

Epiphany: Part

2

1

"I can't believe how well organized they are," Ford said.

"I know," Sheppard said in full agreement. "Ronon's got Green Team up to U.S. Army efficiency."

"Not that that's saying much," Ford joked.

"I don't know. Even a platoon of boot camp-fresh ground pounders would make mince meat out of Blue Team."

"Now that's really not saying very much," Ford said, extending his joke to Sheppard's men.

"Well feel free to offer up any suggestions."

"I already have," Ford argued. "You rejected them."

"They were extreme...to the point of self injury," Sheppard complained. "These are common folk that we're trying to train into soldiers. You gotta allow for a bigger learning curve here compared to Earth."

"Ronon doesn't seem to have a problem pressing his men."

"Ronon is sadistic," Sheppard argued.

"My point exactly."

Sheppard stopped walking and faced Aiden. "Alright, how about this. You can play antagonist and I'll play protagonist."

"Meaning I'm the drill sergeant," Ford asked. "and you're the CO?"

"Something like that," Sheppard agreed.

Ford nodded. "That could work, but we're going to have to set this up properly."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll have to give them challenges to face...and you'll have to be the one to teach them how to get through it."

"I think I see where you're going with this," Sheppard said as they started to continue walking back to the command post from the stargate. They'd just arrived to take their command shift opposite Brand and Ronon, who were both currently back in Atlantis. Striker had been in temporary command the past few days, but Sheppard didn't feel completely comfortable with him taking the reigns of a full training cycle just yet.

"You think my concern for my men is affecting my ability to rough them up?"

"Exactly."

"So, you want to be their worst nightmare so I don't have to?"

Ford smiled. "Yep."

"Hmm," Sheppard considered. "I wonder how Ronon manages to do both?"

"I hate to say it, but I think his Setidan training was better than ours."

Sheppard smiled. "I've been thinking about that since the day we started training the regulars. Kind of a tough pill to swallow...but it does give us the opportunity to learn a few things."

"Man, I wish I could have seen them when they fought the Wraith," Ford said, thinking out loud. "A whole planet full of Ronons...that'd be nuts."

"They're not all like him," Sheppard said, remembering the other Setidans they'd come across. "But they are a tough lot. I..." he said before disappearing in a blinding light.

"What the hell?" Ford said, glancing right and left out of reflex. He looked up in the sky and listened...but there were no darts. Besides, the light hadn't been quite the same, but either way Sheppard had been transported somewhere.

Ford took off at a run back to the stargate. With his enzyme enhanced muscles he made it back within three minutes, hurriedly dialed Atlantis, sent his security code, then ran through the portal to get help.

"Hi, John," Carter said kindly, almost an apology, along with a short wave.

"Hi, Sam," Sheppard said naturally, his shock gone. He should have expected this. O'Neill had warned them that they were coming, but how in the world did they find Yavin? "I'm kind of in the middle of something right now, so would you mind beaming me back down? We can talk later, say an hour or so?" he said sarcastically.

"I'm afraid that's not going to happen," Woolsey said, stepping into the conversation. Carter shot him a short glance, but the I.O.A. representative didn't see it.

"Woolsey," Sheppard said, his voice full of venom. "I should have known you'd be a part of this," he said, looking back at Carter. "But I didn't figure you for a turncoat."

"That's not fair, John," she mildly protested despite the fact that she'd expected as much. "I'm just following orders. You put yourself in this position, not me."

"Gee, thanks," Sheppard said irreverently. "That'll make those long nights in prison all the more bearable now, won't it?"

"You stole from the Air Force," Carter argued. "What did you expect to happen?"

"What I did," he corrected her, "was use the material available to me to aid our allies in the war against the Wraith, as we've done ever since we first set foot in Atlantis and allied ourselves with the Athosians. I didn't change anything. The I.O.A. is the one that did the changing."

"Perhaps so," Woolsey said, "but your actions were still in violation of I.O.A. mandate, not to mention U.S. military regs. You would have received a fair trial...if you hadn't broken security and fled Stargate Command."

"I did the right thing," Sheppard emphasized, "and I was being punished for it. End of story. You can wrap it up in whatever propaganda you like, but that doesn't change the truth. You were going to abandon every single Human in the Pegasus galaxy to the mercy of the Wraith...and we all know where that leads back to. And don't even try to deny it," Sheppard said, pointing an accusing finger at Woolsey.

"I don't deny anything," the man said, unshaken. "Our priority lies with Earth, not the Pegasus galaxy. Your actions, along with those of Dr. Weir, drew us into a war not of our own making. That in no way makes us liable for the outcome of that war or the fate of the Pegasus

galaxy. Given that we did destroy several Wraith Hive ships during our few years here, the Pegasus natives should be thankful for our assistance rather than expect us to bail them out of their perpetual troubles."

"Their 'troubles'?" Sheppard said, incredulously. "You make it sound like it's their fault?"

"Well it's certainly not ours," Woolsey continued. "We have enough problems of our own to deal with. We can't logistically or ideologically commit ourselves to the task of defeating the Wraith, and to be frank, we never should have entertained those thoughts."

"But we can commit ourselves to ransacking every bit of advanced technology that we come across, despite the negative affects it will have on others, all in the name of good old Earth?"

"I wouldn't put it that way, but if you must, then...yes," Woolsey said without any trace of guilt.

"Why you..." Sheppard muttered, taking three quick steps up to the man and punched him in the face.

Woolsey fell to the ground, his nose gushing blood as the SF's ran up to restrain Sheppard.

"Enough!" Carter yelled. Reluctantly Sheppard stopped struggling against the superior muscle. "Lieutenant Vitterman, help Mr. Woolsey to the infirmary. And you," she said, turning her ire on Sheppard.

"And me what?" he countered. "I'm on my way to a holding cell, followed by a rigged trial and a damp, dark cell somewhere on Earth for the rest of my life. You really expect me to walk into that willingly?"

Carter glared at him, but didn't say a word. "Holding cell," she ordered.

The SF's began to drag him off the bridge. "Nice to see you too, Sam."

When Sheppard was out of sight she slumped down in her command chair, cradling her head in her hand.

"General?" Major Kelson said.

"Yes," she said, not looking up.

"We have a message from the *Daedalus*. Dr. McKay is requesting permission to ring over."

"Perfect," Carter muttered in disgust. She thought about denying him permission, but then again this confrontation was going to happen one way or another. She might as well let him find out about Sheppard now and get it over with. "Permission granted," she said, getting up from her chair. "Put us into a stable orbit and have the other ships do likewise. I'm going to meet McKay. You have the bridge, Major."

2

Ford burst into the gate room at a run and continued forward up the stairs. "Sheppard's been taken!" he yelled into the empty room.

Devonshire poked her head up into view above the second tier railing. "What?"

"I said Sheppard's been taken," Ford repeated. "On Yavin. We were walking side by side, then there was a flash of light, and he was gone."

Devonshire frowned. "You mean he was beamed up?"

Ford shook his head. "It wasn't a dart."

Devonshire looked at him as if he was stupid. "I meant an Asgard beam."

Ford frowned. "Why would the Asgard take him?"

"I didn't... what is wrong with you? The transport beams that we use on our ships, like, you know, the *Daedalus* or the *Odyssey*."

"*Daedalus*?" Ford said, remembering. "You mean the tech the Asgard gave Earth."

"Yes," Devonshire over emphasized. "Did it look like that?"

"I've never seen it," Ford told her.

"Oh," she said apologetically. "I guess you wouldn't have. It's sort of like a bright white light that zips up and down, depending on which way you're going."

"It was a white light," Ford confirmed.

Devonshire chewed on her lip as she thought. "Stevenson said he didn't want to be disturbed unless it was an emergency, but I guess this qualifies," she said, walking over to a communications panel. She pulled up a schematic of the city and zoomed in on Stevenson's quarters. She keyed the sound for his location only.

"Control room to Stevenson. We have a situation."

There was a long pause, longer than Devonshire was comfortable with and she began to worry about having interrupted him, but eventually his calm voice responded.

"What is it?"

"Sir, Ford has just returned from Yavin. He claims Sheppard disappeared in a flash of light. We think it might have been..."

"Keep him there," Stevenson said quickly. "I'll be right up."

"Okay..." Devonshire said to herself as the comm channel cut off from Stevenson's end. "I guess that was worth waking him up for."

"Claims?" Ford repeated.

Devonshire stared him down. "If you don't know for sure what it was, then 'claims' is the appropriate term."

"You make it sound like I don't know what I'm talking about."

"I didn't mean it that way."

Ford seemed to let it go. "He was sleeping in the middle of the day?"

She shrugged. "Beats me. I'd be taking a nap right now if I wasn't on duty."

"A nap?" Ford said incredulously. "Don't you have anything better to do?"

She smiled humorlessly. "Right now, Atlantis is a pretty dull place."

"The city has over a hundred gyms," Ford countered.

"I do my workouts in the morning," she told him. "In the afternoon I'm bored to tears."

"Flight training then," Ford countered as he tried to keep his nerves in check. He didn't just like waiting around while Sheppard was who knows where. "There are plenty of simulations to get you started."

"Hmmm, I hadn't thought about that. Is training all you do for fun?"

"Nowadays, pretty much," Ford admitted. "All the 'fun' stuff I did before seems pretty pathetic now."

"Such as?" Devonshire pressed.

"Well, there was this one time..." he began as Stevenson raced into the control room.

"That was fast," Devonshire said as Stevenson brushed past her and went straight for the long range sensors. He recalibrated them in a flash and generated a grainy picture of three contacts over Yavin. It took a moment for the computer to process their likely shapes and origins, but Stevenson already knew who they were.

"Find Ronon," he told Aiden. "I'm going to need the two of you geared up in less than an hour."

"What is it?" Ford asked him pointedly.

"A taskforce from Avalon. We knew they were coming, but I'd been expecting to find them before they found us. Somehow they stumbled across Yavin...unless they backtracked the regulars."

"Where's Avalon?" Ford asked. "And how would they know to track Sheppard's men?"

"Earth," Stevenson said, using the human name for their homeworld. "And I bet they put feelers out into the local populations to try and find where we went. From there that eventually led them back to Yavin."

"So why take him and not me?" Ford asked. "We were side by side."

Stevenson frowned. "I don't know." He turned to Devonshire. "Tell Larrin we're going to need the *Tria*," he said before running off into the city.

Stevenson arrived in the outpost on the forest world that Teyla had entirely to herself barely twenty minutes after he'd received the news about Sheppard. He quickly searched for Teyla within the *terra*, but found her mind somewhat distant.

Teyla, he said telepathically, but there was no reply. Either she didn't have the skills to reply or her transformation hadn't progressed that far yet.

Stevenson got a more precise mental location fix and ran out to her location. He had to pass through over a kilometer of forest before emerging onto the beach that ringed the island that the *terra* was located on. Teyla was on the water's edge, moving to and fro in an elaborate dance-like flow of positions that Stevenson recognized as an Alterran flexibility regimen.

He smiled as he approached her, pleased with the skill of movement that she was displaying...and her lack of clothes. His maleness aside, he took it as a sign of progress that she was abandoning human taboos and recognizing her body for what it really was.

Teyla, he said 'louder' this time, trying to establish a telepathic link.

Right on cue she jerked to sudden awareness, then looked visibly relieved when she saw him approaching and quickly began to walk forward to meet him.

"*Did you say that out loud...or in my mind?*" she asked, speaking Lingara, or as the humans called it, 'Ancient.'

"Mind...I see you've progressed to at least level three," he said, referring to the neural uploads that he'd left in the terra along with a myriad of other developmental training designed to bring her up to Alterran norms.

Teyla smiled. "*Comprehensive level four,*" she informed him, "*but I've reached level 17 in the self defense subsection.*"

Stevenson nodded curtly. "*Good. You're going to need it. I apologize for interrupting your training...I know your transformation isn't complete yet, but I need your help.*"

Teyla's eyes narrowed. "*What's wrong?*" she asked, picking up on his tension either from past experience or a sliver of her developing empathic ability.

"*Sheppard's been captured,*" he said, wasting no time.

Teyla set her jaw, then glanced down at her nude body. "*I can leave as soon as I get dressed,*" she said, starting to walk off the beach back toward the terra.

Stevenson grabbed her arm, stopping her. "*First things first,*" he said, sliding a large, intricate gauntlet onto her forearm. He slid a second identical one on her opposite arm, then held up his own for comparison.

"*What are these for?*" Teyla asked.

"*Combat,*" Stevenson said simply. "*They respond to mental commands. Observe.*"

Teyla watched as both pieces of Stevenson's forearm jewelry melted from their silvery forms and spread out over his body, expanding in size far more than volume would have allowed. Within twenty seconds he was covered head to toe in dark grey body armor that looked to be little more than a thin layer of liquid.

His head covering retracted, exposing his face. "*The armor is made up of nanites. They are rigid, despite their fluid appearance, but they move in conjunction with your neural impulses. They offer no resistance to movement, rather they anticipate your actions and move along with your body. Otherwise they are rock solid and can easily protect you from blades and a moderate amount of kinetic energy. They will also absorb the energy from most stun weapons.*"

"*Amazing,*" Teyla said, glancing down at her own jewelry. Her mind focused and her own armor slithered coolly over her body, clothing her in nanite armor, only hers was golden brown in color. Belatedly she realized it was the same color as the sand she was standing on.

"*Yes, it will match the color of your environment if you wish,*" Stevenson explained quickly. "*It also possesses a decent personal shield and wrist-mounted weapons,*" he said, referencing the small bumps covering both of their wrists. "*One setting is for stun, which is all I want you to use. Try it now,*" he said, firing a small blue orb into the sand.

Teyla concentrated again, lifting her left arm and pointing it toward a small rock near the water's edge. An equally small green orb lept from her wrist, missed the rock low by a few centimeters, and exploded the sand beneath...launching the rock high into the air where it then fell crashing into the lake.

Stevenson shook his head. "*That wasn't stun. Try again.*"

Teyla looked around and found another small stone. She raised her forearm in its direction and thought only about putting the stone to sleep. With that thought in mind, she loosed the weapon's energy, launching the blue stun orb that crackled harmlessly across the stone's surface, quickly dissipating its energy into the rock and the sand beneath.

"*Good,*" Stevenson said, walking off the beach. "*Practice as many functions as you can on our way back. You need to get familiar with the mental interface.*"

"*Who took Sheppard?*" she asked, firing another stun blast into the sand.

"*Three ships from Avalon,*" Stevenson said, retracting his own armor back into the elegant forearm jewelry that he almost always wore. "*They beamed him up from Yavin about half an hour ago.*"

"*They came all this way to recapture him?*" Teyla asked.

"*They came here to reclaim Atlantis,*" Stevenson said, telekinetically pushing a tree branch out of their way. "*O'Neill warned us they were coming, and I've been looking for them. It seems they found us first.*"

Teyla retracted her armor, leaving her nude once again, then just as quickly redeployed it. "What are you planning?"

"*We're going to intercept and board their ships,*" Stevenson told her as they continued to walk back through the forest, though their pace was gradually increasing into a slow run. "*I'll take one, Ronon and Ford will take the second, along with an escort of replicators...*"

"*Aiden Ford?*" Teyla asked, surprised.

Stevenson nodded. "*Long story. You can get reacquainted on the way. I need you to take the third ship. Incapacitate everyone onboard and confine them into holding areas.*"

"*You mean drag them into holding areas,*" Teyla corrected him as she stopped experimenting and accelerated into a full run.

Stevenson easily matched her speed. "*Yes. Don't leave anyone conscious, even if they surrender.*"

"*I understand,*" she said, remembering that these were his former people and that it was possible that he still had some friends among them.

"*We can afford to be generous when we have the advantage,*" he said, reading her thoughts. "*If that wasn't the case, then we wouldn't hold back, no matter who they were.*"

Teyla smiled. She should have known better than to assume a bias on his part.

Within a minute they had arrived back at the terra and Stevenson led Teyla over to the obelisk inside. She frowned.

With a simple mental command Stevenson activated the transportation device. In a flash they were standing in front of its opposite number directly opposite the stargate.

Teyla raised an eyebrow. "*And you made me walk.*"

"*It's all about the journey,*" Stevenson reminded her as they walked up to the gate. He didn't bother with the nearby DHD. He dialed the address mentally inside half a second and the event horizon snapped into place inside the stargate.

"*You're going to have to teach me that trick sometime,*" Teyla said, keeping in step beside him.

"*It's all in the training program,*" he told her as they walked through.

"Larrin?" he asked after they ringed over to the *Tria*, which was still docked in one of Atlantis's six slips.

The ship's captain responded by touching the small device attached to her ear. "They're aboard. Take us up," she said to her small bridge crew, all of whom were Travelers, as she led Stevenson and a fully clothed Teyla out of the ring room.

By the time they reached the bridge, the *Tria* had already activated its anti-grav suspension matrix and released itself from the city's tractor beams that had been holding it aloft. It passed through the city's shield into the freezing atmosphere of Hoth, then rocketed up towards orbit on its primary engines.

When they reached the bridge, Larrin slid into the control chair, utilizing her recent gene enhancement to bring up a tie-in schematic from Atlantis's long range sensors.

"They've already entered hyperspace," Larrin reported.

"Move to intercept their line of flight," Stevenson ordered.

"That's going to be tricky," Larrin warned as Teyla walked over to Ronon and Ford smiling. "Our sensors don't reach that far in hyperspace."

"Anticipate their current course and get us near them. We can reacquire the trace then."

"Ok," Larrin said, unsure of their chances. "Entering hyperspace," she said as she mentally entered her best guess at an intercept point. The ship launched into flight on cue and the telemetry data from Atlantis vanished from above the control chair.

"Estimate two and a half hours to intercept," she said as she remained in the control chair to monitor their status...and to revel in the surge of power she felt whenever she sat in the chair. Larrin liked being in control.

The door to Sheppard's cell onboard the Odyssey opened with a groan and McKay slowly walked through. He glanced back over his shoulder with a none too happy glare at the guard then walked over to the table where Sheppard sat handcuffed to his chair.

A look of disgust crossed Sheppard's face. "You too?"

"Hardly," McKay mumbled as he sat down opposite of Sheppard. "I'm as much of a prisoner as you are," he said, glancing at his friend's handcuffs. "Well, maybe not quite that much, but I am here against my will."

"Oh really?" Sheppard said sarcastically. "Because it's beginning to look a lot like 'stab your friend in the back' day to me."

"You can blame Sam for that," McKay said with a mixture of dismay and disgust. "She's the one pushing this."

Sheppard's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

McKay crossed his arms over his chest. "You'd have to ask her that. O'Neill sent us out here to fail...somehow she didn't get the message."

"O'Neill did?"

"Orders from the President," McKay explained. "Then he twisted my arm to get me to come."

"How'd he do that?" Sheppard asked.

"It was a simple choice between this mission and retirement. I would have balked, but he said we'd abandon the idea if I could prove that it couldn't be done. Ahab up on the bridge has other ideas though."

Sheppard half laughed. "She really thinks she can take Atlantis?"

"Unfortunately yes," McKay said, frowning. "By the way, how did you know? Did she tell you?"

"I managed to put the pieces together," Sheppard said carefully. It seemed O'Neill was still on their side and he didn't want to get him into any trouble. "What are you guys planning to do anyway? The whole Wraith fleet couldn't get past the city's shield...do you really expect a 304 to have better luck?"

"Three, actually," McKay corrected him, "though it makes little difference. She plans to use a new weapon to disrupt Atlantis's shields enough to get a ring transmission through. They even brought along a small army for the occasion."

Sheppard sat back in his seat and laughed. "Whose brilliant idea was that?"

McKay coughed. "Mine, actually."

Sheppard glared at him. "Wait a minute... whose side are you on here?"

"O'Neill said if we could prove it couldn't be done we'd permanently abandon any ideas of retaking Atlantis. Disrupting the shield was our one and only chance, and I pointed it out like I was supposed to. Then Sam goes berserk and has spent the last year building specialized weapons for that very task."

"And I wonder who helped her do that?" Sheppard implied.

"Hey, if I thought there was even a small possibility of success I never would have suggested the idea, but with three ZPMs powering the city and a real Ancient at the controls there's no way in hell she's going to stand a chance. I thought she was intelligent enough to eventually figure that out and abandon the mission, but it seems her bloneness has gotten the best of her... either that or her ego."

"So you're saying you deliberately offered them a plan that you knew would fail?" Sheppard asked slowly.

"Of course," McKay said, slightly offended. "Did you really think I'd side with the I.O.A.?"

Sheppard raised his eyebrows. "I saw Woolsey on the bridge. I thought you said this mission came from the President?"

"Did a bit more than saw from what I hear... anyway, there's not much difference between the two anymore. The recent 'historic' election has left us with either a 'dupe-in-chief' or a 'conspirator-in-chief.' Either way the I.O.A. is pretty much running the show these days. They're the ones that really want Atlantis back. O'Neill argued to just let it go. Oh, by the way, they seem to want Stevenson just as much, if not more than they want the city."

"Fat chance of that," Sheppard mumbled as the cell door opened and Carter burst in.

"You sandbagger!" she verbally slung at McKay. "You've been holding out on us the entire time?"

"What? You were listening?"

"It's my job, McKay," she said with steel in her voice. "Yours was to help me devise a way to retake the city."

"I told you it wouldn't work, what more do you want?" McKay yelled.

"I guess a genuine effort is out of the question," she said sarcastically before turning to Sheppard. "I need Atlantis's address."

The former Colonel pulled against his cuffs. "Why in the world would I tell you that?"

Sam raised her chin. "In exchange for your freedom."

"What?" Sheppard and McKay said in tandem.

"You heard me. Tell me where Atlantis is and after we retake the city I'll arrange for you to 'accidentally' escape. Earth won't mount a retrieval mission for one man hiding in the Pegasus galaxy, especially since I have orders to bring Atlantis back to the Milky Way."

"Why weren't they going to do that the first time?" Sheppard asked irreverently.

"The two new ZPMs changed their mind," Sam told him. "They don't want to have anything to do with this galaxy or the Wraith. Once we're gone you'll be free and clear."

"To do what," Sheppard argued, "become Wraith food?"

"Would you prefer a prison cell for the rest of your life?" Sam countered.

"I don't believe this," McKay interrupted. "We're all on the same side here."

"We were," Sam said quietly. "But as we all know, not all stories have happy endings." Sheppard glared at her. "Since when are you against doing the right thing?"

Sam shook her head. "It's not that simple anymore."

"It never was," Sheppard countered. "That never stopped you and SG-1 from defying orders. Don't forget, I read your mission reports."

"What we did, we did to safeguard Earth."

"What I did was to safeguard Pegasus."

"Sadly, that's not good enough," Sam said with genuine emotion. "Pegasus isn't our home, so not all people care for it as much as we do."

"We?" McKay objected. "You still count yourself in that group?"

"I've done all I can to help Pegasus," Sam angrily told him. "It wasn't enough. If I could disobey orders just one more time and those actions would save the people of Pegasus from the Wraith once and for all I'd do it in a heartbeat. You know that. But really, what can I do from the position I'm in?"

"You can turn us around and go home," McKay scolded her. "O'Neill said a year, and we're long past that."

"Earth needs Atlantis," Sam argued. "And the SGC needs to be the one to bring it back. If we do, we'll have more pull within the bureaucracy. Nowadays, with the Goa'uld defeated and the Wraith a galaxy away, the power of influence is our best weapon to right the wrongs of the I.O.A. But if I go rogue like Sheppard, I lose any chance of doing that. Earth will continue to go downhill until it becomes an enemy equivalent to that of the Goa'uld."

"Believe me," she continued, "I know what evil lurks within the I.O.A. I will not stand by and let it take over my home planet. And the only way I can fight it is from the inside. And to do that, I...we need Atlantis back."

"Is that the best excuse you came up with?" McKay mocked her. "You're never going to make a difference from the inside unless you're at the top of the food chain. Take it from a civilian who's been stomped on at the bottom of that hierarchy for years. The high ups in command do *not* take orders from those below them."

"Well perhaps this blonde has come up with a few ideas that the great Rodney McKay hasn't," Sam said sarcastically. "And, by the way, I'm not a civilian. I'm a General now."

"Temporarily," McKay reminded her.

"Even temporarily it gives me some additional pull," she said, turning back to Sheppard. "For instance, the ability to arrange for your escape."

"What about the others on Atlantis?" Sheppard asked calmly. "You going to let them go too?"

Sam swallowed. "That'll be harder. But as long as I get the city back, I can probably swing it."

"Including Stevenson?" Sheppard asked pointedly.

"No," McKay answered for her. "The I.O.A. wants their guinea pig back."

Sam turned on him with the harshest glare she had.

"Oh, you didn't think I knew about that," McKay said, holding up amicably under that stare. "It's a small ship and word gets around. Especially when you hold your fireside chats with Woolsey in public places."

Sam ignored him. "I can't promise anything for Stevenson."

"All he did," Sheppard reminded her, "was stick his head in the Repository."

"Against standing orders," she countered.

"So demote him," he argued. "That doesn't warrant life in prison."

"I know," Sam agreed. "But it's not up to me."

Sheppard turned his head in disgust, then dropped his eyes to the floor. "Va, Jo, Fin, Sa, Ta, Ra."

"What?" Sam asked.

"That's the address for the planet Atlantis is currently on."

Sam cringed. "That doesn't really help me unless you can write it down."

McKay looked at him, wondering if he'd lost his mind too.

"What, you guys don't know how addresses work?" Sheppard said, greedily mocking them. "I'm not even a scientist and I know."

"Stevenson taught you that?" McKay asked evenly. His world was turning inside out.

"That and other things," Sheppard said. "Uncuff me and I'll write down the address for you neanderthals."

Sam nodded and walked back to the door, motioning to the guard outside who had the handcuff keys. When her back was turned, Sheppard looked at McKay and gave him a quick wink.

Inside McKay nearly jumped for joy, but he managed to keep his elation in check. He knew Sheppard wouldn't blithely give up Atlantis's location, not even to save himself. Sam should have known that too, but apparently she'd gone too far to the darkside to be able to see past the politics and self interest that was the lifeblood of the I.O.A.

"Could you hurry it up?" McKay annoying said just to add to the subterfuge. Sheppard had a plan, and Rodney needed to be ready to help him when the time came. Screw the I.O.A. and screw Earth. He'd had enough...and while he might be a whiny, insecure, self absorbed scientist he was still a man and there were some lines that he just would not cross...and betraying a friend was one of them.

As the guard unhandcuffed Sheppard and he followed the threesome out of the cell he realized that whatever was about to go down would probably kill his engagement with Jennifer...if their 15 months apart hadn't already done so.

No...if he went along with this insanity any longer then he didn't deserve her anyway. He'd find some way to get a message back to her. Right now, he concluded, a man has got to do what a man has got to do, and to hell with the consequences.

He'd find some way out of this mess later...and with a clear conscience. He was, after all, a genius.

3

Sam sat in the *Odyssey's* command chair as her taskforce moved through hyperspace toward the address John had provided. Woolsey was still indisposed and Sheppard was back in his cell, with McKay keeping him company. Aside from a few bridge staff quietly going about their work she had a moment alone with her thoughts as she stared out at the blue/white hue of hyperspace.

Something was nagging her about Sheppard. She'd expected him to take her offer after a bit of indecision, quickly followed by the realization that a lifetime in prison was his only other viable option...but something about it just didn't feel right.

Maybe she had been expecting him to hold out longer, make her sweat for a while. He'd made the only logical choice, and she knew he was a lot smarter than he usually let on, but still...

She half wondered if the address he'd given them was bogus, but then he'd still be a prisoner given that Sam had only agreed to let him go after Atlantis was retaken.

Then again, maybe she was just feeling guilty about her part in all of this.

Sam shook off the thought. She'd been through the logic of the situation many times before, each of which ended with the same scenario...Sheppard in jail, Atlantis back in Earth's hands, Stevenson in the hands of the I.O.A.

That last bit bothered her even more than the rest. Sheppard had chosen to defy orders, same as all those that stayed in Atlantis with him. Stevenson, on the other hand, had been changed by alien technology, so his actions weren't entirely his own. And to top it off, everything that he'd done warranted prison...not experimentation.

"General Carter," Captain Norris politely interrupted her introspection.

"Yes, Captain?"

"We're picking up another vessel in hyperspace directly behind us on the edge of our sensors."

Sam frowned. "What's its heading?" she asked, wondering if they'd stumbled onto the Wraith.

"It's trailing us on an identical heading," the Captain said worriedly, "and closing."

Sam stood up and looked at the hyperspace sensor screen herself. "Oh that can't be good."

"Ma'am?"

"Stay on course. The odds of us actually hitting each other in hyperspace are nil. At the speed they're going they'll pass us by long before we reach Atlantis."

"What if they follow us there?" Major Kelson asked from the opposite bridge station.

Sam shook her head. "Aside from a replicator-infested ship, every hyperdrive technology we've encountered maintains a constant speed once in hyperspace. The only way this contact could follow us is to drop out of hyperspace, then reenter at a slower speed. Actually, I think that's how the replicators managed it too, only using microsecond transitions between the two dimensions."

"Why would they do that?" Norris asked as they both continued to watch the contact 'blip' on the screen.

"They were in the process of upgrading the hyperdrive while in flight," Sam said, remembering back. "A microsecond translation back into realspace would theoretically be enough to reinitialize the hyperspace 'bubble' at a new inertial speed. Other than that, I have no idea how they managed it."

Kelson blinked twice. "I thought it took longer than that for a hyperspace bubble to fully degenerate."

"It does," Sam said, her eyes still on the contact as it got ever closer. "As I said, I don't fully understand how they did it."

"And the Wraith?" Kelson asked.

"Not from what we've seen of their technology."

"Then what are they doing?" Norris asked.

Sam cringed. "I don't know."

On the sensor screen the contact was nearly to them, but the more precise trace that Norris performed indicated that it was going to pass high above them by a few million kilometers. The blip merged on the screen with the dot that represented the three Earth ships...

Sam caught herself on the Captain's chair as the ship suddenly and violently exited hyperspace. "Report!" she said, clawing herself back into her chair.

"We're back in realspace," Norris said quickly. "So are the *Daedalus* and *Apollo*."

"What the hell happened?" Sam asked rhetorically. "I want a hyperdrive diagnostic, now."

"Contact!" Norris yelled out. "Two million clicks and closing fast!"

"Shields up," Sam ordered. "Bring us around next to the *Daedalus*. Open a channel to our ships."

"General," Caldwell's voice came through before she could speak, "we've suffered some type of hyperdrive malfunction. Whatever knocked us out has disabled our drive."

Sam looked to Norris. The Captain nodded in confirmation. Their hyperdrive was offline as well.

"Copy that," Sam said over the open comm between all three ships. "Colonels bring your ships into formation alongside the *Odyssey*. We have incoming."

"We see it, *Odyssey*," Ellis's voice said evenly. "What are your orders?"

"Stand by weapons, but let them make the first move," Sam said as an image enhancement popped up on Kelson's screen. The Major turned to the General with a look of fear. "It's an Ancient warship."

"What?" Sam asked aloud.

"Could it be the replicators?" Ellis asked over the still open comm.

"If it is," Caldwell interrupted, "we're more than a match for one ship."

"Let's not make any assumptions," Sam urged as the *Aurora*-class warship decelerated before them. "Major, try and establish communications with that ship."

"They're firing drones!" Norris warned.

"Weapons hot!" Sam ordered as the Earth ships began to move evasively. "Return fire!"

An explosion in *Odyssey*'s aft rocked the ship, followed quickly by a second, then a third.

"Sublight is gone," Norris reported. "The drones are getting through our shields!"

"Readjust shield frequencies," Sam snapped, jumping out of her seat to do it herself.

Another explosion rocked the ship as the *Odyssey* returned fire with its Asgard beams. Two lances of blue impacted the Ancient ship's shields...and were completely absorbed, along with several more shots from the *Daedalus* and *Apollo*.

"Shield emitters have been destroyed!" Norris screamed panickly.

"*Daedalus, Apollo*," Sam yelled into the air. "If you still have engines get the hell out of here now! That's an order!"

Outside the ship half a dozen Asgard beams impacted the enemy ship, but again they were all absorbed by its shields. Carter couldn't understand how it was holding up against the barrage. The identical replicator ships they'd faced over Asuras hadn't been this strong.

"Fire every nuke we've got!" Sam yelled. "All tubes."

"Aren't we a little close for that?" Kelson asked, amidst another explosion somewhere on the ship.

"We're at minimal safe distance," Sam said, not feeling like giving explanations in the heat of battle. "Fire now!"

A dozen missile plumes shot out from the smoking *Odyssey*, mirroring those coming from the *Apollo* that had been launched only a moment earlier. They raced in toward the Ancient ship as more sporadic drones passed them by halfway between the ships.

Small golden spurts erupted from the enemy ship, picking off some of the missiles. More followed from the port side of the Aurora as it utilized its rarely used energy weapons to down the incoming missiles...but it didn't get all of them.

Four slid past the counter-fire. Three of those were taken out in the last seconds by swiftly moving drones...but the fourth hit and detonated against the forward shields.

Sam covered her eyes against the glare that the auto-darkening viewport couldn't block out. It readjusted to transparency faster than her eyes did, but when her vision had adequately returned she saw the enemy ship just as it had been. It's forward shields still absorbed the incoming Asgard beams, though there were less being fired than before.

Another shot rocked the ship.

"Port battery destroyed," Norris reported, aghast.

Sam looked at the *Apollo* as it made a strafing run close in on the Aurora. It fired its Asgard beams and rail guns at nearly point blank range to no avail. A single drone lept out from the ship and finished off the *Apollo's* already damage sublight engines. The ship listed and flipped over as its momentum carried it past the hull of the Ancient warship.

A small white beam lept between the two ships for an instant, then disappeared. A moment later another one stretched out to the *Odyssey*.

Norris looked up to her with wide eyes in the eerily quiet bridge. No more drones were being fired, and all weapon systems on the *Odyssey* had been destroyed. "The rings have been activated."

Sam immediately punched the intercom control on her command chair. "Intruder alert. All security teams to the ring room!"

"Step inside," Ronon said, standing back to back with Ford at the center of the *Tria's* rings. Four replicators, all male in appearance, filled the excess spaces around them in a tight cluster. Ronon nodded and Malcolm, one of Larrin's crew, typed in the sequence to activate the rings.

The circular beams sprang up from the floor around them...there was a wash of light...then the rings retracted into the floor and they found themselves standing in the *Daedalus* next to two of her crew wielding sidearms.

The two replicators nearest the guards silently raised their stun pistols and shot the two men, but not before the leftmost guard fired a round into and through one of the replicators. The

nanites cells slowed the bullet, taking minute damage from the impact, but they did not stop it completely. It emerged from the replicator at a slower speed, then pinged off Ford's personal shield.

Aiden glanced down at the shield gauntlet that he wore on his right forearm. It was heavy as hell, but well worth it.

Ronon didn't say a word, he merely pointed to the door and his personal replicator walked forward, raised his weapon, and swung into the hallway beyond. It fired two shots before Ronon poked out behind it, covering the opposite direction.

No crew in sight, save for the one female that lay on the floor five meters from the group. Ronon waved the others out of the ring room and pointed Ford in the direction of the woman, while he went the other way. The replicators split between them.

The Setidan's group operated with Ares on point and the new replicator, which he'd named Oronat, bringing up the rear. Ronon kept to the middle, intent on being the primary shot while Ares' mission was to draw fire for him to respond to.

The tactic was called Trinary, and it required the threesome to be fast on their feet at all times. They could not stop, not delay, not separate. It was one of the earliest combat strategies taught to Setidan tactical squads and the basis for the more advanced formations they would learn in later years.

Ronon had Stevenson upgrade his personal replicator with the Trinary and other combat strategies, and for the purpose of this impromptu mission Ares was transmitting orders to Oronat whenever his default programming was lacking. Together the three moved quickly and efficiently through their section of the ship on the way to the bridge.

Their killcount was at twenty two...though technically that term was inadequate, given that none of the *Daedalus's* crew was actually dead...when they encountered their first real obstacle...a sealed bulkhead.

"Ares, open the door," Ronon ordered, reversing his line of sight as he backed himself up against the wall to the right of the door. That way he could cover the rear and be ready to spring into the corridor on the other side without making himself a target for whoever was waiting for them.

Ares reached a hand up to the lock and his nanites dispersed from his hand. They chewed apart the lock then returned to form his five digits, which then wrapped around the handle and pushed the door open.

A hail of bullets flew through the opening and Ares, but the replicator charged through, stunning everyone in sight. Ronon let him have five seconds to himself then pulled himself around the corner and into the line of fire. A quick glance revealed several bodies on the floor with several many more personnel down the hallway firing panickly with their P-90s.

Ronon fired two quick stun blasts as he moved through the door, his boots crunching on the damaged nanites dropping off of Ares. Oronat followed him, as per instructions, but didn't fire. He kept his attention on the corridor behind them in case they should be flanked and would only fire ahead if one of the others became incapacitated.

Between the nearly immune replicator and the shielded Setidan, the *Daedalus's* onboard troops didn't stand a chance. Despite the fact that they looked outfitted for ground combat, all of their armor and weaponry hadn't been enough to save them. Only Stevenson's orders to take them alive had done that.

Ronon did wonder, however, what they had been planning. The bodies he was stepping over were those of soldiers, not standard 304 crew.

He shook the thought off and focused his attention ahead. The bridge wasn't far off.

Ronon saw and heard three shots pass through Ares as he walked out of the connecting corridor and onto the bridge. More dust fell from the replicator, but his gun arm remained intact and fired quick, precise shots into whom Ronon couldn't yet see.

The traveler-made pistol that Ronon favored tracked Ares line of fire as its owner rounded the corner and had his first full view of the bridge. He saw two more bridge crew drop...as well as Colonel Caldwell fire another couple rounds through Ares from his sidearm.

Ronon's gun tracked toward the *Daedalus's* commander and he managed half a grin as he pulled the trigger. Had he delayed any further Ares would have got to him first, but Ronon was pleased to have been the one to knock the arrogant ass backwards over the pilot's station and onto the floor with one beautiful orange stun blast to the chest.

The grin still on his face, Ronon keyed his wrist bound communicator. "Ford?"

"Standby," Aiden's voice came back. Ronon waited a long thirty seconds before he responded again. "Engine room secured," he reported.

"We have the bridge," Ronon told him. "Leave one of your replicators to stand guard, then take the other and sweep the ship."

"Roger that," Ford said.

Ronon rekeyed his communicator. "Commander Larrin?"

"*Tria* here," her voice came back immediately. "What's your status?"

"Bridge and engine room secure," he reported. "We're currently sweeping the ship for stragglers."

"Good work," she said positively. "Stevenson and Teyla have already secured the other ships. I'm sending over a crate of restraints for the crew. It should be in your ring room within thirty seconds."

"Copy that. Do you want anything special done with Caldwell?"

"Who?" Larrin asked.

"The ship's captain," Ronon told her.

"No. Keep everyone onboard for now. Stevenson said he has a few things to take care of before we start transferring the crew."

Ronon raised an eyebrow. "What are we doing with the ships?"

"He didn't say, though right now they're little more than floating boxes. We had to slag most of their primary systems. By the way, check on your ship's life support."

Ronon hadn't thought about that, and did a quick systems check. He didn't understand half of what he was looking at, but with a little help from Ares he confirmed that the *Daedalus's* life support systems were still functional.

"We're good," Ronon said. "Any further orders?"

"None at the moment. Just keep a lid on the crew and sit tight until he tells us what he wants us to do."

"Got it," he said, cutting the comm. He pointed to the crew. "Pick them up and follow me. Two at a time if you can."

The two replicators easily scooped up two crewmembers a piece, carrying one per shoulder. Ronon dipped down and hauled Caldwell's body over his shoulders. He led the way to the mess hall and began depositing the crew there, with Ornat left behind to watch over the bunch. Minutes later when the first of the crew began to awake the replicator shot them again, and continued to do so until Ronon had cleared the ship and locked the mess hall door shut.

Oronat was then ordered to stun anyone trying to leave the room, allowing them to return to consciousness so long as they stayed put. It took two failed attempts by the crew to escape before they decided to give it up and do just that.

4

Outside his cell, Sheppard and Rodney could hear the sounds of battle as the ship rocked from what were obvious hits to the hull, though there were no windows around to confirm it.

"We can't be at Atlantis already," McKay said.

"No..." Sheppard said, looking up at the ceiling as if somehow he could see through it, "but I'd bet you twenty bucks I know who it is."

Another hit nearly knocked McKay out of his chair as the lights dimmed and the artificial gravity cut out for half a second. Off balanced Rodney slid out of his chair and landed hard on his butt. For a moment Sheppard was almost glad he was handcuffed to his chair...almost.

"Who?" McKay asked as he pulled himself back into this seat, briefly rubbing his behind before he sat down.

"Friends..." Sheppard told him. "And by the sound of the damage being done, I'd guess quite a few of them."

"*What* friends?" McKay implored him.

Another hit rocked the ship and Sheppard didn't figure he needed to hide anything anymore. "Travelers."

"Travelers? Why would they come after you? I didn't think that chick liked you *that* much."

Sheppard glared at him. "They signed on to Stevenson's payroll a few months ago. When I left Atlantis there were 63 of their ships in orbit."

"I thought you said we weren't at Atlantis yet?" Rodney said, stunned.

Sheppard shook his head. "That address I gave Sam wasn't for Atlantis, but its close. Close enough for the city's long range proximity sensors to pick us up long before we get there."

"You set her up?" Rodney asked, thoroughly pleased.

"Yep," Sheppard said as the explosions stopped.

"What do you suppose that means?" Rodney asked. "They won or we won?"

"Who's we?"

"Sorry. I meant Sam's guys...though technically since we're on her ship, if we get blown up then we lose too."

"I don't think that's the idea," Sheppard said, straining to hear. "I thought I just heard gunfire."

"Really?" Rodney asked, falling silent. He couldn't hear anything for maybe a minute, then the faint sounds of a firefight became undeniable...and increasing in volume.

McKay picked up his chair and moved it around behind Sheppard, then sat down again.

"What are you doing?"

"Well, if whoever is boarding the ship is looking for you they might not know that I'm on your side...and I don't want to get shot the moment they come through the door."

"So you thought you'd use me as a shield?" Sheppard said sarcastically.

"Well they're not going to shoot you, are they?"

"I hope not," he said just as a whine from an energy weapon muffled its way through the door, followed quickly by a thump.

"Was that the guard?" McKay whispered.

"I think so," Sheppard answered, a bit curious as to what was going on but happy none the less.

The door to their cell opened and a pure black figure walked into the room. Suddenly McKay felt himself lifted out of his seat by an invisible force.

"I'm with Sheppard..." he screamed in girlish fear.

"He is," John said, guessing as to who he was talking to.

"So he is," Stevenson's voice answered. The metal on Sheppard's cuffs broke in two and Rodney was released back onto his feet.

"Sweet," Sheppard said, standing up and stretching.

"Keep back," Stevenson said through his opaque faceplate. "I haven't secured the ship yet."

"Want some help?"

"No," Stevenson said, turning around and firing a blue orb from his wrist down the hallway.

"Stay here," Sheppard told Rodney as he sneaked a peak out of the cell after Stevenson was gone.

"Where are you going?"

"To find a weapon," Sheppard answered, running outside.

"Well don't leave me!" McKay whisper-yelled, following behind him.

He caught up to him two sections over, where he saw Sheppard retrieve a Zat from one of the bodies on the floor. "I told you to stay put," he scolded him.

"And that guy told you to stay put...you didn't," McKay objected.

"I know what I'm doing," Sheppard countered. "Stay behind me."

"Right," Rodney said in total agreement. "Don't I need a weapon too?" he asked as they began to sneak forward past the trail of bodies Stevenson had left.

"No...I don't want you shooting me in the back."

"I wouldn't do that."

"Not on purpose," Sheppard amended. Up ahead he heard a mechanical noise, quickly followed by the doors on an elevator shaft opening.

He fired his Zat the moment he had a shot, barely giving him enough time to notice that they were indeed *Odyssey* personnel and not someone Stevenson had brought along with him.

The two men and one woman crumpled to the ground inside the elevator. Sheppard covered them for a second then jogged forward cautiously. He wasn't sure if they'd all received a full hit, and he knew that two would kill them. When he finally stood over the three crewmembers he studied them for a long moment then withdrew his Zat. They were out cold.

He turned away from the elevator only to have his feet swept out from under him by one of the 'unconscious' men.

It was the woman actually, and she'd caught Sheppard completely off guard. She wrestled him into a submission hold, then was knocked over when Rodney decided to pile on...literally.

Sheppard had the wind knocked out of his lungs by the extra weight smashing down on top of him, but McKay had managed to free the Colonel's left arm. He used it to gain leverage over the woman and, with the help of McKay's bulk pinning her to the ground, he was able to get the upper hand.

He retrieved the Zat from the ground nearby and held it on her. "Stand down!" he ordered. "I don't know how much of a hit you took, but two is supposed to kill a person. Do you really want to take that chance?"

The woman gritted her teeth, but eased her hold on Sheppard's right ankle and Rodney's neck. The scientist rolled off her and dramatically savored his next few breaths of air.

Sheppard kicked himself free and stood up. He motioned for her to do likewise.

"I know you," he said, unable to place the name.

"You should," she snarled back. "I was part of Atlantis's security division before you went rogue."

"Morris..." he said, remembering. "Walk."

She did as bidden and they followed the trail of bodies all the way to the bridge. When they got there Stevenson was nowhere to be seen and all the bridge crew were unconscious...including Carter.

Sheppard pulled a sidearm off the ground and held it on Morris instead of the Zat, which he tossed to Rodney.

"Thanks," he said, holding it upside down. "Where's the trigger?"

Sheppard rolled his eyes. "Never mind. Put it down before you shoot yourself."

"What? I can do this. Just show me where the..." he said as he accidentally fired the weapon sideways into one of the bridge stations, shattering the screen in a shower of sparks as the electronics overloaded. "Don't say it!"

Sheppard held his tongue, but pointed his finger at the ground. Reluctantly Rodney set it down on the floor ever so gently. A moment later Stevenson walked back onto the bridge.

"There you are," Sheppard said, relieved. "You missed a few."

Stevenson shot the woman unconscious. "So I did."

Sheppard raised an eyebrow, but didn't say anything. "What now?"

"The destabilization pulse temporarily knocked out their hyperdrives, but the primitive designs may have been damaged in the process. If they are I'll either have to repair them or have the *Tria* tow them back to Atlantis one at a time."

"Sounds good. What about the crew?"

"Larrin's got the cargo holds set up as detention areas. We can start transferring the crew over once the other ships are secured. You can head on over with your friend now, if you want."

Sheppard motioned toward Carter. "I'll carry Sam back."

"Fine," Stevenson said, slightly miffed at the mention of her name, "but she goes in the hold same as the others."

"Agreed," Sheppard said, lifting her up into his arms. He repositioned her head so it leaned on his shoulder instead of falling backwards at an uncomfortable angle. "Come on Rodney."

"I can stay and help you with the hyperdrive," he offered as Stevenson walked off the bridge.

"He doesn't need help," Sheppard said, carrying Sam off. "Come on."

After verifying that the other strike teams had accomplished their missions and that none of the *Odyssey's* crew were still at large, Stevenson made his way down to the Asgard Core room.

He activated the systems and slid his hands over the Asgard designed interface. He pulled a quick systems analysis and confirmed that the Asgard's legacy hadn't suffered any damage in

the attack. He ran his fingers over the edge of the control panel slowly, getting a brief premonition from the touch. There was something important here, as he'd always suspected.

Stevenson released his touch and walked off. Precognitive abilities had been common among the Alterra...as had been the numerous misinterpretations and outright false predictions that prevented any meaningful forecasting of future events. They'd eventually tied some of the misinformation to a minute symbiosis between the minds of similar individuals in alternate realities.

Some Alterrans had become so adept, so in tune with their counterparts that they were able to see snippets of their lives, which in some cases mirrored their own. It was those that did not that led to erroneous prognostications...and the eventual development of a mental block against such interconnectivity between themselves and their counterparts.

But even with that mystery solved, there had always been a little extra intuition that popped up regularly that could never be scientifically explained. It was commonly held that such things weren't explainable simply due to the fact that the Alterran civilization hadn't advanced its understandings of the universe far enough to comprehend such things. The idea of 'magic' was non-existent, but given Stevenson's unique situation and his knowledge of such things in Earth cultures...he did get the feeling that these intuitions were more than just unexplained science.

Perhaps that's just because they were new to him, but regardless he wasn't going to ignore them...nor was he going to trust their accuracy. He considered them to be hunches, and played them as such. As for this recurring hunch, he had little doubt that it would pan out. The Asgard had entrusted the humans with the core for a reason...and he guessed there was more to that reason than they had told them.

Even so, the discovery of that secret would have to wait until he dealt with the humans. After which, he'd have plenty of time to search the depths of the database...and try to discover how exactly the Ascended Empire had managed to kill them.

"General?" Sam heard someone ask from above her.

Carter blinked her eyes again, this time clearing her vision and making out a pair of faces above her.

"General?" Caldwell repeated again, helping her to sit up slowly.

"Colonel?" she asked, her head pounding. She glanced around, shaking off the disorientation from being stunned. "Where are we?"

"On the Ancient warship would be my guess," he said, sitting down on the cargo bay floor beside her. "I woke up about ten minutes ago."

"I take it the same black warrior got you to?" Sam said, holding her hand against her forehead.

"No," Caldwell said angrily. "Ronon Dex was what got to me...and what I could have sworn was a replicator."

Sam's mind suddenly caught up to the situation. "Did you say replicator?"

"That'd be my guess. I fired several rounds straight through before Ronon stunned me."

"That's not what happened on the *Odyssey*," she told him, trying to stand up then thinking better of it. "A person, wearing some type of black, liquid armor took over the ship."

"Just one?"

Sam nodded, suddenly regretting the motion. "We tracked his progress from the bridge. There was just the one. He had some type of golden plasma weapon. It burned right through our security doors."

"I suppose we should be grateful they stunned us," Caldwell said unconvincingly, "but I'm getting a very bad vibe about this."

"Me too," Sam said, making a second attempt at standing. She succeeded with help from Caldwell. "Have you taken a head count?"

"Fifty two so far, but they keep bringing in more groups every few minutes."

Sam did a full 160, staring at the contents of the cargo bay. "This is too small to be the primary storage bay."

"Assuming this ship is designed to Ancient specs, I'd agree," Caldwell said as Sam leaned on his arm for support. She'd been hit twice by the stun weapon, if her memory was correct. Once in the arm, then once in abs.

"I assume the doors are locked."

"Actually they're using a force field just inside the perimeter of the walls. We don't have access to the doors, save for those," he said, pointing to the far side of the bay.

"Why those?"

"They lead to a set of restrooms, thankfully," Caldwell said sarcastically. "I already tried finding a way out through them, but didn't have any luck."

"That's a bad sign," Carter said, finally releasing his arm. Her strength was starting to come back.

"How so?"

"It means they intend to hold us here for a while."

"You're right. I hadn't thought about that."

"Have you seen anyone you recognized besides Ronon?"

"Larrin and what looked like a group of travelers brought in the last bunch."

Sam raised her eyebrows. "Really. I thought I heard their Aurora was destroyed during the incident with the Attero device."

"That's what I thought too," Caldwell said pessimistically. "None of this is making any sense."

"Whoever it was that boarded the *Odyssey* came for Sheppard. He freed him before he took over the bridge."

"You think it was Stevenson?"

"Possibly," Sam admitted, "but I don't see the Traveler connection."

"How did they manage to knock us out of hyperspace anyway? I thought that was impossible."

"I don't know," Sam said, concerned. "Whoever it is knows a lot more about hyperspace than we do."

"Now there's a cheery thought," Caldwell said as one of the sets of doors into the bay opened. "Speak of the devil."

Larrin led the way through, followed by six more Earth personnel on floating sleds, all unconscious, two Traveler guards...and Teyla.

"Hey Blondie," Larrin said, looking directly at Carter. "Get over here."

Sam walked toward the edge of the blue force field as it shimmered into translucence as the guards pushed the sleds through. They pulled the unconscious crewmen off and laid them on the floor as Sam slowly walked toward the edge of the shield where Larrin was standing.

"What do you want?"

"Not me," Larrin answered tersely as she touched a small crystal on her wristband. The section of shield the guards had entered and exited through shimmered once then returned to transparency. "Her."

Larrin walked away with her guards, but Teyla remained.

"Hello Colonel Carter," she said respectfully as she approached the edge of the shield and stopped barely two feet from Sam.

"Teyla, what's going on?" she asked, almost pleading.

"I could ask you the same question."

"Why we're here in Pegasus?"

Teyla nodded.

Sam sighed, glanced at the floor, then locked eyes with the Athosian. "I won't lie to you. We came here to retake Atlantis."

Teyla locked her fingers together over the trim red clothing clinging to her body like a glove and settled them over her abdomen in a patient gesture. "So that you may fulfill your plans to destroy it?"

"No, we weren't going to destroy it," Sam said quickly. "That option has been taken off the table."

"I'm pleased to hear it," Teyla said, almost sarcastically.

Sam glanced up at the invisible shield separating them. "What are we doing here?"

"You have been placed aboard this ship for transport back to Atlantis. Your ships' hyperdrives were damaged in the battle and require repairs before they too will be brought to Atlantis. You will be arriving a day or so before them."

"And then?"

"That has not yet been decided," Teyla said stiffly.

"You're angry, aren't you?"

"Should I not be? If you had succeeded in capturing Atlantis, any hope of freeing this galaxy of the Wraith would have been destroyed."

"Even with Atlantis, we couldn't stop the Wraith," Sam argued. "Yes, we did them some damage, but we didn't have the resources to win a war against the same enemy that defeated the Ancients."

"The Wraith defeated the Lanteans, not the Alterra," Teyla corrected her. "And even if Earth is unwilling to continue the fight, it has no right to deny us the chance to free ourselves. Atlantis doesn't belong to you."

"Who does it belong to, Teyla? Be honest, who would have more use for the city, our people that understand its technology or the Athosians and others like your people who can't use, let alone understand it."

"My former people's lack of technical skills is not an excuse for Earth stealing Atlantis from us."

"Your 'former' people?"

"I am no longer Athosian," Teyla said proudly. "I am now Alterran."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard correctly. I have become one of the Ancestors of the Ancestors, those that created the Lanteans before they themselves were killed from a plague. They are the ones you call Ancients from your home galaxy."

"How?" Sam said, not believing what she was hearing.

"Stevenson has been given the power to change those whom he deems worthy into Alterra. I am the second person he has gifted with this honor, and I do not believe I will be the last."

"Wait a minute," Sam said, thinking fast. "You're saying that the Repository of Knowledge that altered Stevenson did more than upload the Ancient's knowledge into his mind...it actually transformed him into one of them?"

"Yes."

"Then he had you go through the same process?"

"No, Colonel. He transformed me himself, through nothing more than the touch of skin and mind. My transformation isn't yet complete, nor is my training, but within a few more months I will be fully Alterran, in both body and mind."

"So you see," Teyla continued when Sam was at a loss for words, "we not only have the power to fight the Wraith, we now have the power to annihilate them once and for all. This is what you have attempted to deny us, and fortunately for the Pegasus galaxy you have failed."

"You're serious," Sam said, still finding it hard to believe.

"I am. I am also dismayed that you of all people would have taken part in this."

"I have my reasons."

"I'm listening."

Sam sighed. "I guess there's not really anything I can say to get you to let us out of this cell."

"No, but I would like to hear why you turned against your friends."

"I never turned against you," she said, the words catching in your throat. "You don't understand the chain of command. When Sheppard did what he did, he made himself an enemy of Earth."

"And of you?"

"Yes and no."

Teyla shook her head. "You cannot have it both ways. You are either his enemy or his friend. You have known each other too long for there to be any other option."

"Teyla, I don't see any of you as my enemy."

"Your actions speak otherwise."

"My actions aren't of my own making. I have orders that I have to follow whether I like them or not."

"There is always a choice...just perhaps not always a pleasant one."

"You're saying I should have turned rogue like Sheppard did?"

"Why not? If your superiors are as corrupt as you imply, why then would you continue to follow them?"

Sam laughed without any trace of humor. "It's nowhere near that simple."

"Yes it is," Teyla said softly. "It is a matter of whether you make decisions for yourself, or let others make those choices for you. You have allowed the latter to take place. You claim you are only following the orders of others, but somewhere along the line you had to make the choice to ignore your own intuition, your own conscious. You gave away your freedom at that moment, but not the responsibility for your actions."

Teyla turned and walked away from the force field, leaving Sam on the other side.

"Wait...don't go."

Teyla stopped and half turned back. "You have lost your way, Samantha. If you are the person I believed you to be, then you will find your way back. If not, then we shall never speak again."

Teyla left the cargo hold, her Ancient robes fluttering slightly along her legs and arms as she walked out the doors.

Caldwell walked up to Sam and put his hand on her shoulder. "That sounded rough."

"I have a feeling that's just the tip of the ice berg," she warned him. "This far away from Earth, there's no one to rescue us."

"Which leaves us at their mercy," Caldwell said ominously. "The same people we were going to haul back to Earth for courts martial or leave behind in Pegasus at the mercy of the Wraith."

"Let's hope they don't hold too much of a grudge," Sam said, trying to get her nerve back. She was the leader here. The others needed her to stay strong.

"Sheppard's not that kind of person," Caldwell assured her.

"And Stevenson?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

Caldwell shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. He used to be SGC...let's hope that counts for something."

"Unless we can find a way to escape this shield, hoping is all we're going to be able to do."

"You have any ideas?" Caldwell asked, a bit more positive.

"Not yet, but I'm working on it." She turned and glanced back over the portion of her crew that was assembled in this cell. "Do an inventory check on everything in our possession. Maybe someone had something useful in their pockets when they got stunned."

"Worth a try," Caldwell said, walking quietly over to the nearest crewmen. He knew better than to announce their intentions publically, and would carry out his search person to person in as ambiguous a manner as possible.

Sam meanwhile took off her jacket and began to walk the perimeter of the shield, testing for the invisible barrier with the cloth instead of her skin. Maybe they'd overlooked a weakness when they set up the shield emitters, which she could clearly see attached to the floor on the other side, or maybe there was a loose panel in the floor or in the restrooms which Caldwell had mentioned.

Either way, it was something to do. And the last thing Sam wanted was to sit and think about how she'd totally screwed up this mission.

5

"Let's go," Larrin told Carter and Caldwell as she pulled them out of the confinement area at gunpoint.

"Where are we going?" Caldwell asked.

"You're getting your own private rooms in Atlantis," Larrin answered as she nudged them out through the door into the corridors that spanned the length of the *Tria*.

"What about the rest of our people?" Sam asked.

"They're staying put for the moment," Larrin said, stopping in the middle of the hallway. "I've gotta ask...how in the blazes did you ever think you'd have a chance of retaking Atlantis?"

"As long as we're prisoners," Sam said, ignoring her question, "we don't really have to answer questions like that, now do we."

Larrin half smiled, but it wasn't a pleasant one. "Have a look," she said, pointing inside an adjacent room with her gun. Caldwell and Carter reluctantly walked inside...and were treated with an orbital view of Hoth as the *Tria* descended towards the surface through the mass of ships that was only a small portion of the Traveler fleet.

"Like I said...you didn't stand a chance," Larrin scoffed, nudging Caldwell in the back as the *Tria* started to brush against the first wisps of atmosphere.

The two Earth officers exchanged glances, then let Larrin lead them to the *Tria*'s ring room.

"Inside," she ordered.

Caldwell and Carter stepped inside the rings, but Larrin didn't follow. Instead she walked over to the ring controls. "Look on the bright side," she said sarcastically. "At least you're making it inside the city. Had you actually gotten this far on your own, our fleet would have turned your pathetic ships into scrap."

The rings sprang up around the pair, then quickly descended back into the floor...and Caldwell and Carter found themselves staring at Ronon inside the very ring platform they'd intended to use to board the city during the assault.

"Welcome back," the Setidan said, smiling. He motioned them forward with his standard pistol, an identical match for the weapon Larrin carried.

Caldwell looked down at the gun.

"You know I'll use it," Ronon warned.

"Yeah," Caldwell said, stepping out ahead of Sam. She followed him and Ronon out of Atlantis's ring room while two men she didn't recognize took up guard positions behind them.

Both ship captains knew better than to try to escape under Ronon's watch. Caldwell stood proud under the scrutiny of the passersby that they encountered on the way to the brig, some of whom he recognized as defectors, others were Pegasus natives like Ronon, but there were many more new faces than old, which made him feel even more concerned. Whatever was taking place in Atlantis had gone well beyond an internal Earth squabble.

Sam, meanwhile, hung her head and tried to walk as quickly as possible.

"Nice digs," Dr. Jackson said as he walked into the brig.

"Daniel?" Sam said in surprise. "How did you get here?"

"I live here," he said pointedly. "The question is...what are you doing here?"

Sam sighed. "Not you too."

"Me too what?"

"Sheppard already gave me an ear full," she said bashfully. "How did you get to Atlantis?"

"Oh, let's just say I was given an invitation."

"An invitation?" Sam asked skeptically.

"Yeah...then a nice, short trip via that Ancient warship you recently had a run in with, I hear."

"Tell me about it," Sam said, sitting down on the lone chair provided in her square Atlantis cell. She dipped her head, then raised it back up with a renewed energy. "I literally don't know how they did it."

"Did what?"

"Daniel, their drones passed right through our Asgard shields."

"And you didn't think they would?"

"No."

"Why not? We've seen drones pass through a ship's shields before. We know Anubis's mothership was upgraded with at least some Ancient knowledge and even its shields couldn't protect against the drones."

"But according to the Asgard data core, their shields are supposed to block the drones. I made damn sure of that before I even considered attacking the city."

"Which brings up a whole other line of conversation," Daniel said, switching subjects.

"Why I did it?"

"Why did you do it?" Daniel asked in all seriousness. "These were your friends and colleagues for over a year. The I.O.A. did them dirty and they fought back. I can't for the life of me understand why you sided against them."

"I didn't turn against them...they turned against Earth."

"They turned against the I.O.A.," Daniel countered. "That's a big difference."

"The I.O.A. *is* Earth. Like it or not, that's the reality of the current situation."

"Look, I know you've been away for a while, but things with the I.O.A. have been getting worse."

Sam frowned. "How so?"

"I won't bore you with the details, but let's just say their shadier side is growing in influence and isn't afraid to see the light of day. They're doing things in the open that five years ago they'd have been imprisoned for...nowadays it's just par for the course."

"Like what?" Sam pressed.

"Alright...a month before I left General Landry stumbled onto a little side project the I.O.A. had set up on a moon called Belson. It was a medical facility that they were using to conduct illicit research that was banned on Earth. Now, even though Belson had a stargate, they didn't once use it to send their people or supplies through. Instead they hid the whole affair, using the *Daedalus* and the *Apollo* to ferry cargo to and from the moon while enroute to other locations. Neither the Captains nor the crew were told the content of the cargo they were carrying, only that they had classified drop orders given to them from time to time from the SGC."

"Wait...if it came from the SGC, then Landry should have known about it."

Daniel shook its head. "The orders were forged by an I.O.A. associate assigned to the SGC. So technically the orders were coming from the facility, but they were not originating from the US military as the *Daedalus* and *Apollo* believed."

Sam made a noise under her breath. "The gall of some people. I assume either Landry or O'Neill took care of it?"

"Jack wanted to, but the President stepped in and sanctioned their activities."

"What?!"

"I know... Jack about blew a gasket. The deal was that medical facility had to abandon the forbidden research and be subjected to official oversight... by an I.O.A. representative."

"That's insane. You said they were the ones who set it up in the first place."

"Exactly. Their corruption is being sanctioned at an official level, one that people like Landry and O'Neill can't always undo. And here I find out that you're working with them."

"No," Sam said, almost out of reflex. "My orders came from O'Neill."

"Really," Daniel said, frowning. "I find that hard to believe."

"He's the one that chose me for the assignment."

Daniel shook his head slowly. "No, there's got to be more to it than that. What were his exact orders?"

Sam swallowed. "To recover Atlantis if possible."

Daniel raised an eyebrow. "If possible?"

"He said if it couldn't be done then we'd abandon the idea entirely. I thought we could pull it off, based on the information we'd been given. I never suspected the Asgard core would contain misinformation."

"Who says it did?"

"Daniel, it said the Asgards' shields protected against the drone weapons."

"Ok, but in all fairness, the *Odyssey*, even with all the upgrades and the ZPM it carries, is still a far cry from an actual Asgard ship."

Sam gave him a patronizing look. "They gave us the best of what they had."

"I know, they said as much, but I've been thinking about this for a long time, both during my research through the Asgard database and more recently the files the Ancients had on the Asgard, which have provided some significant insights into their civilization and culture."

"And?"

"Why did they choose to upgrade the *Odyssey* and not one of their own ships? If they were really giving us everything they had, and we know they had at least a few warships left after the war with the replicators, why didn't they give us those?"

Sam blinked. "I guess I never thought about it that way."

"Well I have, and I think there was a reason behind it. By giving us the blueprints for their technology, they were insuring that we'd have to gain a basic grasp of the principles of the science before we could recreate it ourselves. They knew that would take decades, if not centuries, and we'd have to advance as a civilization in order to take full advantage of what they'd given us. Upgrading the *Odyssey* was a way to protect their legacy and give us a means to fight the Ori... short of simply giving us their ships."

"Wait a minute," Sam interrupted. "You're saying they gave us the bike, but with the training wheels still attached?"

"Nice metaphor," he granted. "But I think you've hit it on the head. We weren't ready for everything... but they still gave us everything. And the way in which they did ensured that we had to advance before we'd be able to use it."

"So you're saying a real Asgard ship probably could have stood up to the drones," Sam said, thinking out loud.

"They are a lot bigger than ours."

Sam laughed. "Size really isn't the issue, Daniel. It's the design of the shield that counts."

"Then how did they do it?" Daniel asked, clearly waiting for an answer.

Sam shrugged.

"And, by the way, how did you *think* things were going to turn out going up against a real live *Ancient*?" Daniel said, heavily emphasizing that last bit.

Sam turned to the side, avoiding his gaze.

"Come on, Sam. I know you. What's the unseen angle in all this?"

She turned back. "Bottom line...Earth needs Atlantis. It's too valuable an asset to let go."

"Sam, the I.O.A. was going to destroy it in the first place."

"I know," she said, nodding her head. "And I'm glad it worked out so they didn't. Thankfully, we were able to get them to change their policy on that."

Daniel shook his head slowly. "I don't believe it. You're a sell out."

"A what?" Sam protested.

"You heard me. A sell out. You were the last person in the galaxy I would have expected to succumb to their corruptive influences...but somehow they got to you. Somehow they turned you."

"Daniel!"

"No," he said, taking a half step back. "Sheppard was right. You've changed. I didn't believe it when he asked me to talk to you, but now sadly I see he was right."

"What am I supposed to say to that?" Sam bit back. "You talk to me for all of two minutes then turn your back on me like I was a stranger."

"No one is turning their back on you," Daniel said calmly, but distantly. "You used to know the difference between right and wrong, and given that you're doing things that the old you would never have done, I have to assume that you no longer possess that base function. The only other alternative is that you know the difference and have intentionally chosen the side of evil...which I flat out refuse to believe."

"What? So I'm evil now?"

"You've allied yourself to it," Daniel said, crossing his arms over his chest. "The Sam I knew would have died first...or had some incredibly brilliant plan to pull the wool over the eyes of the enemy and turn them upside down at the last moment. If that's the case please elaborate."

"Well aren't you smug today."

Daniel nodded. "I thought so," he said, quietly turning around and leaving.

Sam got up out of her chair when he went, but didn't say anything. Instead she turned around and kicked the chair into the shield bars in frustration.

Stevenson stood in the gateroom surrounded by seventy three Earth personnel seated on the floor in neat rows while replicator guards wielding stun rifles kept watch over them. The Alterra waited silently until all of this first group were settled into their cramped formations before he spoke.

"You find yourselves captives in a war not of your own making," he began, walking slowly up the column of open floor between the stargate and steps leading up to the control room. The Earth personnel were lined up on either side of that two meter wide gap.

"You came here, thinking you were going to reclaim stolen property of Earth and capture the criminals responsible. You have been lied to...and now it is time that you heard the truth."

"I am Ryan Stevenson, formerly a member of SG-14, and before that SG-7. On a mission to explore one of the remaining uncharted stargate addresses I encountered a device called the Repository of Knowledge. Some of you know of it as a 'head sucker' because that is the term Jack O'Neill labeled it with when he encountered two similar devices. He was nearly killed both times, and only survived due to the intervention of the Asgard."

"Because of the danger involved, standing orders were given never to interact with the technology if it was ever encountered again. I violated those standing orders when I discovered a third device and used it on myself."

"I did so because I was already dying from a degenerative disease that Earth's doctors could not cure. I figured what the hell, I might as well try. If I died, at least it would be a quick death, unlike the long debilitating one I had ahead of me."

"I nearly died from using the technology, but my physiology was slightly more advanced than that of O'Neill's and I survived by the barest of margins. As some of you have been told, I now possess the knowledge of the Ancients...but that in itself is another lie."

"I have not been given a mental library of their knowledge...I have been transformed into one of the original Ancients, known as the Alterra. The Repository of Knowledge was designed to transform a sufficiently advanced human into an Alterra for the express purpose of rebuilding the Ancient civilization millions of years after it was destroyed by a plague that killed every last one of them."

"The Lanteans, that inhabited this city, were like you in the beginning. They were not Alterra, they were humans, tasked with safeguarding this city and protecting the lesser humans developing within the Pegasus galaxy. It was feared that they too might encounter the plague and be killed...but they didn't, and they weren't. The Lanteans developed physically and mentally over several million years, making them far more advanced than you, but still not the equivalent of us."

"I say 'us' because I am fully Alterra now. I know not only from history but from personal experience how advanced, and how inferior the Lanteans were. They used the knowledge and technology we left them to build their own civilization in this galaxy, one that mirrored ours, but one that also fell far short of what we once had. Meanwhile, the humans in your galaxy continued to develop, and the Repository of Knowledge continued to wait while you advanced."

"The Lanteans didn't know of the Repository's existence. None were built in Pegasus, and they had been given strict orders never to leave this galaxy, for fear of them contracting the plague that killed the Alterra. This is why Pegasus stargates do not connect with those in the rest of the gate network. The Lanteans were isolated in order to protect them...and continued to be so until they lost the war against the Wraith and the few survivors fled back to Earth as a last resort."

"Could one of them have used the Repository and become Alterran? Yes, they were physiologically advanced enough at that point to have used the technology without fear of death...but they were never meant for it, and had no knowledge of it. They lived out their lives away from the Pegasus galaxy as they chose, and what happened to most of them is still a mystery. Many, I suspect, altered the course of history on Earth and are partly responsible for it being one of the more developed human worlds in the galaxy."

"Now, we come to the present. I have used the Repository. I have survived. I have become Alterra. The plans laid down by the Ancients millions of years ago are now, finally,

beginning to unfold. I have begun to rebuild our civilization, and whereas I was one Alterra, now there are three. And in coming years there will be many more."

"The Return of the Ancients has begun. Races across twenty three galaxies have been waiting for this day throughout most of their recorded history. We were their friends and allies, and when we were killed it left them defenseless and alone. Our brethren, the Asgard and the Furlings, did their best to aid them, but they were ill equipped for the task. By my count, two thirds of the races that we befriended have been wiped from existence in our absence."

"I will not let the remaining third suffer their fate. We are building as fast as we can, but a civilization that spans galaxies is not an easy thing to recreate. It will take time, and I hope that our friends can survive a little bit longer until we are able to come to their aid as we once did so long ago."

"I tell you this so that you will understand that your mission to retake Atlantis was not one of capturing criminals...you were ignorantly attempting to destroy the Alterrans for a second time before we'd barely begun to rise again."

"Fortunately, you were ill equipped for the task, and have failed miserably. To those of you assembled here, I do not hold a grudge against you. Your failure has saved you from retribution. Even an ignorant action can be deadly, but your actions proved impotent. Others among you, still held within the containment cells, knew more than you did, and I will not forgive them so easily."

"In a few moments we will open a wormhole back to Earth. You are all free to go...but you go with a warning. You now know the truth. If you decide to move against us again, then you are knowingly becoming our enemy, and you will be treated accordingly."

"However, if any among you wish to stay and help us rebuild, I offer you that chance here and now. You will be welcome here, as will your skills, limited as they may be."

Stevenson ended his speech on that note and climbed the stairs into the control room.

"Dial Avalon," he told Corporal Fulton, who was manning the control room that shift.

When the wormhole opened Stevenson activated the visual communications link.

"Stargate Command, this is Atlantis. I need to speak to General Landry immediately."

The voice of the control room Sergeant came back on audio only. "Ah, may I ask who you are?"

Stevenson raised an eyebrow. "Nice to see you too, Sparky."

"Ryan?" Walter asked, activating their half of the visual communications link.

"Who else?"

"Actually, we weren't expecting to hear from you..."

"I know, you were expecting to hear from General Carter saying that she'd recaptured Atlantis."

"Ah, well...I..."

"Relax, Sparky. I'm not upset with you, but I do need to talk to Landry."

"He's on his way now."

"He's here now," Landry's voice said a moment before he walked into the picture.

"General..." Stevenson said evenly.

"You'll forgive me if I don't look happy to see you."

"I need you to lower the iris."

"Really?" Landry said, smiling. "Now why would we do that?"

"So I can return your people to you," Stevenson said, not caring for his tone. "Several groups over the next few hours."

All levity drained from Landry's face. "What happened?"

"They lost," Stevenson said simply. "We took them alive, if that's any conciliation, and I don't intend on holding them here indefinitely. So if you don't mind..."

"Look here son, you know I can't just lower the iris based on your word. Not even if you trotted General Carter out and had her tell us herself."

"General, I'm asking nicely. If I have to take down your iris myself, it will be in such a way that you'll have to buy a new one afterwards...and I know how much the Air Force hates to throw good money away."

"You know I don't take well to threats," Landry warned.

"Is that a no?"

"That's a no," the General said defiantly. "However, if you really do have our people then we need to discuss..."

Stevenson didn't bother to listen to what he said next as he walked out of the control room and down to the stargate. He stood in front of the open wormhole and mentally linked to the gate. He could see the inside of stargate command as well as the exact position of the iris. He knew that in its current position matter wouldn't materialize and even the disruptive vortex couldn't manifest...but if it moved even a fraction of a millimeter distant."

Stevenson raised his left hand, palm up toward the event horizon and released a golden stream of energy into it. Through his mental link he monitored the status of the iris, which didn't move, but the inside layer of it had become less rigid, even molten in the tiny center of the baseball-sized impact point.

He let loose a slightly larger stream of destructive energy in the exact same spot and succeeded in making the opposite side glow, which threw the SGC personnel into a tizzy, but he had accomplished his goal. The point of impact from his attack had lost the thin layer of molecules of that spot. They'd been melted away into a nearly imperceptible wrinkle on the back side of the iris, but with the gate's intricate sensors he could see that he'd made just enough of a crack.

Stevenson lowered his hand and mentally ordered the gate on the terminating side to pulse its vortex. When it did, only the smallest part of it formed within that crack, which ate away a little more of the dense material that made up the iris.

Then it pulsed again, and again, and again. Each time more material was stripped away from the back side of the iris, and as the crack enlarged, more and more of the vortex was able to manifest itself.

After dozens of pulses a small hole the size of a golf ball came into view from Landry's side of the iris. The next pulse extended ten feet out through that hole and enlarged it, eating away laterally at the iris material.

"Son of a bitch," Landry said, not believing his eyes.

"General?" Walter asked.

"Security teams to the gateroom," Landry ordered.

After hundreds of pulses Stevenson finally had the iris destroyed, save for a small ring around the outside that would trip anyone coming through the gate that the vortex couldn't reach without risk of splashing up against the side walls of the gate.

Stevenson stopped the pulses and instead ordered the Pegasus gate to descend a foot further into the floor. The hydraulics beneath the massive ring lowered it slowly while the floor panels adjusted themselves around its new position.

The Alterran turned around and addressed the captives one last time. "The time to choose has come. Those wishing to return to Earth may do so now. The iris is no longer blocking the gate, but mind the bump as you step through. The other side is a bit lower now, so you'll have to step down when you come through. Bend at the knees when you go through or make a tiny hop through the event horizon and you shouldn't fall, but just in case you do we'll send you through one at a time."

"Guards, leave us and return with the second group."

The replicators moved as one and walked off into the city as the Earth personnel began to stand.

"Form a line here. I can see what happens on the other side, so if you fall I'll know to give you a few seconds to pick yourself up."

Captain Norris was the first to step into line, with most of those assembled organizing themselves behind her...but at least a dozen walked off to the corners of the room, making their intent to stay clear. Some of the Earth-bound personnel gave them dirty looks, but their fortitude didn't give out and they held their ground.

"Go," Stevenson told Norris, who opted to bend low while moving into the gate.

On the other side Stevenson saw the Captain stumble more from the guns pointed at her than the drop. He saw Landry order them to stand down and the Captain walk down the ramp.

"Next," he said patiently.

After all the groups had gone through the gate, Sheppard brought Caldwell, Ellis, Woolsey, and Carter down by themselves. They were the last four members of the botched expedition for Stevenson to deal with...but with them being the willing instigators his chat with them was going to be of a different nature.

"Before we begin," Stevenson said, crossing his arms over his chest in front of the still open gate. He still had 17 minutes left on this wormhole before the auto-close function would activate, and he didn't think this conversation would take that long. "All of your people have been sent back to Earth through the stargate or they've chosen to remain here in Atlantis."

"Chosen?" Woolsey asked, not believing it. "Why would they do that?"

"Some of them are pretty smart," Sheppard chimed in. "Present company not included."

"I don't think..." Woolsey began before Stevenson took away his ability to talk.

"Listen," he said quietly, looking at all four people before releasing his hold on Woolsey's vocal chords. "What you came here to do was not in the spirit of the stargate program that I signed up for. We were supposed to be explorers and defenders of Earth, making contact with other worlds and forming alliances with those we found that we could call friend."

"What you came here to do went well beyond that. It involved revenge, greed, arrogance, and above all else corruption. The I.O.A.," he said, looking directly at Woolsey, "is detrimental to Earth's future, both with regards to internal operations and your relationships with other worlds. They've proven to be cheats, liars, cowards, and two-faced backstabbers that no offworld representative in their right mind could ever come to trust. They will continue to corrupt the SGC and isolate Earth from potential allies and trading partners."

"As for the corruption part, you three are prime examples. They've got you doing their dirty work for them. You are Air Force officers...Colonels all. A certain level of moral fortitude is expected of all officers, but the leadership responsibilities that go along with being a Colonel require you to know when to follow orders and when to refuse them."

"The longer the I.O.A. has its tendrils into the stargate program, the more difficult it will be to refuse immoral orders without throwing your entire career away. They are using intimidation to encourage good people to keep their mouth shut when they would normally protest. When that happens, the corruption of the program begins to snowball until it becomes so embedded that it cannot be removed...or until someone comes in from the outside and cuts it out forcefully."

"I didn't expect this from the three of you," Stevenson said, looking at each captain in turn. Then he looked at Woolsey. "Such things are usually reserved for scum like him that hide their evil beneath a façade of weak civility, only to show their true colors when they believe themselves to be in a position of power."

"On your ships you are the power," Stevenson reminded them. "If you are given orders to the contrary, to let someone like him command you, you should refuse the assignment, as you should have refused this one. That error in judgment has cost you your ships, which we will be putting to more productive use."

"As for you," Stevenson said, his voice growing darker. "I had a chat with McKay before he went back to Earth. He told me you were supposed to abandon the mission after a year. Why didn't you?"

Sam ground her teeth, mentally cursing Rodney. "The mission wasn't complete."

Stevenson nodded. "The difference between you and them," he said, pointing at Caldwell and Ellis, "is that you chose this mission. They were assigned to it. You should have returned to Earth as your orders allowed when your deployment time expired. You chose to continue, which makes you as culpable as them," he said, pointing at Woolsey.

Stevenson lowered his eyes to the floor and closed them in disgust. "Go."

After a few exchanged looks, the foursome walked past Stevenson towards the still open gate.

"What was that?" Stevenson asked angrily, turning about and grabbing Woolsey in a telekinetic hold.

"I didn't say anyt...", he said as he was lifted a foot off the floor.

"No, don't hide it," Stevenson said, searching his mind. "Something about me."

Woolsey didn't, or couldn't, say anything.

"You really thought you could pull that off," Stevenson said. "That wouldn't have worked either."

Sheppard frowned, still standing on the steps. Whatever Woolsey was saying to him must have been within his mind.

"That's not the first time you've proposed that, is it?" Stevenson said, visibly constricting Woolsey's neck. "And what did you plan to do when I broke free?"

Woolsey's mind connected to another train of thought in response to that question and Stevenson quickly followed that thread into others like it, exposing a web of memories Woolsey was doing his best to hide from him.

Stevenson's eyes narrowed sharply, and from where Sam was standing it was obvious that he was furious.

The next sound anyone heard was the snap of Woolsey's neck.

"What the..." Sheppard began to say before he suddenly lost his voice...and his ability to move.

Stevenson threw Woolsey's dead body back through the gate then turned and telekinetically picked up Carter. He pulled her up off the ground a few inches and brought her up in front of him.

"Did you know?" he asked, searching her mind.

She didn't.

Suddenly Sam's mind was flooded with memories Stevenson had taken from Woolsey. They were so loud, so vivid that she couldn't block them out. For the next few moments all she could see and hear was what Woolsey had seen and heard and said. She could also feel his emotions and sense his thoughts in those brief snippets of memory.

Her stomach turned upside down in the process, made even worse by the point by point explanation from Stevenson on every misstep she had made. He even went so far as to forcefully tear away the mental blocks and rationalizations she'd been using to combat her own conscious in order to find some level of symbiosis with Earth's leadership...and in doing so exposed Carter to the full emotional effect of what she had done, and what Woolsey and the I.O.A. had planned to do.

It was too much for her to handle, but she couldn't stop it. What felt like an hour of torture took place in only ten seconds, at the end of which Sam's eyes were swollen and gushing with tears.

Stevenson pulled her within a few inches of his face. "I expected more of you."

With those five words hanging in the air and echoing in Sam's mind, Stevenson threw her backwards through the stargate to what would undoubtedly be a very hard landing on the other side.

Stevenson pulled a quick check on the minds of the other two Colonels, but they knew even less than Carter had.

"Mark my words," he said, releasing the pair from his telekinetic hold. "The I.O.A. has just declared war on the Alterra...and so long as you serve them you are on the wrong side in this fight. They are the enemy of Earth, not us."

Stevenson pointed his thumb towards the gate.

Caldwell and Ellis took the cue and walked towards the open wormhole.

"One last thing," Stevenson said, stopping both of them just before they reached the event horizon. "If anyone serving the I.O.A. enters this galaxy again...you'll find us considerably less hospitable."

"We'll deliver the message," Caldwell said stiffly before walking through the gate.

Ellis hesitated. "For whatever it's worth...I'm sorry."

He followed Caldwell through the gate, then Stevenson mentally commanded it to shut down and return to its normal height. When he did, he also released his hold on Sheppard.

"What the hell was that?" Sheppard asked angrily.

Stevenson turned and looked him in the eye. He didn't say anything, but he did mentally transmit the memories he'd taken from Woolsey into the Colonel's mind.

Sheppard's eyes narrowed. "I should have shot the bastard a long time ago."

"Feel up to a field trip?" Stevenson asked.

Sheppard tilted his head in sudden comprehension. "You going after the Repository?"

Stevenson nodded.

"I'm in," Sheppard said without hesitation.

"We'll need to grab a jumper," Stevenson said, walking off with Sheppard.

Aftermath

1

Carter came flying through the stargate head first into the SGC, tumbled over once in mid air, then fell hard to the ground at the foot of the ramp where there was an audible 'pop' that even Landry could hear as he came through the gateroom doors.

"What the hell?" he demanded at the up close sight of Woolsey's dead body, with the sentiment echoing in his mind a second time when he saw Carter's unconscious form balled up on the floor.

A Corporal knelt down next to Carter, pressed two fingers against her throat, then gave Landry a thumbs up.

"Where's that medic?" Landry yelled as Caldwell and Ellis stepped through the gate just before it shut down. "Will someone please tell me what the hell is going on?"

"Which part?" Caldwell asked half sarcastically.

"The part where Woolsey is dead," Landry said evenly, letting the Colonel know he wasn't in a mood for games.

"Stevenson killed Woolsey," Caldwell said. "We don't know why."

"That's not entirely true," Ellis interrupted. "It appeared that Woolsey had information that the rest of us didn't, and whatever that information was it was serious enough to get him killed. Stevenson asked General Carter if she knew before he sent her back."

"You mean threw her back," Caldwell objected. "If Stevenson is as advanced as it appears, then he probably has telepathic abilities, which it looked like he was using on Woolsey and Carter. We have no way of knowing what was going on between them."

"Stop right there," Landry demanded. "We'll sort this mess out later. Are all your personnel accounted for?"

"All that chose to come back," Caldwell said stiffly.

Landry frowned. "You mean more of our people defected to Atlantis?"

"Yes, sir," Ellis answered.

"For the love of God," Landry said under his breath. "We'll debrief in one hour. In the mean time try and come up with a short synopsis. I highly doubt I'll have the patience to sit through every mission detail. The I.O.A. can do that on their own time, but I for one want to hear why our taskforce returned to Earth without their ships," he said, eyeing the two Colonels as he walked over to Carter as the newly arrived medics were hauling her up onto a gurney.

"Sergeant Siler!" Landry half yelled over the din.

"Yes, sir."

"I want that new iris installed ASAP."

"As soon as it arrives, sir."

"Colonel Davenport," Landry said, looking at the man on his left. "I want a permanent security guard in the gateroom around the clock until the iris is fixed. That bastard just left Earth

open to attack, and if anything unwelcome comes through that gate it's your responsibility to make sure it doesn't get off this ramp."

Davenwood nodded. "Will do, General."

Landry looked up at the gate with its worthless iris halo ringing the inside of the device and shook his head in disgust.

"Dr. McKay...wait," Dr. Lam said, putting her arm in front of him as he tried to enter the infirmary.

"I'm here to see Colonel Carter," he explained innocently.

"I know," Lam said. "But before I let you, you need to understand a few things."

"Understand what?"

"She's not alright, despite appearances to the contrary," Lam said in a whisper.

Rodney frowned. "What do you mean?"

"She has a broken wrist, that much is easy to diagnose...but she hasn't said a single word since she woke up. I tried to talk to her, but the most I got was two seconds of eye contact. She's been crying most of the time, or trying to. She's probably out of tears by now."

"What are you saying?"

"I think there's something psychologically wrong with her," Lam said gingerly.

"Something I can't diagnose...not for sure anyway. But at the very least I'd say she suffered some kind of emotional trauma. Her lack of responsiveness is probably due to a self-defense mechanism, dulling her senses to the outside world in an attempt to lock down the internal pain."

"What are you saying...she's broken?"

"I don't know. I suggest you handle her with kid gloves, but if you can get through to her, even a little, it would better help me diagnose her condition."

"Of course," Rodney said as Lam let her arm down. He walked over to Carter's bed and sat down in an adjacent chair. He reached out gently and touched her shoulder.

"Sam? It's me, Rodney. Can you hear me?"

Carter's eyes remained where they were...staring through him towards the wall, half swollen from endless crying.

"What the hell happened to you?" McKay asked in a whisper. "Last I saw you, you were fine."

Very slowly Carter's eyes focused and lifted toward Rodney with fresh tears seeping out. "You were right," she said, barely loud enough for him to hear. "I'm sorry."

"About what? The mission?" McKay said, glad to just have her look at him. "Forget about all that right now..." he said to her, but she'd already drifted off again.

Dr. Lam walked up behind him, concerned. "Did she say something?"

"A few words, then she was gone again."

"That's something at least," Lam said, jotting something down on her clipboard. "Good work."

Rodney shrugged his shoulders. "I didn't do anything."

"Sometimes the presence of a certain person elicits a response that others can't. Either way, it's a good sign."

"Do you have any idea how this could have happened?"

"You don't know?"

"No," McKay said, eyes widening. "What happened?"

"I was told it had to do with Stevenson, and the possibility of a telepathic mind link."

"That doesn't make any sense," McKay said, confused. "Why would he do something like this to her?"

The moment the words were out of his mouth he knew the answer. Sam's few words were all the proof he needed. Dr. Lam must have seen the reaction in his eyes.

"What?" she asked curiously.

"Nothing," McKay said, getting up. "Let me know if anything changes?" he asked.

"Sure," Lam said, unconvinced, but she let it go.

Rodney nodded his thanks then hurriedly walked off.

Stevenson stood at the control board of the Asgard core onboard the *Odyssey* as a sudden revelation hit him. The wording the Asgard had chosen in several historical records had seemed odd, and he'd just done a search along those 'odd' parameters. The correlated events on the patchwork timeline that the computer core had just compiled for him gave a coded sequence of *future* events...if one knew how to read them.

It wasn't something the humans could have noticed. The Asgard language was subtle, and without a full understanding of the nuances of the language the 'oddities' wouldn't stand out. That had given him the first glimmer of hope in the three days he'd spent going through the massive amount of data stored within the core, but what he'd just found floored him.

It was a detailed, yet vague, step by step process through which the Asgard race would be reborn.

He'd suspected something like this would be here. The Asgard were too advanced for mass suicide...the Alterra had taught them better than that. However, if they were going to keep their technology out of the wrong hands then they needed everyone to believe they were dead so no one would come looking for them...except someone sufficiently advanced to help them.

Stevenson didn't know if they'd expected him to be the one to come to their aid, but the clues they'd left behind seemed as if they were tailor made for him. Regardless, he *did* have the power to help them...he'd solved the problem of their continual genetic degeneration within two hours of gaining access to their medical records within the data core. The Asgard had already done all the ground work for him, they had just lacked a single piece of information...one that Stevenson had, thanks to Lyran.

That was, however, merely the tip of the iceberg. With this new revelation a multitude of interlocking events needed to be set in motion, and done so quickly. Time was on his side, so long as he didn't delay. With the initial confrontation with Avalon now in the history books, he could move on to other projects that would require longer periods of time away from Pegasus...projects that, up until now, he hadn't felt comfortable risking.

To that end, he ringed back into the central column of Atlantis from the pier where the *Odyssey* was undergoing a much needed refit and tracked down Drs Jackson and Weir. They were the first two pieces in the very large puzzle that he was about to start putting together.

2

"What's going on?" Mitchell asked as SG-1 came back through the gate from a mission to the Tok'ra homeworld to renegotiate their alliance.

"Sorry, sir," Sergeant Siler apologized. "We're having to install a new iris."

"What's wrong with the old one?" Haley asked as the wormhole deactivated and the construction crews got back to work.

"Had a hole in it," Siler said, excusing himself.

"A hole?" Mitchell asked as they walked off the ramp into the midst of Colonel Davenport's security guard.

"Courtesy of Atlantis," the Colonel answered. "Busted a hole right through it when we wouldn't lower the iris."

"Why?" Vala asked, stepping up next to Mitchell.

"They wanted to send back their prisoners."

"What prisoners?" Mitchell asked, concerned.

"The crew of the three ships we sent to retake the city," Davenport said. "Woolsey came back dead, followed a minute later by Colonel Carter doing a superman through the gate. I hear she's beat up pretty bad."

Mitchell exchanged glances with Teal'c and hurried out of the gateroom with the rest of SG-1 in tow. He made a beeline for the infirmary, still carrying his weapons and desert gear.

"Sam?" he asked earnestly as they walked into the infirmary.

Carter was lying flat on her back looking up at the ceiling and tilted her head forward at the sound of his voice. She closed her eyes in shame when she realized who it was and laid her head back down.

"What happened?" Mitchell asked as he stood over her.

"Go away," she said meekly.

"Yes, go away," Lam said walking up behind the Colonel and pulling at his elbow. "She needs her rest."

"I'm not going anywhere until somebody tells me what's going on."

"Allow me," General Landry said from the doorway behind them. "You blew through the gateroom so fast I wasn't able to catch you."

"What happened to the iris?" Vala asked. "I thought it was close enough to the event horizon to prevent anything from coming through."

Landry nodded. "McKay theorized that Stevenson sent an energy blast through that made a small crack in the metal, then expanded it with repetitive 'kawooshes' as he called it. Damn thing ate away at the iris until they'd opened up a large enough hole to send our people back through."

"If they wanted to send our people back," Haley asked, "why didn't you just open it?"

Landry eyed her for a moment. "In retrospect that probably would have been a good idea, but at the time we didn't know their full intentions."

As they talked, Teal'c walked over to Carter and put his hand on her shoulder, but she turned away from him as well.

"What about Earth's ships?" Vala asked.

"They kept those," Landry said irreverently. "And said they'd be even less friendly if we came after them again."

"What happened to Carter," Mitchell reiterated.

"You can thank Stevenson for that," Landry said angrily. "And for the death of Woolsey. Right now, however, I need SG-1 to redeploy...immediately."

"What's up?" Haley asked eagerly.

"I just got word from the Delta site. They were attacked by a puddle jumper that came through the gate. It destroyed the Ancient repository then left the same way it came."

Mitchell frowned. "Assuming it was someone from Atlantis, why would they do that?"

Landry half smiled. "That's what I want SG-1 to find out. Poke around the base and see what you can dig up. I highly doubt this is a coincidence."

"General..." Carter's meek voice interrupted.

"Sam..." Mitchell said, stepping back to her side.

"Colonel Carter?" Landry said questioningly.

"It's the I.O.A.," she continued, barely making eye contact. "They were...killing people...making them use the repository."

Landry frowned. "How do you know that?"

"Stevenson gave me Woolsey's memories," Carter said, starting to cry again. "They managed to backwards engineer some of the tech from the Ark...they used it to brainwash some of their people. Woolsey knew of three people that died before our mission, and they weren't planning on stopping..."

"That was a year and a half ago," Landry said, thinking out loud.

"Who knows how many more may have died since," Teal'c added somberly.

"That's why the I.O.A. wanted Sheppard back," Carter continued, regaining a bit of her composure. "It wasn't working...and he's demonstrated a compatibility with Ancient tech..."

"Son of a bitch," Mitchell said under his breath.

"Is that why Stevenson killed Woolsey?" Landry asked.

Carter nodded slightly. "It was partly his idea...as a backup if they couldn't capture Stevenson."

"What did they plan to do with him?" Vala asked in all seriousness.

"Woolsey told them they couldn't contain him indefinitely with the anti-prior device. He suggested they download what memories they could, then kill him after no more than 24 hours."

"Kill him?" Vala asked incredulously. "Do they really have the right to do that? I know Woolsey suggested that when Daniel was a prior, but under your planet's laws I thought there was some process of discovery that protected against such things."

"There's supposed to be...but I'm more concerned with them using the Ark," Mitchell said in disgust. "Like you said, they have no problem killing one of our own if they think they're a threat...but brainwashing our own people opens up a whole new can of worms."

Landry took a step closer to Carter. "I don't suppose you have any proof of this?"

Carter glared at him for a moment, then meekly shook her head 'no.'

Landry looked up at Mitchell. "Slight change of plans, Colonel. I want you at the Delta site five minutes ago...see if you can verify what she just said before the I.O.A. has a chance to clean it up."

Mitchell nodded. "Yes, sir." He turned and gave Sam's arm a squeeze. "Hang in there, Kiddo."

SG-1 hurried out of the infirmary and went straight back to the gate while Landry remained behind. He sat down on the edge of Carter's bed and looked at her sympathetically. He had no idea what was going through her mind, but at least she'd recovered enough to give them some vital intel.

"What else did Woolsey know?"

Stevenson brought Jackson and Weir to a bio-lab in one of the spires on pylon 2, far away from the inhabited sections of the city. In fact, ever since Stevenson had arrived in Atlantis certain city sectors had been off limits to the humans, quarantined through the city's central computer.

This lab resided in one of the quarantined sections and was far off the beaten path, even from the Atlantis expedition's original exploration area. As it was, Dr. Weir was getting her first look at a section of city she'd never before laid eyes on.

Stevenson leaned against the wall of the lab when they arrived, indicating they were at their destination.

"Ok," Daniel said curiously. "What's going on?"

"Yes, why couldn't you say anything in the mess hall?" Elizabeth chimed in.

"Remember that promotion I promised you?" Stevenson asked.

Elizabeth inclined her head. "If I broke 20 minutes. What does that have to do with this?"

Stevenson pointed to a device in the corner.

"I've seen one of those before," Daniel said cautiously. "If I'm not mistaken, it's some type of DNA altering device, identical to the ones Nirti and Anubis used...and Merlin."

Stevenson raised an eyebrow in Daniel's direction.

"What are you saying?" Elizabeth asked.

"You want to use this machine to...upgrade us?" Daniel asked.

Stevenson nodded. "The Alterran home galaxy was always Avalona, but even there we didn't have full control. There are far more systems without stargates than those with, and those that did were too many in number for us to keep a close watch on. We used a network of alliances to maintain our influence and keep watch over our territory, even in our primary galaxy."

"And while Pegasus is a dwarf galaxy, it still contains millions of systems...too many for anyone to keep track of. Even if I focused my entire mission on this galaxy alone, there would still be wild systems, not to mention interstellar space, where we would hold no power."

"That is why the Alterra do not seek to dominate a region of space through brute force...we act in response to threats, we do not seek to suppress them. It would be futile to try. As far as we know the universe is infinite...there will always be the unknown to deal with, therefore we developed our interstellar and intergalactic civilization along those lines."

"I think I see where you're going with this," Daniel interrupted. "The Asgard operated the same way. They had a list of planets under their protection, and they would intervene if something happened to them, but they never defended them in the traditional sense. They allowed the enemy the first move with the knowledge that they could and would inevitably bring in superior firepower to deal with the situation."

Elizabeth cringed. "That sounds a little cold to me. A lot of people could be killed before they could respond. On the other hand, if they'd placed some sort of outpost on the planet in question they could hold off the attack until reinforcements arrived."

"You're missing the point," Daniel said, glancing at Stevenson for verification. "If they put their own people on the worlds they protected, that list would be a short one. Now, if they only promised a swift and overwhelming response..."

"...they could protect more worlds," Elizabeth finished.

"A lot more," Daniel continued, "given that the Alterra established the means for instantaneous travel between galaxies, coupled with advanced hyperdrives to be able to quickly move to regions that didn't have stargates."

Elizabeth glanced at Stevenson, but he seemed content to let them work through the logic on their own. "But, if you get too big you run the risk of letting some worlds slip through the cracks."

"Which is why," Daniel said with finality, "you need a network of allies who can keep watch and inform you when something is happening."

Stevenson smiled. "Or to deal with the minor threats themselves."

Daniel glanced back at the Ancient device. "And you want us," he said, gesturing to himself and Elizabeth, "to look after Pegasus."

"Yes," Stevenson said.

Daniel frowned. "You're not thinking Adam and Eve here, are you?"

"No," Stevenson said firmly, shaking his head. "In fact, I don't want you reproducing for a while. You'll need a decent population before you can form a matura...say, at least a thousand."

"Hold on a minute," Elizabeth said, throwing her hands in the air to get them to stop. "What are you implying?"

"Not that..." Daniel said quickly, "though that's by no means a slight against you."

Elizabeth held her head in his hand. "Ryan, why do you have to be so cryptic? Just tell me what it is you want."

Stevenson held up his hand to stop Daniel from saying anything. "I told you if you broke 20 minutes on a 5k run you would get a promotion. You did very well with your training once you got past your initial reluctance. You even started to like it, because it gave you a personal journey that only you were aware of. You didn't have to factor in other people's opinions or beliefs...it was just you and the hard truth. And you appreciated the reversal."

Elizabeth's eyes narrowed. "I thought you taught me how to block your telepathy?"

"You're not very good at it," Stevenson said, almost apologetic.

"Hard truth seems to be the Alterran way," Elizabeth said, but she wasn't upset. "What does that have to do with all of this?" she said, gesturing to the lab they were in.

"This is where you are going to get the promotion you earned...Daniel too, though we never had a formal arrangement. He's made considerable progress since he arrived here, due to some subtle nudging on my part."

"Yeah," Daniel said, "I did notice that, by the way."

"I know," Stevenson said, reminding him of his mind-reading capabilities. "Both of you stood out among your race when I first met you, and you've come even further since then. Now it's time you took the next step...and help me in the process."

Elizabeth's eyes narrowed. "How?"

Stevenson looked at Daniel, but said nothing.

Daniel took that as his cue. "He's taking a page out of Merlin's playbook. He's going to turn us into Lanteans...right?"

"Lanteans!?" Elizabeth repeated, stunned.

Stevenson nodded. "I need you to start rebuilding their civilization, and eventually become the caretakers of Pegasus while I and the Alterra move on to larger problems."

"Larger than the Wraith?" Elizabeth asked, her mind racing. Her, an Ancient?

"We'll take care of the Wraith," Stevenson assured her. "It's the aftermath I need the Lantean civilization for."

"A Lantean?" Elizabeth repeated out loud. "I never imagined..."

"Daniel?" Stevenson said, walking over and powering up the device.

"Happy to," he said, jumping up on the pedestal. "Is this going to take several treatments?"

Stevenson raised a curious eyebrow. "That depends how far along you are," he said, using the machine to map out his genome. "I'd guess at least two, based on Merlin's research."

"I wonder what happened to them," Daniel said, referring to the people Merlin had advanced. "Could they still be alive?"

"Depends on the individual," Stevenson said, remembering that he'd had to wipe the part of Daniel's memory where Merlin explained that the Knights of the Round Table had been sent off to another galaxy far, far away. "And how good of shape you get yourself into," he said, glancing at Elizabeth.

"Lesson learned," she said, stepping beside Stevenson and looking at the control board with him.

"According to this, your transformation should take a few days," Stevenson said as the device displayed Jackson's genome along with a stereotypical Lantean model and highlighted the differences. "I'll have to troubleshoot the finer points, but you should be able to get your first treatment within an hour or so."

The holographic schematics disappeared from around Daniel. "Next."

"Guess that's me," Elizabeth said eagerly, taking Daniel's place on the pedestal.

"Just for the record, I couldn't have done this without you fully assimilating your clone body. It would have caused additional problems."

She smiled. "Which was another reason for the training."

He nodded. "Which needs to continue indefinitely," he reminded her.

"I know," she said softly as her genome appeared as a twisted halo around her petite body.

Stevenson recorded her genome alongside Daniel's then shut down the scanner. "Ok, I need a few minutes to tweak the Lantean norms to fit your profiles, then we'll get you both started. You'll feel quite a bit of stress over the next few days, but you need to be as active as possible. I recommend double training sessions, Elizabeth. Morning and afternoon to help you process the changes. Same thing for you, Daniel."

"Get my ass in the gym," he said sarcastically. "Got it."

"Not quite. You need to focus on running and agility drills, not weights. Excessive motion is needed to quickly process the upgrades, or this will take weeks instead of days."

"Just for the record," Daniel mildly complained, "I'm not much of a runner."

"Neither was I," Elizabeth said ironically. "But you'll get used to it."

"I supposed we could work out together?" Daniel suggested, not entirely enthused.

"Heck no," Elizabeth said playfully. "I'm not slowing down for you."

Stevenson laughed. "Good girl. Take a cue from her, Daniel. She's got the right attitude."

"I'll do what I need to," Daniel said, determined.

"If it helps," Stevenson offered. "Most Alterra were runners."

"Really?" Daniel asked, now interested. "I always pictured them as the cerebral type."

"We are...it's called multitasking."

"Not to complain, but I don't see you in the gym."

"Check the records, you'll see my stats."

"There are records?" Daniel asked.

"I've seen him on occasion," Elizabeth told him. "Usually very early in the morning."

Daniel frowned. "By the way, how long do you sleep?"

"About three hours on average."

"That...explains a lot," Daniel said.

"Take my word for it, Daniel," Elizabeth said. "Start training, seriously, or he'll find ways to motivate you," she said knowingly.

Daniel raised an eyebrow. "Such as?" he asked, sensing some story behind her remark.

"Just take my word on this one," she half whispered, taking a seat on the edge of a table to wait on Stevenson who was even now working on their genetic profiles.

"Ok," Daniel said, sitting down next to her. He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes, then looked at the ocular devices. "I wonder if I'll need these."

Stevenson heard his question and shook his head 'no.'

"Well then," Daniel said, tossing his glasses aside. "So much for the intellectual look."

"You have nice eyes," Elizabeth said. "No reason to hide them behind glasses."

"You think so?"

"Sure you do...besides, what does it matter what humans think of us. We're about to become Ancients."

"That we are," Daniel said, pleased.

3

"How are you doing?" Stevenson asked Daniel as he finished his run and walked off the gymnasium's track. Elizabeth ran by him in a blur, lapping him for the third time and giving an almost inaudible "beep beep" as she passed him.

Daniel smiled at that between heavens of air. She'd been giddy ever since her transformation.

"Sucking badly," Daniel said in Ancient, answering Stevenson's question, "*but not nearly as much as last week.*"

"How's the burning?"

"Gone," Daniel said, referring to the hyper-processing that his body had been undergoing. He'd felt the changes as a constant burning sensation throughout his body, as if every inch of his flesh was overheating, yet his temperature remained constant.

"Good," Stevenson said succinctly. "*I didn't want to take you away until your physiology had fully adapted.*"

"Away?" Daniel asked, finally getting his breathing under control.

Stevenson nodded. "*I need your help.*"

"Really," Daniel said, surprised. "*With what?*"

"*I need you to make an introduction.*"

"No problem," Daniel said, thinking through the list of cultures he'd encountered. "*Who do you want to meet?*"

"*The Ori.*"

Daniel coughed in surprise. "*The Ori?*"

Stevenson nodded. "*I have no knowledge of them since the Alterra left Destra. As it is, you know more about them than I do.*"

"*You're talking about the humans, right? The ascended Ori are all dead.*"

"*Humans and the Priors...the Doci if possible.*"

Daniel's eyes narrowed. "*You intend to bring them into the fold.*"

"*I intend to bring all humans into the fold. We may not have recreated those in Destra, but at this point, with the Ori dead, they could probably use my help...and I theirs.*"

"*You want the Ori fleet to fight the Wraith?*" Daniel asked.

Stevenson shook his head dismissively. "*I don't need them for that. In two months the first Columnar will be finished and I can start witting them down while we build more. The Ori fleet is unnecessary.*"

"*Then what do you have planned for them, assuming they play ball, which they very well might not given all that's happened to them. You have something specific in mind, I can tell.*"

Stevenson sighed. "*Daniel, you're going to have to accept that there are some things I can't tell you. The stakes are too high, and some secrets I have to keep.*"

"What stakes?" Daniel pressed. "*Why do you need to keep secrets? To everyone here, including me, it looks like you've got the power to do whatever you please. You've said your mission is to rebuild the Alterran civilization, how does that require secrecy? I mean, who can stand against you...or is there something else going on that you're not telling us?*"

Stevenson considered his next words carefully. *"I have the collective knowledge of the entire Alterran race...more than any single Alterra ever possessed. I will always have secrets, Daniel. And despite appearances to the contrary, our civilization was not an easy one to build the first time around...and we were threatened with annihilation several times in our history. I've shown you one already, and there are many more. I am walking a very fine line...if I screw up and attract the attention of the wrong people, then I put us in an endgame scenario that I will not be able to work my way out of."*

"So you want the Ori on your side as what...backup?"

"No, Daniel. It's not that simple. Everything that I have done is part of a larger design, threads building upon threads. Pull the wrong one, and it all unravels."

"Alright, I get it," Daniel said. "There's more going on than meets the eye. You have to be careful, for some reason I still don't understand. But what I don't get, especially now that I'm an Ancient, is why you can't tell me. Where's the risk there?"

"I'm sorry, Daniel. I can't."

Daniel looked down at the ground in frustration. *"What can you tell me?"*

"It's been six years since anyone from Earth has had contact with the Ori. We don't know what's happened to them. I, for one, would rather have them on our side than leave them be and hope they don't become an enemy again."

"The ascended Ori are dead," Daniel reminded him.

"You're a student of human nature," Stevenson reminded him. "Take away their unifying purpose, their religion, their leadership, and the basis for their entire civilization...and you tell me what's possible."

Daniel considered that for a moment. *"Any number of things. Worst case scenario they resent what we've done and seek to avenge their loss."*

"I wouldn't call that the worst case scenario," Stevenson qualified, "but it's concern enough."

"I think I'm beginning to see your point. Give people freedom that they've never had before and all kinds of suppressed aspects of their psyche come to the surface."

"We need to at least find out what's happened to them," Stevenson offered.

Daniel nodded. *"Alright, I'll introduce you to them...but I don't think they'll want to replace the Ori with one of their kin, even if you are flesh and blood."*

"Possibly," Stevenson admitted. "But I'm willing to bet that the Priors feel differently."

"Why?"

"Same reason the Jaffa are flocking to Dakara," Stevenson prompted him.

"A return to normalcy," Daniel suddenly realized, "and a renewed sense of purpose."

"Never underestimate the power of purpose," Stevenson advised.

"No...", Daniel said, realizing that Stevenson had done the same thing with him...given him a purpose where he had none. Ever since his wife had died his purpose had been ambiguous, and he'd 'floated' from one assignment to another. Threads all, and valuable, but without an underlying motivation to guide his path. "...I won't."

"Come on," Stevenson said, monitoring his thought process. "The Tria is ready to leave. Pack what you need. We'll depart as soon as you're aboard."

"I won't be long," Daniel said as Elizabeth walked up to them. Stevenson pointed him forward, and Daniel went ahead of him while he turned to talk to the other Lantean.

"I'm taking the Tria and Daniel to the Ori galaxy. We might be gone a while."

Elizabeth frowned. *"The Ori?"*

Stevenson nodded. *"If you don't mind the double duty, I'm putting you back in command of Atlantis...permanently."*

Elizabeth's grin spread from ear to ear. *"I love you,"* she said sarcastically.

Stevenson grinned. *"You'll still have to manage Hoth...until you can train a replacement."*

She lost her grin and replaced it with her working face. *"It'll be a stretch, but I can handle it. Did you have someone in mind?"*

"I'll let you choose. If we're not back in five days Sheppard has a mission scheduled that'll take him back to Avalon. I was going to go with him, but if I don't make it back he's still a go. Bra'tac will keep an eye on him."

"Avalon?" she asked curiously.

"You can talk to him about it. Something he arranged with McKay."

"Sounds interesting," Elizabeth said. *"Any orders while you're gone?"*

"Don't blow up the city," Stevenson said jokingly as he walked off.

With Daniel aboard, the *Tria* took off from Atlantis and made its way to the nearest of the two remaining supergates in the Pegasus galaxy. From there they dialed the Avalona purple gate nearest to the location of the Ori supergate. A few minutes in hyperspace later and they arrived at the giant ring, which was considerably bigger than its Alterran counterparts.

Stevenson dialed Destra using both his own knowledge of basic stargate technology and the dialing program that Earth had used onboard the *Odyssey*, which they in turn had gotten from Daniel during his time as an Ori prior. The narrow *Tria* passed through the gate easily with room to spare and in a few seconds traveled the entire distance that it would have taken the original Alterra 73 years to cover from Destra to Avalona had they traveled in a straight line at maximum speed.

Being such a long distance away from his own stargate network put Stevenson a little on edge knowing that this one pair of gates was his only way back within a decade. Even with the advances in hyperdrive technology that the Alterra had made in the interim, it would still take seven years to cross the gap in the *Tria*.

Once in Destra, Larrin jumped the *Tria* into hyperspace enroute to Celestis, whose location Stevenson had also derived from the *Odyssey's* computer. Capturing that ship had been more critical to Stevenson's efforts than Earth would ever know.

"We've got a problem," Larrin said after they'd exited hyperspace. She brought up a holographic schematic of the sensor readings that she was seeing through her mental connection to the control chair.

"It's been destroyed," Daniel said, turning to Stevenson. They exchanged glances.

"Any life signs?" Stevenson asked.

"No," Larrin confirmed. "But, there is a part of the city that my sensors aren't penetrating."

The holographic picture of the rubble of Celestis zoomed in on one subsurface area. It was a null zone...no data at all from the sensors.

"Worth a look," Stevenson said. "Rings?"

"No," Larrin said after checking for a connection.

"We'll take a jumper then," he said, walking aft. "Cloak the ship and change orbit once we're away."

"Understood," Larrin said, agreeing that they shouldn't take any chances. The damage to Celestis looked to be orbital in nature.

When they boarded the first of two jumpers in the *Tria's* main hangar bay Stevenson slid into the copilot's seat. "*Take us down,*" he told Daniel.

"*Alright,*" he said, taking the pilot's seat and powering up the tiny ship. He'd always envied Jack his ability to pilot these ships and he hadn't been wrong. The mental interface coupled with the hand controls was just...cool.

The jumper slid out of the bay as the Ancient warship disappeared behind them. Daniel cautiously landed the ship in the rubble of the Ori's holiest city, taking twice as much time as it would have taken Stevenson, but it was obvious that he needed the practice.

Stevenson didn't complain about the delay. He waited patiently until they touched down, then closed his eyes in silence for a moment. "*There's someone here. A Prior, I think.*"

"*How can you be sure?*" Daniel asked.

"*I can sense his mind...it's too complex to be human,*" he said, getting up. "*I think it's best if they see you first.*"

"*Chicken,*" Daniel jibbed, though in complete agreement, as he got out of the pilot's seat and lowered the aft hatch. "You staying here or just hiding behind me?"

In response Stevenson disappeared beneath his personal cloaking field. "*I'll have a quiet look around the place while you make contact...just in case there are any surprises.*"

"*Makes sense,*" Daniel said, heading out. Based on the jumper's sensors, the null zone was only fifty meters away to the northeast. He meandered that direction through the rubble, dressed in a simple, yet elegant Lantean semi-formal uniform. The dark blue material, cut into fine lines that held close to his body stood out in stark contrast to the chaos around him.

The towers of the city now lay in pieces, smashed beyond recognition. Deep furrows exposed underlayers of the city going down several dozens of meters, or *kepps* as the Ancients had called them. The measurements weren't identical, but they were close, with the kepp being slightly longer. One fissure in the ground looked to be at least fifty kepps deep down to a dark haze that Daniel couldn't see through.

Whatever had hit the city had done a thorough job of leveling it. Based on their flyover prior to landing, not one building remained standing, and most of the foundations were so disrupted that he couldn't tell where the buildings had been...the entire area looked like a dumping ground, with no correlation to the impressive city Daniel had first seen eight years ago through another man's eyes.

Daniel climbed up and over a partially intact column that lay horizontal, spanning two debris piles. When he got to the top he saw a small area that had been cleared of rubble. The smooth stones of the city surface were cracked and disheveled, but it was clear that someone had cleaned up the area surrounding a hole in the ground.

When Daniel approached, his Lantean eyes spied a stairwell inside the hole that was equally damaged, but still intact. He patiently walked over the cracks and jutting pieces of tile until he stood over the opening. Below he saw a solitary torch at the base of the stairs casting light on the curve of the stairs as they passed down to yet another level.

Taking care not to trip on the splintering stone steps, Daniel walked beneath the surface level and into the fire-lit darkness. When he arrived at the plateau with the torch he saw that the level he was on had collapsed, but the stairwell going further down was lit by yet another torch on the lower level.

By the time Daniel reached the second torch the damage to the stairs had ended, the only disruption of their usual gleaming surface was a thin layer of dust. He took a few steps off the platform into this level and saw that it remained undamaged, yet dark. Whatever was causing the sensor disruption must have also protected it from the damage, which Daniel found curious. What would the Ori have valued more than the rest of their city?

A sound from below prompted Daniel to return to the stairs. He cautiously walked down to the next level where he nearly ran into a man coming from an even lower level of the city.

"Doci?" Daniel asked, surprised. The man didn't have his ornate shoulder mantle, but Daniel recognized his face.

"Dr. Jackson," he said wearily. "Why have you returned to Celestis?"

"To find you, actually. What happened?"

"It shames me to say that we have not done well with the truth you showed us. Our civilization is in chaos. Many of those who once called themselves Priors of the Ori now seek power for themselves. In their quest for personal aggrandizement, many have died, far more than we ever killed when we followed the teachings of the Ori."

Daniel lowered his head for a moment. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"It is no fault of your own, Dr. Jackson. We are the ones to blame."

"What happened here?"

"Some of the priors sought retribution against the Ori by destroying their holy city. As you can see, only the vault of herebis survived."

"Herebis?" Daniel asked, not catching the reference.

"Come," the Doci said, turning around. "I will show you."

Daniel followed him down several levels until they were bathed in the light of many torches, enough to cast away any and all lingering traces of darkness.

"Herebis," the Doci repeated. "That which is of value, but not of the Ori."

Daniel's eyes widened with sudden understanding. In the center of the large room stood an Ori stargate. The curved prongs with the narrow gap at the top were unmistakable. He'd passed through an identical gate when first brought to the Ori's home planet, then made the rest of the journey to the exterior of Celestis via their version of the ring transporter.

The only difference with this gate was that it was pure red, and the inscription on the two prongs read:

Behold the gateway to darkness. All who step forth enter the domain of the evil ones, forsaken brothers of the Hallowed.

Daniel knew this must have been the gate through which the original Priors had entered Avalona. Beside it was what looked like an Alterran power core, similar in appearance to a ZPM only ten times larger and spherical in design. Off to the side there were also three rings that Daniel realized must have been the original stargate design shared by the Ori and Alterrans before their split. These stargates had no chevrons and no symbols. They were pure silver, dull in sheen, save for a small square patch visible on the outside of one of the rings. There were six buttons, similar to the control panel for the rings, that must have functioned as their destination controls.

The rest of the room was covered with various technologies, some of which Daniel knew to have originated from the Alterrans, but also some that looked decidedly alien. Only the Ori stargate in the center looked to be functional. Everything else was strewn about haphazardly, yet carefully preserved.

"A treasure vault," Daniel said offhand.

"Perhaps," the Doci said. *"But whereas I once looked upon the herebis with disdain, I now value it above all else. It gives those few of us still loyal to the cause an insight into the lies that the Ori bound us with."*

"Still loyal?" Daniel asked.

"The truth you gave us is a difficult one, Dr. Jackson. We cannot believe in the Ori, yet we cannot disregard their teachings."

"Because they lied to you with the truth," Daniel said, realizing the sticky position they were in.

"What is the truth and what is not?" the Doci asked. *"This is what we have been trying to determine...and the herebis have taught us much."*

"You spoke of others," Daniel said.

"They are not here," the Doci said simply. *"They are amongst the people now. Trying to atone for the evil we wrought, as I am serving my penance here."*

"About that," Daniel said. *"There is someone that I think you should talk to. He may be able to help you sort out the truth from the lies."*

"Of whom do you speak," the Doci asked without emotion, but there was a slight twitch of his body that convinced Daniel that he was indeed searching for answers.

"An Alterran. One who has shed light on many of my own misconceptions."

The Doci's eyes narrowed to squints. *"Why would they help us, we who sought to destroy them?"*

Daniel shook his head. *"This Alterran isn't ascended. He's flesh and blood, like you and me."*

"How is that possible?" the Doci asked.

"It's a long story," Daniel said with a sigh. *"I'm sure he'll be happy to explain it to you. It was actually his idea for me to come here, so I could function as an intermediary and arrange a meeting."*

"Is he the one responsible for the change I sense in you?" the Doci asked.

Daniel nodded. *"Yes, he is."*

"So be it, then," the Doci said evenly.

The sound of footsteps on the stairs behind them caught both men's attention. With his white shoes coming into view first, then his legs and wrists as he rounded the stairs Stevenson walked down onto their level. When his face became visible the Doci's eyes widened in shock. It was all he could do to keep himself from bowing out of reflex.

"Orici," he whispered.

4

Two days after her brief talk with Landry where she painfully recounted all of Woolsey's memories, Sam sat on the couch in her apartment staring at a blank tv screen. She'd been released from the infirmary with a cast, but Dr. Lam had declared her temporarily unfit for duty due to her mental condition. General Landry had given her a two week leave of absence to try and get her wits back before she would have to undergo an I.O.A. interrogation concerning the details of her botched mission.

Landry had also told her that he needed the time to look into a few things, and that the delay would work to his advantage.

It hadn't mattered. Sam's mind was a mess. She wanted to blame that on Stevenson but she knew the truth...she'd done things that were out of character, things that she never would have done in her right mind...the thing was, she couldn't remember having gone astray. Trying to put the pieces together and figure out where she had gone wrong consumed her every waking thought, awash in a constant sea of guilt.

Her only saving grace was that her plans had failed, and she blessed Atlantis for that. She couldn't have lived with herself if...ah, who was she kidding. She couldn't live with herself now, and had ended up in a waking, yet comatose state because of it.

And she knew it. She realized her situation, her inaction, every train of thought and backtracked it to its source. Sam was more aware now than she had ever been, yet she was still disconnected and figured she would continue to be so until she figured out where she had gone wrong. So far, her logic was circular, and she wasn't getting anywhere.

Outside her thoughts her apartment's doorbell rang. She heard it, but didn't respond for a few seconds. She sluggishly dragged herself to the door, still processing Woolsey's memories and her own in a continuous analytical nightmare, and pulled it open, not even bothering to look through the peep hole. If it was a psychotic murderer on the other side she didn't care...she probably deserved it anyway.

"Hi, Sam," O'Neill said sympathetically.

"General," she said, half waking up.

O'Neill raised an eyebrow at the 'General' part. "Can I come in?"

"Of course," Sam said, stepping aside. "Sorry about the mess."

"Ah," O'Neill said, waving it off. "Looks clean compared to mine."

"If you don't mind me asking...why are you here?"

"I heard what happened to you," he said, sitting down on the couch. She sat down next to him...leaving the middle cushion between them.

"And?" she asked, a bit rudely.

"And," he echoed.

"Come to chew me out for losing three ships," she floated.

"No," he said gently, staring into her eyes.

She looked away from him. "What do you want?" she asked, her nerves raw.

"I think I know what you're going through."

Sam scoffed at that. "No you don't."

"You're questioning your own judgment," O'Neill continued. "I've been doing that a lot lately. I don't really like who I'm seeing in the mirror anymore...and not just because of the gray."

"What do you see?" Sam asked meekly, not looking at him.

"A stuffy bureaucrat," O'Neill answered, not pulling any punches. "A pencil-pusher...desk jockey...memo-writing paper monkey."

Sam couldn't help but smile, but it was short lived. "That doesn't sound so bad."

"The point is it's not me. I've been aware of it for some time. I don't think you did...and it's just now catching up with you."

"How could I have been so stupid," Sam said, her walls breaking down followed by another wave of tears.

"Well, let's start with why you didn't take the out I gave you," O'Neill said slowly.

"I thought we needed Atlantis."

"Who's 'we'?"

"The SGC...so it would give us some more political weight to throw around."

"To use against the I.O.A.?" O'Neill guessed.

Sam nodded.

"Been there," O'Neill said candidly. "About a year ago a proposal came across the monstrosity I like to call a desk detailing a way for the SGC to generate some extra revenue. Revenue that would be used as backup if we ever needed to ditch the funds coming from the I.O.A. The plan was to open up an interstellar Wal-Mart using items and resources that we had at our disposal...all off world, of course."

"The Ian Proposal," Sam said, remembering. "It got axed."

"It got axed before I had a look at the details," O'Neill said stiffly. "The base proposal was sound, including the summary that crossed my desk. I was convinced it was a good thing...a great thing, actually. About a week later I remembered that our luck is never that good and had my people do some digging."

"What did they find?" Sam asked, curious despite her continuing despair.

"A rat's nest. How they planned to acquire a lot of these 'items' involved stepping on the toes of the 'minor' civilizations we've come across. A lot of the help we've been giving them for free was going to start carrying a price tag...a small one, they reasoned, to offset the large number of supplies we were dishing out without any return on our investment. It even sounded somewhat reasonable the way they spelled it out."

Sam looked at him. "What happened?"

"I took a long hard look at why we needed 'compensation' for helping people, and I started to realize I had my priorities all screwed up. Earth isn't the only planet in the galaxy, and we can't place our problems with the I.O.A. on other people's heads."

Sam squeezed her eyes shut in shame. "You're right."

"I usually am," O'Neill said sarcastically. "But I also know how to lose."

Sam looked up at him.

"Carter, you're just too stubborn to give up," he said louder. "You got it stuck in your head that the I.O.A. has to be fought...true enough. But there comes a time you've got to give up...when fighting them means you've got to go to the darkside in order to win. And when that happens, you don't win. You become the I.O.A."

Sam leaned forward and put her head in her hands with her chin resting on the edge of her cast. "You're right...you're exactly right."

O'Neill stood up and scooted closer. He sat down and put his arm over her shoulders, giving her a light squeeze. "No matter what you do, you're never going to convince me you're one of the bad guys. You might get your head screwed up from time to time, but on the inside I know you'll always be you. You just forgot for a while."

"That doesn't excuse what I did," Sam argued.

"No...but it explains it. And now that you know the score, I'm not worried."

"That makes one of us."

"You'll find your feet," O'Neill said. "And to that end, your leave has been canceled."

"What?" Sam asked, looking at him.

"I'm reassigning you," O'Neill said, standing up and walking toward the door.

"Where?"

"SG-1," he said, walking out the door with a wry smile on his face.

Daniel looked between the Doci and Stevenson in confusion. Had he heard him right? Did he just call Stevenson the Orici?

Daniel stared at his friend warily, wondering whose side he was really on.

Stevenson gave him a 'don't be stupid' look as he approached the Doci, who was frozen stiff in awe. "*Why did you call me Orici?*"

"*Your face is known to all Priors,*" he said shakily. "*It was burned into our memory the moment of our transformation. You are the Orici spoken of in the book of Origin.*"

Daniel saw Stevenson frown, and by the look on the Doci's face he was clearly conflicted. "*What does the passage say?*"

The Doci didn't take his eyes off Stevenson. "*It is said that in the darkest of days, when evil has wrought great destruction and the fires of Celestis are no more, the Orici will appear to guide us back unto the path. He will relight the fire of the Gods, caste away the darkness, and share the knowledge and power of the universe with all those who join him on his quest to vanquish the evil ones in the far lands and bring the light to those who have known nothing but darkness.*"

This time it was Stevenson's eyes that widened in surprise, and Daniel could tell from his expression that the Doci's words rang true.

"*What the hell is going on?*" Daniel demanded. "*Are you Alterran or Ori?*"

"*It seems I am both,*" Stevenson said dismissively. "*How long have you been a prior?*"

"*Longer than I can recount,*" the Doci said. "*Many centuries.*"

"*Then you were given the memory of my face before I was born,*" Stevenson told him, not understanding it himself.

"*That does not surprise me,*" the Doci said evenly. "*Much of the Ori continues to defy reason. I do wonder, though, how the Orici can be one of those the Ori deemed evil. Do you know nothing of this?*"

"No," Stevenson said.

"*Why then, have you come to us? Daniel Jackson has said it was to aid us, to show us the error of our ways and show us the true path.*"

"*Those weren't my exact words,*" Daniel protested.

"*It is true that much of what the Ori told you has been lies, and though I have no knowledge of how this prophecy came into being...it is not one of them.*"

"*What?!*" Daniel asked.

Stevenson glanced at him. "*More of that stuff I can't tell you.*"

"Well you'd better now," Daniel yelled at him. *"Because from all appearances it looks like you're going to start a war with the ascended Ancients!"*

"I can't," he said in a bickering voice. *"Because even though this is far away from their domain, one of them might have followed me through the supergate and could be watching us even now."*

"So you are their enemy," he accused him.

"They are my kin," Stevenson reminded him. *"I am not their enemy. But they've made it clear that they have ulterior motives that run counter to my own. So I can't run the chance of them not liking what I have planned and move to stop me before I even get started."*

"How have they made it clear?" Daniel asked as the Doci simply watched.

Stevenson frowned reluctantly. *"Before you came to Atlantis I discovered a survivor of the plague. She was an Alterran, held in stasis, much like the one you discovered in Antarctica. I cured her of the plague, and not two minutes later they ascended her. They let her rot in stasis for millions of years and only bothered to 'help' her so that they could deny her to me. Now, does that sound like the actions of an ally to you?"*

Daniel frowned as he thought. *"You could have told me."*

"There was no need to...until now."

"Why would they do that? It's their civilization you're attempting to rebuild."

"As I said, they have ulterior motives, whatever they are. I'm on my own, and I have to consider the possibility of them acting against me again at some point. And while I'd never turn against my own brothers and sisters, I can't assume the same for them. I should be able to, but who knows how being ascended for millions of years could have changed them. It's possible that they've become so disconnected from the corporeal realm that they don't see me as one of them and they no longer care about rebuilding our civilization."

"Again, why didn't you tell me?" Daniel said. *"From my own experiences I'd have to say that's a distinct possibility. They were willing to let Anubis wipe out all life in the galaxy to appease their vaunted rules or who knows what else. I understand, and I want to help. I just don't see why you think you can't trust me. You can read my mind, so..."*

Stevenson sighed. *"It's not a matter of trust, Daniel. It's a matter of security. I can block the ascended from reading my mind."*

"How?" Daniel said, frowning.

"Yet another thing I don't want them to know by picking your brain."

Daniel considered that and realized the nature of the situation Stevenson was in. As he did, Stevenson sifted through the possible ways that the Ori could have known about him. First off was some type of precognition, then there was time travel, or knowledge from an alternate reality similar to their own.

Another question was why would they want an Alterran to lead their people after they were gone...

Stevenson realized they must have foreseen their own death, which may well have been a factor in their war against the ascended Ancients. Perhaps it was in part a preemptive attack...their attempt to circumvent the future they foresaw by destroying the Ancients before they could destroy them.

But then there was the entire Ascended Empire to deal with. It occurred to Stevenson that perhaps the Ori didn't know the full extent of the Empire. It would have been suicide for them to have attempted to defeat it, no matter how much energy they sapped from their followers. But, if

they didn't know its true size or power, or perhaps didn't know that it extended beyond the Alterrans, Lanteans, and a few others in the local area...

Lyran had said that information gathering was discouraged within the Empire. If that was true, then knowledge of the Empire on the outside had to be even scarcer. The Ori probably had no clue what they were up against...or maybe the Ascended Empire would have let the Ori kill off the Ancients, wearing themselves down in the process, then finish off what's left of the Ori and eliminate them as a possible threat.

There were too many possibilities and too little data to work from. Stevenson couldn't be sure of anything, but he was getting the distinct impression that the Ori didn't think it would be a cake walk. The prophecy that they'd gone so far as to include in the book of Origin and ingrain into the very memory of the priors may have been a backup in case they failed and their foretold doom came to pass.

If that was the case, then they may have known of the coming conflict between Stevenson and the ascended Ancients/Ascended Empire and sought to aid him simply out of spite for their enemies. It didn't matter that he'd tell the Ori followers the truth about their existence and reshape their civilization based on an Alterran model...they wanted revenge against those that killed them, or would kill them, and they saw him as the perfect, if not only way to do it.

The prophecy said as much, vague as it was. The relighting of the fires bit didn't quite fit...unless...

"Doci," Stevenson said a few seconds later. *"The Ori told you part of the truth, I am here to complete that truth and show you way the into the full light. You will have to unlearn much of what you hold to be true, and I have no doubt it will be difficult for you, but if you can find the fortitude within you to endure the battle of wills to come, then I offer you the chance to walk the true path."*

"You offer?" the Doci asked. *"You do not command it?"*

Stevenson shook his head. *"True enlightenment cannot be forced."*

"Is enlightenment even possible, or was that one of the Ori's lies?"

Stevenson nodded. *"I have the power to ascend at any time I choose. I have not for several reasons. One is that my work is here. Another is that anyone who ascends will fall under the dominion of the others. The combined might of the Ori was insufficient to oppose them. We must remain flesh and blood, whereby they claim they have no right to interfere, in order to take the reigns of our own destiny. If that should ever change, then ascension is still a possibility that I can guarantee...should you prove yourselves worthy."*

"We have done anything but that," the Doci said regretfully. *"But I, for one, welcome a chance at redemption."*

"That still leaves the question," Daniel interrupted, *"of why would the Ori would want anything to do with an Alterran? There has to be a reason."*

Stevenson was about to answer that with a half truth, but the Doci beat him to it.

"You spoke of a schism between yourself and the ascended ones," he said, looking at Stevenson for verification. *"There is another passage from the book of Origin that answers your question, Daniel Jackson. 'He who is opposed, often seeks friends in the strangest of places.'"*

"Enemy of my enemy is my friend," Daniel echoed.

"What is the current state of the people?" Stevenson asked.

"Many still believe in the teachings of Origin," the Doci said, regretfully, *"despite what we have told them. Those that do have been exploited by a small group of Priors that seek power*

for themselves. They still proclaim the Ori are gods, despite the truth they were shown. The people who serve them do so now as they always have."

"Wait a minute," Daniel interrupted. "Are you saying the people don't know the truth? I thought the Ark..." he said, cutting himself off as he realized their mistake. "The Ark only affected the Priors."

The Doci nodded. "And through us, we relayed to them the truth. Many could not accept it. Fighting arose, which we in turn attempted to quell using our powers and knowledge. We were successful for a time, until a rift formed between those that sought to return to the teachings of Origin and those that did not. Celestis was destroyed by the later, and even now the fighting continues."

Daniel glanced at Stevenson. "Looks like you're the only way to stop it...which the Ori probably also foresaw."

"How many ships remain?" Stevenson asked.

"To my knowledge, there are thirty four...but even now more are being built by both factions. Those of us still loyal to the book of Origin, yet refuse to close our eyes to the truth have retained four ships. They await your command, Orici."

"Summon them," Stevenson said, standing a bit straighter. "All of them. Has the stargate on this world also been destroyed?"

"No. It remains in the forest on the edge of the plains that surround Celestis."

Stevenson nodded. "Then summon all priors to come here immediately, whether by gate or my ship...but see to it that the ships loyal to you arrive here first."

The Doci bowed slightly, with a serene expression on his face. "Yes, Orici...and thank you."

"For the record," he added. "My name is Stevenson. You may address me as such in private."

The Doci almost cracked a smile, but didn't say a word. He nodded in respect then walked toward the stairs, leaving Daniel and Stevenson alone in the vault of herebis.

"Are you nuts?" Daniel whispered. "You're going to bring all of them here?"

"The Orici commands, Daniel. He does not ask. I have to be forceful. It's what they expect."

"They may very well kill each other once they get here," he argued.

"I know, but I suspect most of them are as desperate as the Doci. They need someone to command them. It's been ingrained into them. And if my face is known to all Priors as the Orici from the book of Origin, then that should solve half the problem right there."

"Because one side still believes in Origin," Daniel said, catching on, "and you figure you can reason with the others."

Stevenson nodded. "I am Alterra. That will never change. And with the Doci supporting me, I expect a lot of the others will automatically fall into line once the chain of command is reestablished."

"Sounds a bit optimistic," Daniel said, "but I guess it's worth a shot."

"If it wouldn't work, then the Ori wouldn't have gone to the trouble to set this up."

Daniel tilted his head in thought. "Good point."

Stevenson raised an eyebrow. "Now, for you. I need a favor."

"What?" Daniel asked, curious.

"I need you to leave...now."

Daniel thought for a moment. "Because we're not part of the Ori."

Stevenson nodded. "*And I need you to run an errand for me.*"

"*An errand?*"

"*I need you to build me a high security stargate and bring it back here.*"

"A yellow gate?" he asked, shocked. "*How am I supposed to do that?*"

Stevenson reached forward and touched his fingers to Daniel's forehead. Two seconds later he released the connection.

Daniel blinked his eyes. "*Oh...I can do that.*"

5

Within an hour several priors had arrived through the Ori stargate and walked across the marshy plains to the ruins of Celestis. Stevenson let the Doci handle them, and instead chose to remain inside the vault of herebis. The Ori had quite a collection of unique items, some of which originated from neither the Alterrans nor the shared technology of the two before the split.

Stevenson slid his hand over the smooth red prong of the Ori stargate inside the vault. It was smaller than the Alterran version, which meant that this route back to Avalona was one way only. A small gate could connect to a larger one, but not the reverse for obvious compatibility issues. He could use this gate as a means of escape if the supergate were ever destroyed...but he'd never be able to get back here and the five trillion humans in Destra would be out of his reach.

That was why he'd sent Daniel and the *Tria* back to the Alterran network to manufacture a yellow gate for use in Destra. It would allow him instantaneous travel back and forth on foot, and provide a backup in case the supergate was ever destroyed.

He would have to find an applicable power source, but he didn't think that would be too much of a problem considering that the Ori had demonstrated power generation capabilities far superior to the Alterra. He'd spoken with the Doci about what they used to power the supergate over such a great distance...and for the first time since his transformation he was surprised...in a technological way.

The Ori were using a black hole tap to power the gates on either end. The Alterra had never experimented with such things, given the difficulties in actually reaching the surface of a grav sphere of that magnitude. He'd found the Ori method ingeniously simple.

In a black hole, the gravity of the body is sufficient enough to retain all energy emitted as opposed to a star that expels such energy as radiation. The energy produced in a black hole can't achieve escape velocities and is instead contained inside the event horizon. This means that all the luminous energy of 10 stars expelled over thousands, if not millions of years is pooled beneath the event horizon just waiting to be tapped.

The first trick is getting a tap in place without it being crushed into oblivion. The Ori designed multiple shield layers augmented with massive inertial dampeners all powered by the energy the tap absorbs from the environment...so as long as the tap has sufficient power to reach the surface it will forever be able to sustain itself once in place.

The second trick is getting the power back out. The Ori used a micro-wormhole the size of Stevenson's finger to transmit the processed energy to the nearby supergate. Whenever the supergate's capacitors ran low or an outgoing wormhole needed to be established the micro-wormhole would connect first and supply all the power the supergate would need in real time for as long a time as necessary.

Setting up such a system was quite an endeavor, but the payoffs were huge. Whenever he had the time he was going to look into using the Ori designs to create a new potentia factory...one that could potentially charge 1000 of the devices in the time it normally took to charge one.

He wasn't going to rely entirely on the technology for potential production, that would be shortsighted. Stevenson would maintain and expand the number of traditional potential energy collectors and augment them with a black hole tap. The more options they had available the more powerful they would become. Being pigeonholed into one type of technology was foolhardy and a rookie mistake he wasn't going to make, but he also wasn't going to pass up an opportunity like this.

Stevenson had also asked the Doci a few other questions, including their population estimates and how they'd managed to create their technology if most of the population was living a primitive rural/agricultural existence.

The answer this time wasn't as surprising, but it was still innovative. The Doci told him that select worlds held what the Ori called 'wells of wisdom.' The devices were administered by the Priors and required one of their followers to merely drink from the water of the well and they would be imbued with knowledge far beyond their understanding.

That knowledge would last less than a day, but it allowed the Ori to assemble a skilled workforce for whatever task they required while maintaining the primitive ignorance they deemed of their followers. It was an ingenious system, which some of the Priors were even now using to create more ships to fight amongst themselves.

The last thing he had asked of the Doci was for a copy of the book of Origin. He'd given Stevenson his own copy and the Alterran had spent a good twenty minutes absorbing and processing the words. To his surprise, very little of it was false. However, it had been worded in such a way as to suffer many interpretations. The vagueness of the text was evidence upon first glance, but there was subtle wisdom in the pages if one knew how to read between the lines.

In fact, most of the book of Origin had been paraphrased from texts predating the Ori/Alterran split. They'd obviously rewritten the passages to their design, but the basics were the same. This more than anything else told Stevenson how to proceed.

Four hours after the Doci had sent his summons, the first of their massive ships arrived. Stevenson instructed him to land them on the plains surrounding the city. One to the north, one to the south, one to the east, and one to the west... all facing in. The rest of the ships would settle down in between them forming a great circle where all the Priors would gather.

During the time it took for the rest of the ships to arrive Stevenson did not allow himself to be seen. Apparently the Doci commanded enough respect to keep the factions subdued...enhanced by the fact that he had not issued a single order since his encounter with the Ark. When he had summoned all Priors and ships to Celestis in the name of the Ori, they had responded instinctively...but Stevenson could sense the tension boiling beneath the calmness.

He waited a full three days before choosing to reveal himself. At that point most of the Priors and ships had arrived, but not all. Stevenson couldn't wait for the others. He could feel the Doci's calm hold over the thousands of assembled Priors slipping and he knew it was time.

The Doci called for all Priors to assemble on the plain just north of the ruined city. They did as bidden and stood elbow to elbow, some visibly sneering at one another, but no physical disputes arose. They were all curious to hear what was happening.

There was a small empty space radiating around the Doci, who had his back to the rubble. He activated his mantelpiece, the central jewel glowed, and a ring of fire traced itself in a circle a few meters wide from the Doci...but it wasn't centered on him. Instead it was centered on the emptiness to his right. The fires burned brighter and higher, culminating in a two meter high blaze that obscured him from view.

When the flames diminished there were two individuals standing within the ring of fire...with Stevenson at the center.

He could both see and feel the reaction of the Priors when they saw his face. The Doci had been right, they all knew him on sight.

Nearly a third of all the Priors assembled fell to their knees in reverence. The others stood their ground...but completely at a loss. They didn't know what to do...or what to make of him.

"*Rise*," Stevenson said, amplifying his voice. When his order was followed he brought forth the book of Origin, opened it to the first page, and began to read.

"Hallowed are the Ori, for it is through their divine intent that man should be conceived and spread forth amongst the stars."

"Hallowed are they who offer their divine knowledge to those that would caste off the evil that seeks to corrupt them and walk the path of the righteous."

"Hallowed are they who offer their blessing to those who are righteous and faithful, and give forth their promise that all such believers shall join them in the fires of everlasting enlightenment."

Stevenson paused after those lines, then explained the meaning of them. He told them of their actual creation by the Ori and briefly explained the concept of 'ascension' before he continued onto the next bit of text.

He read and explained the first part of the book of Origin for the next eight hours. Not one of the Priors moved during that time. Not one of them spoke. They had questions, many questions, but they dared not ask...so Stevenson simply took them from their minds and answered as he went along. By the time Stevenson dismissed them for the rest of the day with instructions to eat, rest, and return in the morning not a one of them wanted to leave, but they did as bidden and dispersed to the assembled ships.

"Your wisdom is truly great, Orici," the Doci praised him. *"Is there anything you require?"*

"A room aboard one of the ships...and five hours of uninterrupted meditation."

"Come," he said, making sure to walk beside the Orici and not in front of him. Out beyond the ruins where the northernmost ship sat, a ring platform now rested on the ground. The Doci and Orici used it to enter the ship, where Stevenson was afforded every courtesy befitting his position.

"We will begin again at the rising of the sun," Stevenson told him from inside his chambers.

The Doci bowed. *"We will be waiting,"* he said before telekinetically closing the doors.

Stevenson dropped onto the bed and flopped onto his back. The Priors had wanted to hear more of the real truth that the book of Origin held, and had been willing to remain for hours more but Stevenson couldn't. The Priors might have been accustomed to standing for hours on end, but the Alterran's physiology was still in flux and he'd felt his internal instability growing by the hour. He had to stop before it reached critical levels and threatened his cellular integrity.

The new Orici pulled his feet up off the floor and sat in a cross-legged position on the end of the bed, taking on a meditative pose. Objects from around the room, the heavier the better, flew up into a circling halo that split into three rotating circles that spun on radically different orbits. He reversed one and intersected the other two...then set about maintaining the manipulation, the more complex the better, as it slowly allowed his body to drain off the building stress and allow his forced evolutionary development to streamline into the efficiency required to sustain his life.

"What's going on?" Larrin asked when Daniel returned to the *Tria* without Stevenson.

"We have a new mission," Daniel told her.

"Great...what is it?" she asked spunkily.

"Back to Atlantis to pick up some supplies first, then to a secure facility in Avalona where Stevenson wants us to build him a new stargate then bring it back here."

"If you say so," she said, powering up the hyperspace engines. "Can you dial the supergate?"

"Yes," Daniel answered quickly.

Larrin closed her eyes. "Jumping to hyperspace."

The rings in the gate center activated and deposited Jackson in the darkness. As soon as the facility detected his Ancient gene the lights came on and the five stargates became visible in front of him. He turned around and saw the control tower less than two meters behind him.

"Ok..." Daniel said, mentally reviewing the steps Stevenson had given him to follow.

He turned and walked to his left. He quickly found the access door that led to the innards of the facility and the control tower above him. He ascended the stairs and accessed a specific terminal.

"Larrin, you should have tie-in control now."

"Got it," she said over the comm. "Transporting now."

Outside on the main floor a number of crates materialized from the Ancient's form of short range transport beams. Among the crates a number of figures started to move...replicators that Weir had sent along to handle the raw materials.

Now that they were here, Daniel went down to the lower levels of the facility. Level 13 specifically. It was here that the individual supplies were being fed into the machinery that would process them into the components of a new stargate...which one depended on his input in the control room.

This one was slightly smaller than the control tower lookout and was segmented into five areas. Daniel slid into the third station and activated the console. He scrolled through the diagnostics and watched as the necessary components were loaded into coffers. The increase in supply was monitored by three dozen bars that denoted the amount of available supplies. Apparently some material had already been present in the coffers, including some rare components that his list for Elizabeth hadn't contained.

While that happened Daniel pulled up the template for a high security yellow gate. The controls allowed for any number of modifications to the gate designs...all of which was well beyond Daniel's expertise. Fortunately, he didn't have to design a new gate, just copy an existing design. He input the standard yellow gate schematics into the machine and cued it to begin fabrication once sufficient material was available.

That happened some fifteen minutes later when the replicators were only half finished loading the supplies. Status boards throughout the control room glowed to life along with the manufacturing equipment that had built the original gate network.

Daniel found it odd that he should be here. The mystery of the origin of the stargates had been a constant throughout his time at the SGC...and now he was here, building one himself.

The estimated time of completion for the single gate was noted on his console...seven jolunes, which translated into about three hours. With time to spare Daniel thought he'd take the opportunity to explore the gate center...then thought better of it. Stevenson's instructions had

provided him with the route to get to the control room on this level, but not anywhere else in the facility that was half the size of Atlantis. If he wasn't careful he could easily get lost, and since he didn't know the function of any of the equipment except that which he required to carry out this mission, Daniel decided to explore this level only and see the gate fabrication process up close.

He left the control room and walked out on the main floor. There were pathways constructed throughout the level in an erratic, web-like pattern that meandered between large, sealed machines on the inside of which most of the magic was happening.

Daniel heard the his of a force field activate behind him and he turned to see a small component float from one machine to another across the bluish/green energy conduit. A few moments later another followed in its path.

Intrigued, Daniel waited while the components did whatever they needed to do inside and looked for their exit from the device. As he was waiting another two such force fields activated between other machines and additional components were passed on, these looking like crystals and rods, whereas the first had resembled the grayish material that covered Avalona style stargates.

Of course it would be Avalona style, Daniel thought to himself. The Pegasus gates hadn't been built here.

Daniel followed the flow of components for a while, then noticed the first intersection of pieces. When they came out as one, they rode a slightly larger force field conduit and moved onto even larger processing machines. Slowly over the course of the three hours hundreds of different initial components were combined and augmented into what finally resembled a curved beam.

Nine pieces of this beam entered the largest processing station Daniel had seen yet, along with a number of other components from other directions...Daniel hadn't been able to follow them all, there were far too many. He sincerely hoped that everything was functioning as it should, because Stevenson hadn't given him the knowledge to troubleshoot any problems.

The nine beams that had entered the latest machine emerged in a large, lateral force field conduit, having been connected together into a large blank ring. For the first time Daniel could see the stargate taking shape as it slid into yet another large device.

When it exited this one the yellow chevrons had been added. The next added the inner ring of symbols. The following station didn't change anything as far as Daniel could see, so he assumed it was some internal modification. Two more such stations ended the fabrication process.

The finished gate floated out of the machine and into a vertical storage slot, held aloft entirely by energy fields. Daniel knew this was his cue, made ever more obvious by the entire line of machinery powering down.

He walked over to a wall-mounted control pad near the storage racks and input a select sequence. The gate tipped over and floated on a river-like suspension field that led to a vertical shaft of shimmering bluish/green light. When the gate reached this point it was carried upward through the levels where it would arrive on the main floor.

Daniel took the long route back up and met the hovering gate eye to eye in the center of the vast expanse of emptiness on which the five functioning stargates and the control tower rested. He wondered why there was such an abundance of space for a moment, then decided it was yet another mystery he'd discover later.

He walked up to the new gate, unaffected by the force field, and put his hand up against the metal...it was still warm, but not painfully so. He glanced up above the horizontal ring and saw yet another transport pylon hanging from the ceiling.

Daniel nodded to himself and hiked back up to the control tower. He signaled Larrin to stand ready to receive the transfer, then used the control room interface to transport the gate directly to the *Tria's* cargo hold. He followed a couple minutes later via the rings.

Once aboard, they ducked through the purple gate outside the gate center and took a short cut back to the supergate, where Daniel once again dialed the Ori device as Stevenson had instructed him. They slipped through without incident and set course back to Celestis.

"Ok," Daniel said as he looked over the *Tria's* sensor data. "I guess he really did get their attention."

"What do you want to do?" Larrin asked as they hid beneath the ship's cloaking device in geosynchronous orbit over the 27 grounded Ori motherships on the surface.

"He has a communicator with him, right?" Daniel asked.

Larrin nodded beside him, having abandoned the control chair. "He should."

"Wait a minute," Daniel said, thinking. "Send a text message via the intergalactic communicator saying that we're here. We don't want to interrupt him if he's in the middle of something."

"Good thinking," Larrin said, nodding to her bridge crew. "I hope he knows what he's doing. That's an awful lot of firepower down there."

"Yeah," Daniel said, mirroring her thoughts. "But as you well know, he can be very persuasive when he wants to be."

Larrin raised an eyebrow. "Is that some crack about the Travelers?"

Daniel looked at her calmly. "No, I don't think he uses his abilities to manipulate people into doing what he wants...well, not in a bad way, exactly. I think he uses his talents to clear a person's mind rather than bending it to his will."

"He can do that?" Larrin asked, concerned.

"Adria could," Daniel commented, then realized she had no idea what he was talking about. "The other Orici who led the Ori in their invasion of Avalona had similar abilities to Stevenson...one of them was the ability to warp a person's mind into doing whatever she wanted them to. I think Stevenson has the same type of telepathic ability, but he doesn't use it in the same way."

"But he could," Larrin pressed.

"I imagine he could do a lot of things if he wanted to," Daniel said evenly. "Just be thankful he's one of the good guys."

Larrin looked miffed. "I don't like people messing with my mind...or having that kind of power."

"I wouldn't worry about it too much," Daniel said sympathetically. "If he was the domineering type he wouldn't be giving us the ability to counteract his powers."

Larrin frowned. "What do you mean?"

Daniel looked directly at her. "When he transformed me into a Lantean he undercut his ability to affect my mind. I'm much stronger now that I used to be, both physically and mentally. I have no doubt he's stronger still, but if he was intent on brainwashing us to do his bidding he's going about it all the wrong way."

"That's assuming he hasn't already messed with your head," Larrin argued, but she saw his point.

"No, he hasn't. I'm more cleared headed now than I've ever been."

"Good for you, but that doesn't help me much. Suppose he gets a little lonely and wants some companionship for the night...not that I'd really mind, he's cute enough...but I don't like the idea that he can compel me to do whatever he wants on a whim."

"I'm not sure it works that way," Daniel argued. "From my experience this type of mental manipulation convinces you to voluntarily comply, sort of like an amped up version of peer pressure. He can't take direct control over you..." Daniel said as a stray thought struck him. The intergalactic communication device that the old Alterrans used had functioned in just that way. Could that have been an extension of their natural abilities? Daniel would have to ask him about that later.

"So he can only entice you..." Larrin said thoughtfully. "Hmnn, that seems fair enough."

"It does?" Daniel asked, surprised she would say that.

She raised a playful eyebrow. "I'm somewhat familiar with the concept of enticement."

"Right..." Daniel said, catching her meaning as the *Tria* received a response to their message.

"Larrin, he says to bring the ship down to the surface and deposit the gate inside the ruins of the city," her second in command read from his terminal.

The Captain of the *Tria* nodded then returned to the control chair. "With your permission?" she asked Daniel.

"Granted," he said, not realizing that she needed his permission. Then again, with him being a Lantean that probably put him higher up in the chain of command by default. "Lower the cloak," he ordered, not wanting to spook any of the Ori ships on the surface.

The Lantean ship broke through the heavy cloud cover directly over the city, exchanging its shadow for those of the clouds. In the center of the debris a large circle had been cleared away.

"Down there, I'd guess," Daniel said. "How low do we have to be to use the beams?"

"Very," she answered. "Right in front of those Ori guns."

"We'll be fine," Daniel reassured her. "Deposit the gate in the clearing. I'm taking a jumped down, unless I can go down on the beams?"

"You can, but I'm detecting several ring platforms...one for each ship, actually."

"I don't want to ring down inside a ship unannounced."

"No, I mean a ring platform outside each ship. I wasn't counting the ones inside."

"Outside? Really." Daniel commented. "Put me down nearest to the city."

Stevenson met up with Daniel on the ground as the *Tria* floated lazily overhead. No Priors, or any other people for that matter, were in sight. It was just the two of them on the plains.

"*How's it going?*" Daniel asked.

"*It's done,*" Stevenson said. "*I'm in charge now.*"

Daniel's jaw dropped. "*That was fast.*"

"*Any problems?*"

Daniel shook his head. "*Nope. Came off without a hitch...assuming that it actually works.*"

"It should once we get a power source hooked up. Now that the gate's here you're free to return to Atlantis. I, however, am going to have to spend most of my time here in the coming days."

"I understand," Daniel said warily, thinking that Stevenson might have bitten off more than he could chew.

"I'm going to need you and Elizabeth to keep things together until Teyla is ready."

"We'll do our best," Daniel assured him. *"What about Sheppard? I thought he was your right hand man?"*

"He will be, someday. But not yet. He still has some growing up to do."

"How so?" Daniel asked, curious.

"He still clings to others' impressions of himself. His father's, particularly. He treated Sheppard like a loser, and until he can clear his head of that nonsense he's not ready for an upgrade."

"He needs to release his burden," Daniel said, understanding. He'd had to face a similar situation with his wife after she'd died.

"I wouldn't put it in those words," Stevenson mildly corrected him, *"but you're essentially correct."*

Daniel glanced over his shoulder toward the spot where they'd deposited the gate. *"How long until we hear from you?"*

"I'll check in when we hook up the gate to the network. Probably no more than two weeks. After that I'll be able to travel back and forth when needed...and remember, the long range communications device won't work this far away. You'll have to send all messages through the gate."

"Got it. Any modifications we need to make on our end? Does Atlantis have enough power?"

"With a potentia and a gate of this size, yes. There are a few dialing modifications I'll need to make on Atlantis's end, but let me worry about that when I get back."

"Alright then," Daniel said, sensing it was time to go. *"Good luck."*

"And to you," Stevenson said, extending his hand. *"Thanks."*

"Whatever you need," Daniel said, walking back to the ring platform.

Stevenson let him go and walked toward his new stargate. He had a lot of work to do here in Destra before he could move on to phase two of his plan, but for now, at least, he was one step closer to rescuing the Asgard.

Vengeance

1

"Are you sure that goes straight to Dakara?" Sheppard asked as the gate in Atlantis's control room activated after the standard kawoosh.

Elizabeth smiled. "I'm sure. Stevenson modified the control crystal to allow any outgoing connection between galaxies...but you're still going to have to come back through the gate center."

"Right," Sheppard said, glancing at Ford. "You ready?"

"I was waiting on you," he said deadpan.

Sheppard smirked and looked back up off the gateroom floor to where Elizabeth was standing on the landing. "Be back in a few days."

"I hope so," Elizabeth snided. "I wouldn't want to have to bring Atlantis all the way to Earth to bust your ass out of jail."

Sheppard did a double take. "Be careful...I got it," he said, nudging Ford through the event horizon. He gave Elizabeth a small wave then followed him through.

They stepped out of the opposite gate looking into the barrels of half a dozen staff weapons and two fixed turrets.

"As *you were*," one of the guards said. The rest of the Jaffa lowered their weapons.

The Jaffa that spoke walked out from behind the gate guards and stood before Sheppard and Ford. "I bid you greetings on behalf of Lord Bra'tac."

Sheppard nodded. "Hello to you too."

"Hey," Ford quipped, "no tattoo?"

To his surprise the Jaffa smiled. "None that you may see, but it is there."

"Invisible tattoo..." Ford asked, "what's the point?"

"Excuse my friend," Sheppard said, jumping in, "he doesn't get out much. Now, I assume Bra'tac left word that we were coming?"

"He did, indeed," the Jaffa said. "He awaits you at the shipyard."

"Shipyard...sweet," Sheppard said, raising a hand. "Lead on."

The Jaffa nodded and swept his cape around in a long turn. "Follow me."

When he wasn't looking Sheppard elbowed Ford in the ribs. His friend gave him a 'what's that for' look then let it go. Both of them dropped into step behind the quickly moving Jaffa as he led them along a dirt path through the rubble-strewn landscape. After half a kilometer they came to a set of rings seemingly out of place from any nearby habitation.

The threesome stepped inside and the Jaffa pressed a sequence of buttons on his forearm gauntlet. The rings flashed up around them as usual, then deposited them in the middle of what looked like an Ancient city.

Small, but Ancient-style structures surrounded the three of them as the Jaffa continued his rapid pace away from the rings and along the smooth, almost polished meter-wide tiles that lined the city's streets. Ford and Sheppard had to jog a few steps to catch up.

"Wow," Ford said under his breath. "Kind of reminds me of Atlantis."

Sheppard cringed. "Not quite the Lantean architecture, but close."

"I thought the Alterra built Atlantis," Ford pointed out.

"True, but I imagine the Lanteans did at least some redecorating."

"Makes sense," Ford said as they passed a small contingent of guards being led by another tattoo-less Jaffa. "How long did you say this has been here?"

"Less than two years," Sheppard said, thoroughly impressed. "Ancients build fast."

As they turned a corner Ford's eyes went wide. "No kidding."

"You said it," Sheppard echoed as the buildings ended a few rows down and a vast plateau stretched out before them with six large, half constructed ships cradled in a mess of support struts and what looked like cranes...only they had glowy patches on them.

"Shipyard I guess," Ford said as the Jaffa turned around when he heard their footsteps stop.

"It is an impressive sight, even for those of us that see it every day," he said in agreement with their awe. "None the less, Lord Bra'tac must not be kept waiting. Come."

Sheppard and Ford kept up with him this time as he guided them down onto the plateau. As they came closer, they realized there were several smaller ships under construction alongside the larger ones...and off to the side was a promenade that two complete vessels were parked on.

"Are those our ride?" Ford asked.

The Jaffa nodded. "The first of the new Alket design. Only these two are complete, but as you can see many more are being built."

"And the big ones?" Sheppard asked.

"H'tel," the Jaffa answered. "Similar to the Goa'uld motherships of past days...only far more powerful."

"I'll bet," Sheppard said as they stopped outside a small spire on the edge of the promenade.

"Colonel Sheppard," a voice called out from the shadows of the spire. "Good. You have arrived," Bra'tac said, striding out to meet them.

"That we have," Sheppard said, taken slightly aback by the bold red tunic that the man wore. It stood out in stark contrast to his surroundings and the dress of the other Jaffa. Sheppard also noted the man's forearm jewelry...which was eerily similar to the style Stevenson wore.

"From what I was told, we are retrieving some of Atlantis's former crew, yes?"

Sheppard nodded. "A few more than planned actually. Dr. Weir has been given command of Atlantis and she added a few names to the list."

"How many?" Bra'tac demanded.

"Seven total," Sheppard told him.

Bra'tac nodded. "Do you know the location of said individuals on the planet?"

"Just one, but he should be able to help us find the rest."

"Very well," Bra'tac said, satisfied. "If nothing else, it should be an adequate test of the Alket's stealth abilities."

Sheppard raised an eyebrow. "You haven't tested it yet?"

"Through trials, yes. But this will be the first mission for the prototype."

"Sounds fun," Ford chimed in.

Sheppard glanced at him. "We're ready when you are."

"The crew is already aboard," Bra'tac said, walking forward. "We shall leave immediately."

"Sorry if we kept you waiting," Sheppard said, trying to keep in step with the energetic man.

"You did not," he said forcefully. "There is still much work to be done on the H'tels. Time was not wasted."

"Good to hear," Sheppard offered, struggling slightly to keep up with Bra'tac's pace.

"I hear you recently defeated three ships of the Tau'ri?" the Alterra asked.

Sheppard nodded slowly. "More Stevenson than us, but yeah."

"The *Tria* is a mighty warship," Bra'tac agreed. "I studied the design with great interest before designing the H'tel. It gives me great comfort to know that a single vessel can outmatch three of the upgraded Human vessels."

"A single Ancient ship?" Ford asked. "Or a single...H'tel?"

Bra'tac smiled. "Both," he said as they finally arrived on the deep paving stones of the promenade. When they did, a small gantry was extended from the side of the nearest Alket.

"Come," Bra'tac said, almost running up the narrow ramp.

Sheppard and Ford followed him inside, albeit a few seconds later.

"Time to arrival?" Nella asked.

Her fellow Aschen in the control chamber lightly tapped three buttons on the workstation before him.

"The bio-pods will arrive in 18 hours, 54 minutes," the second of the two mission commanders stated lethargically. "The command ship and elementals will arrive 23 and 27 minutes later, respectively."

"Any vessels within detection range?" Neela asked.

"None," Jarro reported. "It seems strange for the Earthers not to have at least some detection net set up around their world."

"By all recollection, they are a primitive race," Neela commented.

"A race which succeeded in destroying an entire star system," Jarro argued.

"A heavy price to pay, for sure," Neela countered calmly, "but the knowledge of the gate system unlocked serves as recompense."

"The two million Aschen who died would argue otherwise."

"As would I," Neela agreed, "but the past cannot be undone. Only the future preserved."

"But it can be avenged..."

Neela turned on him. "You have doubts?"

"I believe we are acting in haste. Sufficient thought has not been given to the matter."

"Normally I would agree, but these Earthers have escaped our grasp once. We cannot let them persist. Their continued existence would only serve to poison others."

"Two years is not sufficient time," Jarro continued to argue. "From all indications the Earthers have defeated a powerful enemy in the interim. They could not have done so with the technology they possessed at our last encounter. I fear we may be underestimating them."

"We shall soon see," Neela said, leaving the control chamber.

2

"Well, Honey, I don't really see anything."

McKay rolled his head back then turned to Jennifer. "For the millionth time will you please stop calling me that. It's embarrassing."

"Why?" she asked playfully. "I like calling you that."

"Well, for starters, there's no rational connection between the word 'honey,' me, and the bee juice."

Jennifer put her nose up against Rodney's cheek. "You're as sweet as honey...Honey."

"No, I'm not," he complained loudly, then lowered his voice. There were other people in the park.

"I'll admit, you are a bit sour at times...but you still have your *golden* moments."

"No," Rodney said, shaking his head sarcastically. "Now you, you're worthy of the name Honey. You even resemble the actress, can't think of her name."

"Actress?" Jennifer asked, confused.

"The Bond chick, in the first of the series. The good ones with Sean Connery, not the crappy knockoffs nowadays."

Jennifer eyed him. "So I'm a 'Bond girl' huh?"

"Every bit," Rodney mocked, squeezing her hand tighter. "Now. It should be around here somewhere."

"I don't see a bent tree," Jennifer remarked, once again serious.

"Maybe it's on the other side of the creek," Rodney suggested. "There's a bridge over there."

"Okay," Jennifer said, walking hand in hand with him while holding the strap of her backpack across her shoulder with the other.

"Ah, see. I told you," Rodney said, pointing to a particular tree. "He said he'd meet us here."

"Must be early," Jennifer said, stopping on the bridge.

"No, no, we had a deal," Rodney said, letting go of her hand and continuing to walk forward. He looked right and left, behind some bushes, and then across a low wall. "He said 2:17 pm."

Jennifer frowned. "Why 2:17 and not 2:20...or 2:30?"

"That way," Sheppard said, standing up from his sitting position on the opposite side of the tree, "you get here at 2:17 exactly to find out why."

"John," Jennifer said, smiling. "It's good to see you."

"Likewise," he said, shaking hands with McKay. "You both coming?"

"Yeah," Rodney said, "I finally talked her into it."

"Really? I didn't think techno-babble worked on her," he said sarcastically.

"Actually, he was very convincing," Jennifer said, once again taking Rodney's hand. "And we made something of a deal out of it."

"What kind of a deal?" Sheppard asked, looking at McKay.

Rodney smiled and held up his other hand...with a ring on it.

Sheppard's jaw dropped. "How did a geek like you ever get a blonde like her to marry you?"

"Hey," McKay protested. "I do have feelings, you know?"

Jennifer squeezed his hand again. "He's just teasing. We all know you do...Honey."

McKay squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. "Is everything set?"

Sheppard nodded. "Just one small snag."

"What kind of snag?" McKay asked.

"Elizabeth has been given command of Atlantis and she wanted me to track down a few other people while I'm here..."

"And you need me to help you find them," Rodney guessed.

Sheppard shrugged. "You're the computer geek."

"Enough with the 'geek' thing already. Who's on your list?"

Sheppard smiled and pulled out a piece of paper and handed it to McKay. He read through the six names and visibly slumped.

"You've got to be kidding me."

Sheppard's smile widened. "Nope. That's who she wants."

"Ah, alright. Let me get to a computer with network access and I'll track'em down. I hope you have a way of getting to them?"

"Not a problem. Where do you need to go for the computer?"

"Area 51. It's about an hour drive by car...then figure twenty minutes to get through security, another five to find the whereabouts of the...*individuals* on your list, then another fifteen on the way out."

"I think we can do better than that," Sheppard said, glancing around. He pulled his sleeve up and touched a button on the wristband he wore. "Three to beam up."

McKay frowned. "Since when do Ancient ships have beaming..."

Three white flashes later and they were in orbit.

"You're serious?" Zelenka said after Sheppard explained his mission.

"Completely," John said, leaning against the door of Zelenka's university office.

"Well, I can't just abandon my work on the drop of a hat. I have ongoing research projects..."

"None that compare to Atlantis," Sheppard interrupted. "That was your research project until you got yanked off it by the I.O.A....just think of it as resuming your work."

Zelenka smiled appreciatively. "I think it's a bit more complex than that, Colonel...or, whatever your rank is now."

"Colonel's fine."

"Well, Colonel, what you're asking me to do is...frankly, illegal."

Sheppard considered that. "Maybe here on Earth...but that's not really saying much in the grand scheme of things, is it?"

"True, the Ancients did build Atlantis," Zelenka offered, "and from a certain point of view their retaking it isn't illegal so much as reclaiming their property...especially considering this isn't the first time it's happened...but the fact remains that I'd never be able to return to Earth as anything other than a criminal. While that might not mean anything in Pegasus, I still consider myself to be an Earthling. I don't want to be a rebel."

"How important can a planet be when they don't even have a proper name for themselves," Sheppard argued. "Earthling is so...1920s"

"You may have a point there, and as much as I appreciate Dr. Weir's confidence in me...not to overlook that fact that she's still alive and I would much like to see her again...I'm sorry, I can't accept your offer."

Sheppard nodded, a bit sarcastically. "I understand. Lorne said the same thing. I appreciate your honesty...and I want you to know, that given your loyalties to Earth, this is actually for your benefit and nothing personal on my part."

Zelenka frowned. "What is?"

"This," Sheppard said, pulling out an Ancient stunner. He shot Zelenka at point blank range and caught his body before it could fall to the floor.

"Three down, three to go."

Laura was sitting in her apartment, sucking down a pint of mint chocolate chip ice cream while watching 'Dancing with the Stars' when her door buzzer rang.

"Who is it?" she asked, setting down her snack and walking to the door.

She looked through the peep hole and did a double take. *No way.*

She pulled open the door to the sight of Sheppard standing outside. "Hello, Lieutenant."

"Colonel Sheppard? What are you doing here? I heard you'd been sent to prison."

"Almost," he said, glancing around. "Mind if I come in."

"Sure," Cadman said warily. "You're not in some kind of trouble. Are you?"

"Only if I'm caught," Sheppard joked. "No, actually I'm here to offer you a ticket back to Atlantis."

"Come again?"

"How about you start with what you know," Sheppard said, sitting down on her couch.

"I.O.A. pulled the plug on the expedition," she said, plopping down next to him. "You went merc and they arrested you."

"That it?"

"Yeah."

"Long story short...that head sucker thing O'Neill ran into, twice, worked on a guy named Ryan Stevenson and turned him into an Ancient."

Cadman shook her head. "Don't know him. Wait a minute, you said it turned him into an Ancient?"

"Oh yeah, and he's been busy ever since."

"Doing what?"

"Rebuilding their civilization."

Cadman blinked twice. "Is this a joke?"

"Nope."

"An Ancient...a real, live, Ancient is rebuilding their civilization."

Sheppard nodded slowly. "We're based out of Atlantis, but he already has ops going on in several galaxies. Point is, we need good people to join us. Dr. Weir recommended you and..."

"I thought Weir was dead?" she interrupted.

"Well, she did have something of a rough spell, being turned into a replicator and all, but she's back in a human body now. Another long story."

"I'll bet," Cadman said, taking it all in. "And she wants me?"

"You were on her short list, yes."

"What about this Ancient...isn't he in charge."

Sheppard cringed. "Technically they're both Ancients...Stevenson transformed Weir into a Lantean not too long ago."

Cadman looked at him coyly. "This just keeps getting better."

"I know it's confusing, but it all makes sense...eventually."

"Hypothetically speaking, if I said yes, how would we get there. I doubt they're going to let you use the stargate, seeing as how you're a criminal and all."

"We don't need the gate. We have a ship in orbit."

"A ship?"

"A cloaked ship...with beaming technology. Say the word and we can be up there in ten seconds."

"Well, looks like you've got all your bases covered."

"What do you say, Lieutenant? Care to blow this joint?"

Cadman smiled. "Actually it's Major now...and what the hell, I've been bored ever since I got back."

Sheppard smiled widely. "I had a feeling..."

"What...that I'm as much of an adrenaline junky as you?"

"Something like that."

"Should I pack first?"

"If you have any sentimental items sure, but Atlantis can supply you with whatever else you need when you get there."

"Cool," she said, grabbing a book off her kitchen counter. "I'm good."

Sheppard smiled/laughed. "Nice to have a kindred spirit," he said, keying his comm again. "Two this time," he said, quickly followed by a blur of white.

Cadman looked around the inside of the Alket, caught a glance of McKay and gave him a small wave.

"Oh goodie," Rodney said under his breath as he went back to work on the laptop he'd brought with him.

"You did what?" Carson complained.

"Don't look surprised."

"I know I shouldn't be," Dr. Beckett said, leaning back in his desk chair. "But you'll forgive me if I have a hard time imagining Earth as the enemy."

"I don't like it much either," Sheppard said, sitting in a chair across Beckett's desk, "but the fact is, Earth is going darkside."

"Are you sure there isn't some mistake?" Carson pleaded. "Brainwashing and killing people while attempting to gain access to the knowledge of the Ancients is..."

"Evil," Sheppard offered.

"Aye," Carson said reluctantly. "Hasn't General O'Neill done anything about it?"

Sheppard shrugged. "Don't know if he even knows, but the fact is they were doing it until we stopped them, and planned on using me if they ever caught me."

"To be perfectly honest, I have heard some...unsavory...rumors coming out of the SGC, but I didn't give them serious thought. It's a proven fact that people have a knack for distorting the truth through gossip. I didn't imagine the rumors would have *understated* the situation."

"So, bottom line," Sheppard said, leaning forward, "can you live with the knowledge that you're helping the bad guys?"

"Actually, most of my work is in this private practice, Colonel. Only on occasion do I do any work for the SGC."

"You didn't answer my question, Carson."

Dr. Beckett sighed. "If I did, I wouldn't be much of a doctor then, would I?"

"Then you'll come?"

"Aye. It'll be good to see the others again, especially Elizabeth. I just need to wrap up a few things here."

"How long?" Sheppard asked.

"Oh, it shouldn't take too long. Two weeks, tops."

Sheppard laughed. "I can give you two *hours*..."

Carson frowned. "What's the rush?"

"The longer we're here the greater the risk of us being found out...especially when key personnel start disappearing."

"Well, I suppose I could leave a list of instructions for Dr. Herreman. That would cover most of my patients..."

"Good. Start typing," Sheppard said, standing up.

"Hold on a minute. It's not that simple. I'm due in surgery in five hours. I can't skip that."

Sheppard chewed his lip. "Tell you what. I'll get the other people on my list then come back for you after the surgery tonight."

Carson nodded. "That could work. Where do you want to meet?"

"Right here."

"Alright. It'll be a bit of a juggling act, but I think I can pull it off."

"Be back around...eight tonight?" Sheppard asked.

Carson nodded. "That'll work."

Sheppard smiled. "Good to have you back."

Carson returned the smile. "Aye. Now get going. I have a lot of work to do before tonight."

Sheppard turned to walk out, then hesitated. "You're not going to call the SGC on me, are you?"

"Perish the thought," Carson joked.

"Just checking," Sheppard said, almost convinced. He'd be careful, just in case. "See you at eight."

"We have a problem," McKay told Sheppard once he was back onboard the Alket.

"What?"

"Novak is currently serving aboard the *Phoenix*."

"I thought you said she was at the SGC?"

"Yeah, well I did some double checking with the data link Bra'tac set up and she's been assigned to the ship for a four day systems diagnostic."

"Great," Sheppard complained. "Don't suppose the ship's sensors can detect hiccups?"

"Hiccups?" Rodney asked.

"Novak has persistent hiccups," Sheppard explained.

Rodney snapped his fingers three times. "You've just given me an idea."

There were three of them in the engine room, pulling a manual diagnostic of the hyperspace engines while running multiple simulations on the ship's computer. They were trying

to identify any flaws that might have allowed the Lantean ship to disable the hyperdrives on all three of their 304s. According to the mission reports, the hyperdrives had not only been disengaged while in flight, but they had been damaged in the process.

If the rebels in Atlantis had this capability, then it was likely that another confrontation would yield similar results...hence this recent project to identify the means by which they had disabled the engines and create a defense against it.

Novak sat at her terminal running through lines of diagnostic code when the officer next to her disappeared in a flash of light.

"What was that?" Major Brigson asked.

"I don't know," Novak said, frowning. Suddenly the Captain reappeared...then the Major vanished.

"What the hell?" she swore.

A moment later the Major reappeared, then Novak disappeared in a wash of white light and suddenly found herself in another room.

"Finally," Sheppard said.

"Uh...what just happened?" Novak asked, looking around.

"We're kidnapping you," Sheppard explained pithily.

Novak's eyes went wide. "Kidnapping me?"

"Relax," Sheppard assured her. "Worst case scenario you end up with a two week vacation to the Pegasus galaxy."

"And the best case scenario?" Novak asked cautiously.

Sheppard smiled. "One hell of a promotion."

"I don't understand," Novak said, shaking her head.

Sheppard waved her off. "Just go along for the ride. You'll catch on." He turned to the Jaffa at the beaming controls. "Next."

Five hours later, after 'retrieving' Simpson from the UK, Sheppard beamed back onboard with Carson and *three* suitcases.

"For crying out loud, Carson," McKay complained, "what did you pack?"

"Just a few essentials," Carson said. "Nice to see you too, by the way."

"Hello, Carson," Jennifer said from Rodney's side.

"Dr. Keller. I didn't expect to see you here?"

"Actually," Jennifer said, smiling, "it's Dr. McKay now."

"Really," Carson said, smiling. "Congratulations you two."

"Thanks," Rodney said amicably.

"Don't get too excited," Sheppard interrupted. "Once we reach Pegasus your marriage is null and void."

"What?" Jennifer asked, horrified.

"What are you talking about?" Rodney echoed.

Sheppard stepped forward and clapped Rodney on the shoulder. "The Ancients don't recognize marriage."

Rodney's eyes went wide. "They don't?"

"So," Sheppard continued. "Enjoy your few remaining hours of wedded bliss," he said, winking at Keller before walking off.

Both Rodney and Jennifer exchanged glances, stunned.

"Was he serious?" she asked.

"Beats me," Rodney said. "Just my luck...I finally get the perfect girl, future is looking good, then the other shoe drops."

Jennifer grabbed his arm tightly. "You're not losing me."

"Who am I kidding," Rodney whined. "Marriage was my only hope of keeping you. Eventually I'll annoy you to frustration and you'll move on to someone less irritating."

Jennifer frowned. "So, you were planning on keeping me prisoner?"

"Pretty much," Rodney admitted.

She smiled seductively. "Kinky."

Rodney had to laugh at that. "Stop. My side. You're killing me."

"Marriage or not," Jennifer said seriously. "We'll beat the odds."

"You think?"

"Definitely," she said, kissing him on the cheek.

"Hmmm," Rodney said, thinking. "Maybe Sheppard was joking. He does that you know."

"Doesn't matter," Jennifer said, kissing him again.

"Doesn't matter," Rodney echoed.

"Ok," Sheppard said, walking onto the bridge of the Alket. "Everyone's aboard. We can leave now."

Bra'tac nodded. "*Helm, set course for Dakara.*"

The Jaffa at the controls frowned as his console began to light up. "*My Lord, sensors have detected a ship entering the system.*"

Bra'tac frowned. All three of the Tau'ri ships were currently in orbit.

"*Show me,*" he ordered.

A holographic map of Earth, Luna, and their orbital paths materialized in front of Bra'tac's command chair. Outside of Luna's orbit a new contact had emerged...one of unfamiliar design.

"What's that?" Sheppard asked.

Bra'tac slowly shook his head. "I know not," he said as multiple contacts splintered off from the ship and headed rapidly toward the planet.

"*Sensor focus,*" Bra'tac ordered quickly.

The Jaffa knew what he meant and did an in-depth sensor scan on one of the objects. A small obloid shape materialized in a fuzzy hologram.

"Is that the best you can do?" Sheppard asked.

"We would have to drop our cloak for better results," the Jaffa answered him in English.

"Do so," Bra'tac said, standing. "And move us on an intercept course with those objects."

"What?" Sheppard asked seriously.

"A hunch," the Alterra answered as the fuzzy image clarified.

"My Lord, sensors indicate..."

"...biological weapons," Bra'tac finished, reading the Ancient script attached to the hologram. "Full speed. We must intercept those weapons before they reach the planet's atmosphere."

Sheppard frowned. "Are Earth's ships moving?"

"No," the Jaffa answered as he accelerated the Alket on a new heading.

"Open communications with the Tau'ri ships," Bra'tac ordered.

The Jaffa touched a few controls then nodded.

"Vessels of the Tau'ri," Bra'tac said quickly, but formally. "A number of biological weapons approach your planet. You must destroy them...now!"

3

"The weapons are diverging," the Jaffa at the helm controls noted, unsure which to pursue.

"There," Bra'tac declared, pointing at the farthest of them. "Move us to intercept this one. We will then circle around and target these," he said, pointing at a cluster of four others.

The Jaffa nodded his understanding and realigned their trajectory.

"Power all weapons," Bra'tac ordered.

Another Jaffa who had been sitting silently off to the side stepped forward and touched a small symbol on a pedestal in the center of the bridge, directly in front of Bra'tac's command chair.

A targeting station rose from within the floor and the Jaffa took position behind it, alongside the pilot. Meanwhile Bra'tac used his chair controls to manipulate the hologram before him so he could better appraise the situation. The nearest of the Tau'ri ships was slowly moving to intercept range, but the other had yet to move.

Bra'tac utilized the mental interface built into the chair and had the ship's computer extrapolate the weapons' targets...apparently they had been designed to track towards land, for their trajectories had them all missing the planet's massive oceans and tracking directly for the seven continents.

The *Sun Tzu* decelerated and held its ground against the first of the projectiles...one that was tracking directly towards Southeast Asia. A hail of rail gun fire blossomed from the 304 at extreme range and continued as the yellow projectiles missed badly for nearly thirty seconds before the bio weapon closed within two and a half kilometers. The heavy rounds shattered the central casing, spilling the apparently liquid weapon into the cold of space.

It froze instantly in a malformed glob...until another metallic round shattered the deadly ice into a multitude of fragments along with shards of the weapon's casing. As soon as it was destroyed, the *Sun Tzu* accelerated at maximum thrust to intercept the path of the next closest projectile, but it already had a significant lead on the Chinese ship.

Meanwhile the *Kerensky* opted for a head first charge toward a cluster of three of the weapons. The Russian ship didn't opt to wait in low orbit and give the weapons free distance towards Earth. It opened up with its beam weapons at range and succeeded in destroying one of the weapons after two dozen attempts.

The other two weapons closed fast, and the *Kerensky* added its rail guns to the beam weapons, as well as deploying a pair of 302s that fell back from the rapidly accelerating ship, then dropped even closer towards the planet as a second line of defense.

The two remaining bio weapons altered course and split widely, obviously some type of preprogrammed defensive maneuver, and the Russians had to make a quick choice which to follow...and failed to do so. By the time they chose a weapon to track they were too far behind and had to settle for a long loop that brought them around on a pursuit course towards Earth...with their excess weapons fire headed down to the planet's surface.

A small missile impacted the side of one of the weapons as they neared the atmosphere, courtesy of the 302s, and knocked it off course. The tiny fighters pounced on it with more missile and their pathetic energy weapons, but they did finally succeed in breaking the case that held the weapon and destroyed its guidance systems. With any luck the now ballistic debris would burn up upon reentry...which would begin in twenty seconds.

The third projectile was out of range of the Russians' weapons though many rail gun rounds flashed by, their targeting system useless at this range. The bio weapon dropped into the upper atmosphere and a reentry shield activated in front of the rectangular device. It was powered by the heat of friction, and grew stronger the deeper it delved into the thick atmosphere on its way down towards Greenland.

The *Phoenix* chose a similar attack profile to the Russians...they headed out at full speed to intercept the weapons before they could get too close to Earth...but the delay they'd suffered in recognizing the weapons for what they were put them in position to destroy only a handful of them. Fortunately the unidentified ship that had sent them the warning had got a good jump on weapons and had intercepted them further out where they had been clustered closer together.

Five projectiles approached the Americas...the *Phoenix* targeted two that were still relatively close together as it wheeled around and moved against their future position laterally rather than wait for them to pass by and force them to play catch up later. Rail guns fired like an oversized version of a chain gun across the path of the weapons as the ship also launched a dozen missiles, hoping that they would be able to overtake the speed of the bio weapons...they could not, and lagged behind uselessly as the pair of projectiles sped past at amazing speed.

The *Phoenix* dropped in behind them and fought to catch up. The weapons appeared to be ballistic and not accelerating, so the American ship still had a chance. It reached out with its beam weapons towards the leftmost of the two, firing frantically to hit the tiny dot on their forward screens. They fired round after round, with the missed lances penetrating the upper atmosphere and landing who knows where...if the beam cohesion held. Hopefully it wouldn't.

A luck strike took out the targeted weapon and the *Phoenix* angled towards the second as it quickly gained ground...but the weapon slipped into the upper atmosphere and began its fiery descent towards Canada.

As if angered to the point of madness, the 304 slammed into the atmosphere, punching such a wide hole into the gaseous layers around the planet that for a moment it appeared as if there was a second sun in the sky overhead. The fireball was so intense preceding the forward shields of the ship that none of her weapons could fire forward...but fortunately they didn't have to. The ship/meteor passed within 300 meters of the bio weapon halfway through its descent and vaporized it in the inferno mushrooming around the *Phoenix*.

The American craft then redirected its course through a painful upward loop, bottoming out less than 10 kilometers above Hudson Bay before pulling back spaceward with negligible shield strength remaining. It quickly confirmed an additional kill by their 302s, launched at the outset of the engagement, but the other two weapons had made it to the surface.

"Where did they hit?" Sheppard asked as he stood beside Bra'tac. They'd managed to destroy twenty seven of the weapons...but four had slipped past Earth's lethargic defenders. Had they been on the ball they could have stopped them all.

A hologram of the planet appeared with four points of impact marked... Antarctica...Greenland...Mexico...Brazil.

"I'd better get Beckett up here," Sheppard said, running off the bridge.

"*Where is the launching device?*" Bra'tac asked snappily. He did not appreciate failure.

A sensor image of the now empty launcher drifted outside of Luna's orbit with no signs of activity.

"*Take us there,*" Bra'tac said, once again sitting down. "*Perhaps it will give us a clue as to the identity of the attackers.*"

"*Yes, my Lord,*" the pilot said softly. He too realized the price of failure. The Tau'ri homeworld was now contaminated. With what they didn't know, but they all knew the symbiot-less humans would have little defense against a biological weapon.

"What the hell is going on up there?" Rodney demanded as Sheppard ran into view. "That sounded like weapons fire."

"It was," Sheppard said, settling down. "Carson, we need your help...you too, Jennifer."

"What is it?" Beckett asked.

"Earth was just attacked with dozens of bio weapons...four got through our defenses."

"Dear god," Carson said under his breath as he walked toward Sheppard and the door that led to the bridge.

"Who was it?" Rodney said, jogging to catch up with them. Jennifer lagged behind him a step, followed by a silent Ford. Novak stayed behind with the unconscious personnel, hiccups evident.

"They didn't exactly leave a calling card, Rodney," Sheppard said, irritated. "This ship...thing just dropped out of hyperspace and launched missiles at the planet."

"What are we going to do?" Rodney asked panickly.

Sheppard just shook his head and hurried after Carson.

Bra'tac stared at the inert bio launcher drifting lazily 100 meters ahead of the Alket. The technology was unfamiliar to him and there seemed to be no bridge or control facility on the craft to board. It was merely a hyperdrive-equipped weapons platform.

"You still say it is unfamiliar to you?" Bra'tac asked Sheppard and the other humans with him.

"You've already asked me that twice," Sheppard protested. "What makes you think I'll change my mind?"

"Because," Bra'tac said as he stood up almost within the hologram of Luna, "whoever they are, they are an enemy of the Tau'ri. It reasons that you must have come into contact with them somewhere."

"He's right," Ford interrupted. "Nobody comes all this way to kill a planet full of strangers. They must have some beef with us. Think."

Sheppard threw up his hands in disgust. "Rodney?"

"Why do I always get to be answer man?" he said, getting glares in response. "Ok, let's start with the obvious. The Goa'uld."

Bra'tac shook his head. "This weapon is not of Goa'uld design...nor is it of the Jaffa."

"Ok, scratch the most obvious two," Rodney said, thinking. "Is it some form of Ancient tech?"

"No," Bra'tac said firmly.

Rodney nodded. "Ok...Ori?"

"I thought we were friends now?" Jennifer interrupted.

"My Lord, a vessel of the Tau'ri approaches...it hails us."

"Allow them communication," Bra'tac said, turning to a wall display on his left. A flat hologram appeared an inch off the wall.

"Unidentified vessel," Colonel Ronson's image demanded, "please state your purpose here and any information you have concerning this attack."

"I am Bra'tac of the Alterra, first System Lord of the Jaffa. We came here on private business with individuals from your planet. Our presence here is coincidental with this attack. We know nothing of it, save for that which both of us saw."

"Your mission here aside," Ronson continued, "you have our thanks. Had you not been here we would have been caught unawares."

"Four weapons penetrated our combined defenses," Bra'tac said stiffly. "Had you moved more quickly, they all could have been intercepted."

Ronson's chin came up slightly. "Your warning occurred before our sensors detected the weapons. We could not have moved faster than we did. As it is, I do not know how you knew before we did."

Bra'tac nodded his head in reluctant understanding. "This vessel has been constructed of Ancient technology, including the craft's sensors...but still, we know nothing of this weapon's origin. Is the design familiar to you?"

Ronson nodded. "We've got our people mulling over the sensor data. Right now we don't have a lead on where it came from, but I'm confident we'll come up with something."

"Very well," Bra'tac said, unconvinced. "What of the devices that struck your planet."

Ronson's jaw flexed. "We don't know anything yet, but any assistance the Jaffa could provide would be welcomed."

"A sample of the weapon would be useful."

"You're referring to the pathogen itself?"

"Yes," Bra'tac confirmed as his pilot stirred again. "*What is it?*" he asked, turning away from Colonel Ronson's image.

"A ship has appeared on the extreme edge of the star system...beyond the orbit of 17th planet."

"Stand by," Bra'tac said to Ronson as he adjusted the hologram. A small sensor image enlarged to show a large vessel, half again the size of a 304. It, like the bio launcher, was adorned with smooth blue/white aesthetics.

The base alarm sounded in the middle of breakfast in the commissary for SG-1...followed quickly by Landry's voice over the base-wide intercom. "Colonel Carter, report to the gateroom ASAP. We have a situation."

Sam frowned. "I wonder what's going on," she said, getting up from her tray.

"One way to find out," Mitchell said, jumping out of his seat a step ahead of her. The rest of SG-1 followed on their heels.

"What's going on, sir?" Sam asked as she ran up the steps into the control room.

"Earth is under attack," Landry stated calmly, pointing at the numerous displays around the control room. Most of them showed relayed images of the bio weapons, the launcher, and the ship sitting on the edge of the system. "They snuck four of these bio weapons past our defenses. Our 304s and a Jaffa vessel destroyed the rest...then this beastie showed up."

"Who are they?" Mitchell asked.

"We don't know," Landry said, looking at the static images and then Carter. "By any chance are these things Pegasus related?"

Sam looked quizzically at the images, then a thought struck her. She turned to Teal'c and found a similar expression on his face...one of grave concern. He nodded once.

"No, sir," Sam answered as a chill ran through her bones, "but we have encountered them before. They call themselves the Aschen."

"My Lord, another vessel has dropped out of hyperspace," the pilot announced, displaying a visual of a large block less than 1,000 kilometers away. "It is...breaking apart."

Bra'tac glanced between the visual at the front of the bridge and the tactical display before him. The 'block' was pulling itself apart into flat segments...some 180 total. Each piece was showing shields, engines, and a single weapon mount.

"Colonel," Bra'tac said, glancing to his left. "I suggest you prepare for battle."

"Can we count on your support?" Ronson asked.

"You can."

"Much appreciated," the Colonel said before breaking communications.

"What are they?" Sheppard asked.

"Fighters?" Ford asked.

Bra'tac shook his head. "No, they are too large...and there are no lifeform readings."

"Well whatever they are," Rodney interrupted, "they're coming right for us!"

"Move us away from the Tau'ri," Bra'tac ordered. "Lateral acceleration, then sweep back across their path. Use our speed against them."

The view of the approaching 'slices' disappeared as the Jaffa wheeled the Alket to starboard and accelerated at full thrust.

4

"The elementals have engaged the enemy," Jarro reported needlessly. The hologram showed the battle in great detail.

A blue lance lept out from one of the Earth vessels, impacted the flat side of one of the elementals...and utterly destroyed it.

Nella blinked in surprise. "Their weaponry is impressive," she said as more of the block-like elementals swarmed around the four alien ships. Most were moving too fast to target accurately, but the Aschen commander saw two more winged by the blue plasma and subsequently explode.

"As are their shields," Jarro added, studying the telemetry the elementals were relaying back to their command ship. "Their shield matrix is quite complex, far more so that whatever they have powering it."

"Pull back," Nella ordered.

Jarro typed a quick series of commands into his console and the elementals responded immediately, breaking free of the engagement and fleeing Earth orbit towards a rendezvous position near to the second planet's orbital zone.

"What have you got?" Nella asked.

"The computer estimates that five elementals are necessary to defend against their primary weapons...two for their lesser."

"Maneuverability?"

"We will retain the advantage over their three larger ships, but we will be at a disadvantage to their fourth. Smaller as it may be, it appears to be constructed of more advanced technology. We have little data on its shields, the elementals had a hard time targeting it."

"Countermeasures?"

Jarro inclined his head in thought. "Possibly, but a simpler explanation would be its narrow profile coupled with mobile attack patterns."

"Similar to our own," Nella said. "How do its weapons compare?"

"Inferior in power to the others, but with a much higher firing rate. It is possible that we are looking at a prototype craft...or an ally."

"That complicates things. How many elementals do we have left?"

"One hundred sixty four from the first wave," Jarro reported.

"Engage twenty clusters of five. The remainder will remain in singles to keep their smaller ship occupied. All ships will maintain mobile attack patterns."

"What of the others?"

"Patience, Jarro. We need a complete assessment of their capabilities before we commit the bulk of our forces."

"I agree, but have you considered the possibility that they might have summoned reinforcements from elsewhere?"

"That is always a possibility," Nella reprimanded him. "Regardless, we will proceed according to protocol. Once the elementals reconfigure have them execute a micro jump into attack position."

Jarro nodded and began imputing the necessary commands.

"This is weird," Sheppard said as the attackers retreated just as the battle began.

"I agree," Bra'tac said, rubbing his chin. "Be on guard. I do not believe they have given up yet."

"What are those things?" Ford asked.

"Whatever they are," Rodney answered, "the Asgard beam weapons on the 304s cut them to ribbons."

"You think that's why they pulled back?" Ford asked.

"Not that I'm a military strategist," Rodney said irreverently, "but yeah, I'd say that's a distinct possibility."

"You know, I think I liked it better when you were a galaxy away," Ford told him.

"Oh yeah, then why'd you come?"

"To see my Grandma and Grandpa," Ford told him.

"Really? You didn't strike me as the sentimental type."

Ford shook his head dismissively. "I was crazy for *not* shooting you when I had an excuse."

"Enough!" Sheppard interrupted. "We've got bigger things to worry about."

"Indeed," Bra'tac echoed as he pointed at a specific point on the hologram. During the battle a number of vessels had appeared alongside the command ship outside the system...there were 26 of them, and they appeared to have the same dimensions as the original block that split up into the pieces that had attacked them."

"Oh, that's not good," Rodney said quietly.

"Aye," Carson echoed, "but you're forgetting the bio weapons already on the planet. Unless you get me...us, to some sort of medical facility, we're not going to be of any use up here."

"That will have to wait," Bra'tac said as the blocks disappeared from Venus orbit and suddenly were upon them again. The pilot of the Alket accelerated the ship to attack speed.

"Here we go again," Sheppard said, putting one hand on a bulkhead for support. The forward viewport swung around on the tail of what looked like several blocks stuck together. Four golden globs of plasma lept out from the Jaffa ship and impacted its rear shields just as an Asgard beam struck it from the other side.

The blocks' shields held...and their five beams targeted the *Kerensky* simultaneously in response.

Likewise the Asgard shields on the 304 held, which began a brief slugging match between the two ships. Two more, nearly simultaneous beams from the *Kerensky* succeeded in destroying the multi-craft, but the Russian ship was under attack from seven more of them plus several of the individual units.

Two quick blasts hit the Alket's shields as the Jaffa vessel swung around behind the *Kerensky* and targeted one of the multi-crafts attacking the *Phoenix*. As they did, a dozen more individuals tracked toward the Alket, lighting up the Ancient shields and the space around them with their brief, yet elongated energy blasts.

"They have adapted their attack," Bra'tac commented as the pilot swung the ship to and fro, trying to shake off their pursuit. "That first engagement was merely a test of our abilities."

"If we can just keep from getting blown out of the sky," Sheppard said, grabbing Jennifer by the arm as she started to fall due to an extreme turn to port, "the 304s look like they can handle them."

Bra'tac inquired the Alket's battle computer for the status of the allied vessels and received holographic stats around the ships. A thin bar above each ship indicated their shield strength...all of them were below 50%."

Another of the multi-craft exploded under the *Phoenix's* guns and Bra'tac did a quick assessment of the battlefield. There were 16 of the multi-craft left, 54 of the singles, and rapidly depleting shields on the Tau'ri ships. Even the Alket's shields had been diminished by 25%, and given the kill rate they were managing it was going to be a close call as to who was going to come out of this conflict as the victor.

Three of the multi-craft coordinated their attack on the *Sun Tzu* and fired their enhanced beams at a single point on the 304s shields. The Asgard designed matrix absorbed most of the energy, but the beams lasted long enough to overload that particular square meter of the energy field and allowed the last wisp of their weapons to hit the hull.

A small explosion mushroomed out from the port side of the ship as the hole in the shields resealed itself almost instantaneously. Two crewmen, however, were in that particular section of the ship and died from decompression before emergency bulkheads snapped into place behind them, preserving the rest of the ship's internal atmosphere.

Bra'tac took note of the damage and the alarming fact that by combining their craft together they had increased the power of their shields *and weapons* beyond the expected cumulative effect. He suspected it had to do with the internal blocks being retasked to 'generator mode' while the outer ones used the energy provided to enhance their shields and weapons.

If that were true, then any more combinations of blocks would result in even more firepower and tougher shields. In the pit of his stomach he got the feeling that whoever this enemy was, they were playing with the Tau'ri and had yet to show their true strength.

Another momentary shield breach occurred on the *Phoenix* just before a swarm of yellow lights flowed past its hull and slammed into the enemy blocks...

"Yes!" Sheppard said, fist pumping the air as the drones passed right through the enemy shields and tore the blocks to shreds.

Bra'tac settled back into his seat, letting out a sigh of relief. The Tau'ri had activated the Ancient weapons platform in Antarctica...but how many of the pesqua did they have left?

Concerned, Bra'tac used his knowledge of Ancient systems and queried the outpost below for their current weapon count.

589 remained.

As the last of the enemy craft exploded Bra'tac's eyes lept to the ships sitting just outside the star system. None of them moved. Perhaps they were rethinking their strategy. That was good, for it might give them the time they needed.

"Hail the Tau'ri," Bra'tac ordered, standing up.

Colonel Ronson's image appeared again. "Yes?"

"I need to speak with stargate command immediately."

"May I ask why?"

"There are many more ships on the edge of the system. I believe this attack has been nothing more than a probe into your defenses."

"More ships?" Ronson asked, clearly worried. He rechecked with his crew. "Our sensors are clear."

"They are massed at the very edge of the system," Bra'tac said, relaying their sensor data to the *Phoenix*. "Time is short. I must use your stargate immediately if I am to rally reinforcements."

"Patching you through now," Ronson said after looking at the sensor data. A moment later General Landry's image appeared.

Bra'tac nodded in greeting. "I need to use your stargate to summon reinforcements, and time is short."

"That can be arranged," Landry said, also clearly concerned. "I hear from Colonel Ronson that you've also requested a sample of the bio weapon?"

"Yes, but that will have to wait. Your world is due for another attack, and I must leave at once if we are to return in time."

"Very well," Landry agreed.

"Dial Chulak immediately," Bra'tac told him. "We will be in your gateroom within sixty seconds."

Bra'tac severed communications then turned to his crew. "Aid the Tau'ri as you are able, but do not stand toe to toe with this enemy. Flee if you must, for you do neither them nor me any good dead. Hit and run. Become a nuisance. Survive to inflict more damage later."

The assembled Jaffa nodded. "Understood my Lord," the pilot said.

Bra'tac put his hand on his shoulder. "This is the Tau'ri's world. They may defend it to their deaths. You will not. Fight bravely, but more important, fight wisely."

He turned to the Atlantis crew. "Any of you that possess the Ancient gene will come with me. All others will travel to Atlantis via the stargate."

"Lorne has the gene," Sheppard said, "but he's still unconscious."

"Come," Bra'tac said, walking swiftly off the bridge. The others fell into step behind him.

When they got to where Novak and the unconscious crew were Bra'tac knelt over Lorne and placed his hand on his forehead.

"What the...?" he said, waking up with a start.

"Be still," Bra'tac said evenly. "Your world is under assault. We require your assistance."

"Okay," Lorne said, not sure what was going on.

Bra'tac stood up and moved behind a control console. "I will follow you shortly," he said, activating the Asgard beaming technology.

Sheppard and the others suddenly found themselves beneath the window of the SGC command center staring into the kawoosh of the activating wormhole. It settled into a stable event horizon and Bra'tac beamed down in front of it at the foot of the ramp.

"What are they doing here?" Landry's voice asked over the speakers.

"They are coming with me," Bra'tac said, waving them forward.

"Security!" Landry said quickly, with the assembled armed guards snapping to attention.

Bra'tac looked up at the control room angrily. "Your world is under attack. We have no time for games!"

"Colonel Sheppard is under arrest," Landry said evenly, "and the others aren't supposed to be here either."

"There is no time for this!" Bra'tac yelled. "Order your guards to stand down or I will take them by force," Bra'tac said, his forearm jewelry melting and covering him head to toe in armor. He slowly raised his forearm towards one of the nervous guards pointing a weapon at him...

"Stop," Landry yelled. "Security teams stand down."

Bra'tac's armor retracted and he waved Sheppard forward. "Go," he said, nudging him through the gate.

"I should stay," Carson said as the others went through.

"Me too," Jennifer added after pushing Rodney through and stepping back down the ramp.

"I require you as a gunner," he said to Carson, then turned to Jennifer. "And you will have better luck with the medical equipment in Atlantis once the Tau'ri have provided us with a sample of the weapon. Now come, time is short," he said, glancing back at Landry once, then gently pushed the two doctors through the gate.

They emerged through the opposite gate and met the others in the cold forest environment of Chulak.

"What are we doing here?" Sheppard said, shivering.

Bra'tac said nothing. Instead he immediately went for the DHD and dialed an eight chevron jump address, imputing the security code to the bewilderment of the others...especially Rodney.

As soon as the gate activated Bra'tac stepped through and the others hurried to join him. The group arrived in the gate center and Bra'tac took off at a run for the control tower, yelling back at Sheppard.

"Those who do not possess the gene will go through first. The rest of you stay here."

"Alright, that's Cadman, Keller, Simpson, Zelenka, and Novak," Sheppard said, organizing them. "Everyone else sit tight. I don't know exactly what Bra'tac has planned, but I'm willing to bet it's something good."

"Where's he going, and what is this place?" Rodney asked, looking at the multiple gates.

"Long story," Sheppard said as the red gate suddenly activated. "Keller, take Zelenka. Cadman, you've got Simpson."

"Jennifer, when you get there..." Carson began to say.

She nodded. "I know where to start," she said, dragging Zelenka's unconscious body into the event horizon.

"Colonel," Novak asked as Cadman dragged Zelenka through. "What in the world is going on?"

"I promise we'll explain everything later. You can talk to Dr. Weir in a moment."

"Alright," she said, hesitantly walking through the stargate.

"What the hell is going on?" Lorne asked, looking around the place.

Off to the side the green stargate activated. McKay glanced back and forth between the two. "Ok, that's impossible."

"Rookies," Sheppard said sarcastically as Bra'tac ran back from the control tower to join them. "Move!" he ordered.

"Let's go," Sheppard yelled, stepping through the gate.

On the other side he nearly lost his breath. Standing before them was a gigantic ship in a breathtakingly huge construction slip. "Is that..."

"The Columnar," Bra'tac said, attracting the attention of a nearby replicator. He had a brief conversation with it in Ancient then walked quickly toward a nearby ring platform.

"Is that the reinforcements?" McKay asked.

"Yes. I require your assistance as gunners," Bra'tac said, motioning for them to step inside the rings. All did so and the Alterra joined them after keying the activation sequence.

"I didn't think it was ready?" Sheppard asked after they were transported inside.

"The primary weapon and most of the armor has yet to be completed," Bra'tac said, hurrying towards the bridge. "The rest of the systems should be operational."

"Drones?" Sheppard asked.

Bra'tac shook his head. "There are no *pesqua* aboard. Nor are there any auxiliary craft. Such things are added after final construction."

"What do we have to fight with then?"

"To my knowledge the plasma cannons and *lox* generators are fully operational, as are the shields and hyperdrive. Fortunately, the *potentia* has already been installed, lest we be delayed further."

"Cool," Ford muttered.

Bra'tac opened the door to a 'transporter' big enough for three people. He, Sheppard, and McKay stepped inside. "Follow us," Bra'tac ordered, sealing the door. The three of them were transported to the terminal at the far end of the bridge, a long high ceilinged corridor that looked very drab. At the far end a solitary control chair sat.

"Ship?" Bra'tac called out into the emptiness as he walked toward the chair.

A hologram of an Ancient woman half materialized walking beside them. "Yes?" she asked.

"Prepare for emergency launch," Bra'tac ordered. "We must go into battle immediately."

It blinked. "Construction crews have already evacuated the slip. It will take 4.2 minutes to open the primary hatch...and I would remind you that not all weapons systems are currently operational."

"What's that?" McKay whispered to Sheppard.

"You've got me," he said.

"Plot course for the nearest ship gate," he told the hologram as he slipped into the control chair. It and nearly everything else on the bridge lit up brilliantly. Off on the far end Carson, Lorne, and Ford stepped out of transporter.

"Sit," Bra'tac said. Along the wall three smaller versions of the control chair rose up out of the floor, along with two more on the opposite side.

"Now that's what I'm talking about," Sheppard said, sliding into the small seat and connecting with the ship. He pulled up as much information as he could, some of which appeared as a hologram in front of him, including the ship's name...*Nieruie*.

"Nieruie?" Sheppard said aloud.

"Yes," the hologram answered.

"Ah...what are you?"

"I am the ship's computer."

"What's with the name, Bra'tac?"

"It means 'exceptional strength,'" the Alterra answered.

"In Ancient?" Sheppard asked.

"Of course."

"Can she...it control the weapons?"

"I can," Nieruie answered.

"Why then do I need you?" Bra'tac said, sensing his question. "The computer is faster and more accurate than a person, but it lacks the wisdom in target choice. I cannot control all the

weapons myself. Each of you will take as many as you can, the ship will utilize the rest for point defense."

"How many are there?" Ford asked.

"Ninety nine plasma cannons and four lox generators, which I will man."

"Lox?" Carson asked.

"Lightning," Bra'tac translated as there was a sudden shudder felt throughout the ship.

"What was that?" Lorne asked.

"The moon is opening," Sheppard said, getting a sensor feed through his chair.

"Indeed," Bra'tac said, still impressed by the sight of it. "This shipyard is encased within a hollow moon. I believe that is the sole reason why it has survived to this day."

"Ship...system diagnostic. Are we ready to launch?"

The hologram hesitated a few seconds. "All completed systems are operating at 100%."

Bra'tac closed his eyes in the control chair and the ship's engines hummed to life.

"Here we go," Carson said warily.

"Whoever is attacking Earth," Sheppard said eagerly, "is about to get a big surprise."

"How far away are we?" Lorne asked. In response a hologram appeared over his chair showing Avalona and the distance between it and Kestardra. "We're in another galaxy?"

"Looks like it," Sheppard said as the ship slowly lifted out of its berth.

"Well what kind of a bloody plan is this," Carson complained. "It'll take days, if not weeks, for us to get back to Earth."

"Bra'tac knows a shortcut," Sheppard said sarcastically. "Nieruie, can you give me a weapons simulation for practice?"

"Yes," it said as a targeting proficiency program activated through Sheppard's neural link. Some holographic elements also manifested themselves.

"Me too!" McKay said quickly.

"Me three," Lorne said, less enthusiastic. "Who are we fighting anyway?"

"Don't know," Sheppard said, fighting phantom enemies as he spoke. "They came out of nowhere and attacked Earth with some type of bio weapon, then followed it up with a bunch of legos."

"Legos?" McKay complained. "Seriously..."

"You have a better name, Rodney?"

"Well, now that you mention it..."

"Meaning what?" Lorne interrupted.

"They can fight individually," Sheppard explained, "or they can hook together to increase their strength...at least, that's how it looked."

"You are correct," Bra'tac interrupted. "They did indeed increase their power when connected. I fear their combined might if they number in the hundreds..."

"Ouch," Sheppard said, "I hadn't thought about that."

"That's one big door," Ford said, watching their exit in hologram. They were hovering over several dozen slips...all with partially constructed Columnars in the rib stage of fabrication, but far above them a large oval was peeling up into space. Small bits of debris and dust fell inward and sparkled as they passed through the atmospheric shield that kept the moon's interior from venting into space.

Bra'tac tipped the long ship up into a nearly vertical position and accelerated rapidly out of the facility. Once outside, Ford and Carson both stared back at a barren, char-colored sphere while the other crew members worked through their weapons simulations.

"What's this shortcut?" Carson asked, his jaw still slack from what he was seeing.
"You will see shortly," Bra'tac said as the Columnar launched into hyperspace.

5

Moments before the *Nieruie* exited hyperspace Bra'tac knew things were bad. What limited sensor readings were possible from hyperspace showed only two ships in Earth orbit, and the former Jaffa Master realigned their exit point to get them as close as possible to them on reversion.

The massive Columnar slid back into realspace between the *Phoenix* and Earth, just above the atmosphere. The *Kerensky* shadowed the American ship, but there was no sign of the *Sun Tzu*...and there was a thin wisp of smoke rising from Antarctica.

"That's not good," Sheppard said quietly.

A transmission from the *Phoenix* appeared in hologram across the forward wall of the bridge, as well as above each individual chair. Colonel Ronson's distraught face appeared.

"What has transpired?" Bra'tac asked, checking on the position of the enemy fleet. They were sitting right where they had been...minus one of their ships.

"A number of their smaller ships engaged us in battle again, this time as a diversion. As soon as the Antarctic outpost launched their drones another group of enemy ships pulled a hyperspace jump into the upper atmosphere and took it out. The drones in flight dropped dead before they hit their targets. We managed to destroy the diversionary force, but when the second group joined the battle we lost the *Sun Tzu*.

"What of the ship I left behind?" Bra'tac asked.

Ronson shook his head. "I don't know. We lost track of them."

The Alterra nodded. "The enemy has made no further move?"

"No...I can't understand it. By now they have to know they have more than enough firepower to take us out...at least they did. I hope that's no longer the case, judging by the looks of your ship. Please tell me I'm right?"

Bra'tac nodded. "Pull back and disengage. We will take it from here."

"Not to sound ungrateful," Ronson said, "but this is our world. We *will* defend it."

"Your deaths will not serve your world. Only your continued life can. If the enemy persists the battle will grow beyond your capabilities. You will be more of a hindrance than an asset. Pull back and see to your repairs."

"I can't do that," Ronson argued. "I have my orders."

"You have new orders now," Bra'tac said stiffly. "Issued by the battlefield commander, which I have now become."

Ronson visibly stiffened. "Not to belabor the point, but where can we go? I doubt I could land the ship in one piece, and if we jumped into hyperspace there's no guarantee the enemy wouldn't follow us."

"You could bring them onboard," Ford offered. "The main bay looks big enough."

"A prudent suggestion," Bra'tac said with approval. "Do your ships still have maneuvering capability?"

"I believe so," Ronson answered.

"Then you will land inside our ship and begin your repairs. Both of your ships."

Ronson's eyes went wide. "Did you say inside your ship?"

"I am opening the primary bay now," Bra'tac said, stopping the Columnar near the *Phoenix*. "Get your ship close and the bay's tractor beams will guide you the rest of the way."

"I'm not sure I like this," Ronson said, wavering.

"If you cannot land, and cannot flee, you have no other alternative."

"Very well," Ronson said reluctantly. "I'll instruct the *Kerensky* to follow us...assuming both ships will fit inside."

Bra'tac did a third check of the sizes. "They will."

Ronson nodded. "Thank you. We'll try and expedite repairs as best we can."

The *Phoenix* turned on maneuvering thrusters and edged around the back of the Columnar where a thin layer of replicator armor was peeling back from the center section of the ship revealing a pair of massive hangar bay doors. Once the armor blocks had reformed elsewhere the bay opened slowly revealing a hangar deeper than it was wide.

The *Phoenix* closed to within a couple kilometers then the ship was gripped by a translucent blue beam...and she lost all maneuvering control.

"Shut down all engines," Ronson ordered as they were smoothly pulled forward into the bay.

"My god," he whispered as the ceiling whipped across the forward viewport and subdued yellow lighting cast a soothing glow across the bridge. The *Phoenix* was dragged forward to nearly the end of the bay where it stopped and very slowly descended to the floor.

"Landing protocols," he ordered quickly. "Let's not make a mess on their deck."

The *Phoenix's* heavy landing gear emerged from the underside of the ship and transferred the weight of the 304 to the deck until the tractor beams finally released them with a gentle thud.

"Aft cameras," Ronson said, standing up.

Behind them the *Kerensky* was just entering the tractor beams, but it quickly obscured most of the visible stars and loomed ominously larger as the seconds passed by. For a moment the Colonel feared a collision, but just a few dozen meters shy of his ship the *Kerensky* stopped its forward momentum and, like the *Phoenix*, began to very slowly drift downwards.

Ronson also noted that behind them the hangar bay doors were resealing. Before the *Kerensky* had even touched down the visible stars were gone and the only exterior light came from row upon row of the bay's yellow illumination bars, each probably the width of the 302.

"Alright people, let's get to work. The faster we repair this damage the sooner we can get back in this fight!"

"Now that's just cool," Sheppard said, monitoring the boarding ships.

"You can say that again," Ford echoed.

"What are they doing?" Lorne asked, looking at a hologram of the enemy ships as they broke apart.

"They are reconfiguring," Bra'tac said, beginning to understand their tactics. "They estimate it will take a larger configuration to engage this ship...they are preparing to attack."

"Why don't we hit them first?" McKay asked. "If this ship really is as bad ass as you say..."

"If they attack us with a smaller force, it is to our advantage to wipe it out, thus diminishing their available numbers to throw at us once they realize how significant a threat we are."

"Patience is the way of the Jedi," Sheppard explained sarcastically.

"As you well know..." McKay reminded him, "I'm not the most patient of souls. Right now I'm ready to sling some lead!"

"Darth McKay it is," Ford said jokingly.

"Heavens no," Carson chimed in.

"Yeah, well just be glad I no longer have the power to Force choke you to death," McKay snarled at Ford.

Aiden laughed. "When was that?"

"Humans..." Bra'tac growled under his breath as the tactical hologram shifted. The moving blocks had stopped reconfiguring, settling on a flat, angular design. "Stand ready!"

The Atlantis crew immediately stopped their bickering and snapped to attention as Bra'tac powered up the ship's weapons. In each gunner's station all weapon systems were 'visible' to the neural interface, giving them the choice of which weapon/weapons to control.

A moment after Bra'tac gave them the word, 99 plasma cannons shifted from mental black dots to green, active batteries alongside the other blacked out weapons systems. Sheppard reached out and 'grabbed' a dozen along the port side of the ship. That was the most he'd been proficient at controlling in the simulations and now wasn't the time to overestimate his abilities.

Other green dots turned red as his compatriots selected cannons to control. Through his connection, Sheppard felt McKay pick up 50 or more of them.

"Rodney, you get five, no more."

"What! Why?" he demanded.

"You can't control fifty," Sheppard said rudely. "I'm maxed out at twelve, now stop playing around."

"Alright," McKay grumbled, releasing all but five.

"Ship," Bra'tac said, "retain twenty batteries for point defense."

The holographic Alterran nodded and twenty green dots spaced evenly around the hull turned red.

"What about the rest?" Carson asked.

"I will use them as I am able," Bra'tac said as the enemy ships disappeared from sensors. "But my primary focus will be on the lox generators."

Outside the ship seventeen clusters appeared from their microjump. The angular ships, vaguely resembling the form of a Wraith mothership, thrusted around on an intercept course with the *Nieruie* as Bra'tac commanded the ship to open its weapon pods and deploy the lox pillars.

A half segment of the cylinder-like ship bisected along the upper aft hull and split laterally revealing an empty pesqua launcher beneath as the two pods drifted away from the hull. Halfway through their deployment two more pods split in the lower fore section of the hull, revealing a second empty pesqua launcher and the flat sides of the pods.

From the flat side of all four pods a small circular column rose 'up' from the center and deployed its flaps spreading out like a flower petal. The front pods had their lox generators covering the forward and dorsal arcs, while the back pods with their generators pointing 'down' covered the ventral and aft arcs.

Mental counters appeared over Bra'tac's chair beginning at 32 seconds...the time it would take for the generators to charge and recharge. The plasma cannons had a much faster recharge rate, though they didn't wield as much destructive force.

Bra'tac grabbed twenty seven of the unused plasma cannons and fired as many that were in range at the approaching ships, which in turn fired linked combos of short bursts from all available weapon points on their blocks.

Inside the Columnar the impacts were not felt, but the computer displays made up for the lack of tactile sensation as the ship's computer generated a huge central hologram depicting the ship and all weapon impacts. As expected, the 40-some cluster ships couldn't penetrate the Alterran ship's shields, but it wasn't from lack of trying. Their onslaught of weapon's fire never ceased, but for each amount of shield energy drained, the emitters pulled equal amounts of energy from the ZPM to replace it.

In this way, the shields would never be downed, so long as the ZPM still had energy...unless the enemy could pinpoint stress a particular spot faster than the reserve energy could be distributed to the matrix. However, right now that wasn't the case...which meant that the battle quickly became little more than target practice for the crew.

All across the Columnar the plasma cannons fired gulps of bluish/green energy at two second intervals. Many missed the quickly moving cluster ships, but still many more impacted their combined shields, draining them of energy faster than their small power generators could replenish it.

Bra'tac fired off the most accurate shots as he waited for the lox generators to come online, utilizing the computer's targeting skills while he merely pointed them in the right direction. The others were less effective, trying to manually target the weapons, which resulted mostly in misses, save for the ships that came extremely close on strafing runs.

Those ships also drew the attention of the point defense system under command of the ship's computer. From the 20 batteries it controlled a nearly constant stutter stream of plasma fired into the quickly moving strafers as they passed by.

One such ship suffered massive damage from the point defenses after being tagged by both Bra'tac's and Sheppard's port batteries, lowering its shields enough for the computer to rack up the kill...or nearly so. The undamaged blocks disconnected from the dead ones and flew apart, where they then either began to assault the ship individually or pull off to reform with others into new cluster ships.

Sheppard frowned as he saw the point defense batteries firing quickly...with his twelve suffering through a two second recharge penalty. He wondered why his couldn't fire quicker, then all of a sudden his batteries changed aspects and the recharge lag dropped to one second...with the plasma bolts being weakened in compensation.

"I get it," he whispered to himself, mentally commanding all but two of his batteries to chop the recharge down to one third of a second...with the other two moving up to their maximum of four seconds.

He used his 'pulsers,' as he thought of them, to stitch the quicker ships while he used the 'mega guns' to pound the slower moving foursome lurking in front of the ship.

All of a sudden two of those four detonated in massive fireballs, with flicks of orange electricity arcing to their neighbors and being caught on their shields.

"Whooohoo," Ford yelled out. "Give it to 'em Bra'tac."

The Alterra had to smile at that, though the others couldn't see. The Columnar's firepower was indeed impressive, and the enemy was posing no match for them...yet he was still concerned. The other enemy ships remained still, content to watch the battle while they blasted their ships apart. Something else was afoot...he was sure of it.

"That is an example of why we follow protocol," Neela said unemotionally. "Had we rushed into battle, this new development could have severely crippled our fleet before we had a chance to account for it."

"I concede the point," Jarro said, studying the data they were gathering. "This new ship is far superior to our current technology. I have no doubt it is an ally of Earth, summoned to their defense."

"I concur. We must ascertain their true strength, then report back what we have learned. That is now our primary mission."

Jarro turned to his companion. "Securing this world is no longer an objective?"

"No," Neela said calmly as she watched the holograph of the battle. "Whoever this new race is, they have not made themselves known to those we have encountered. They are an unknown variable. If unchecked, the Aschen Confederation could be at risk. I will not allow that."

"Neither will I," Jarro agreed completely. "Shall we escalate the battle?"

Neela glanced at his console. "Do you have enough data to configure the remaining elementals?"

"Not for victory," he cautioned, "but enough to insure they last long enough to gather sufficient data."

"Send them all, save for five individuals...in case their smaller ship returns to harass us again."

"Reconfiguring now," he said, watching the remaining cubes disintegrate into a maelstrom of tiny pieces. Slowly they began to coalesce into one gigantic ship.

Over the ice of Antarctica a helicopter from McMurdo base skirted over a small ridgeline then dropped to the ground and settled its landing struts into the snow pack. Half a dozen people in hazmat suits climbed off the chopper as two more could be heard coming in the distance. The six over dressed scientists waddled their way across the gap to the downed bio weapon lying on the ice.

They could clearly see the central section had been depleted of its contents, sprayed throughout the atmosphere during its corkscrew descent no doubt, but there should still have been trace amounts of the weapon for them to sample...

One of the scientists slid his gloved hand over the clear, empty container looking for an access panel, yet found none. They continued to look for several minutes before calling it quits and signaling for the cargo carrier.

A frame-like helicopter moved into position over top the car-sized device and lowered straps from its midsection. The scientists secured them in a weave-like pattern around the container, fastening more than two dozen interlocks. When they finished they retreated to their chopper as the entire assembly was lifted off the ice and up into the open underbelly of the cargo chopper. Together, they returned to McMurdo base where a temporary facility was being constructed to analyze the device and get a sample of its weapon for the medical teams to start picking apart and hopefully device some type of antidote.

That said, no one knew yet what the contagion was supposed to...

"That's one big ship," McKay commented as they watched the sensors readings from the edge of the system.

"You can say that again," Lorne echoed.

"We *are* going to be able to handle that," Sheppard asked, "right?"

"Let us hope so," Bra'tac answered, reviewing the limited data they had gathered on the 'blocks.' He was somewhat familiar with the concept, both from his experience fighting against

the replicators and the technology downloads Stevenson had given to him. As impressive as the modular design was, it should have its limitations.

If the technology was functioning as Bra'tac believed, then interior blocks were being utilized as power generators to enhance the abilities of the outer blocks...yet that power had to travel through the conduits of the individual blocks, and there was always a limit to how much power a conduit could transmit.

The Columnar had massive conduits, designed to channel the power from a potentia, but even they had limits. These enemy blocks were much smaller, and as such their conduits, not to mention their weapons and shield emitters, had to have a limit as to how much power they could use at any one time. Given the size of the attack craft being constructed Bra'tac wondered if it wasn't too big...or if he had underestimated their technology.

He didn't have to wait long to find out. As soon as the craft was assembled, the knife-like design jumped into attack position. Bra'tac awaited the first concerted blast, which came from hundreds of individual points across the 'edge' of the blade. All of them intersected on a small patch of shield, trying to penetrate it without taking down the entire matrix.

As the rest of the crew fired their plasma cannons at will, Bra'tac monitored the shield controls closely. That first attack had point stressed the shield down to 20%, then the adjacent shield matrix had flooded energy into the gap within a second after the weapons' fire had ceased, closing the near breach. Had their weapons been slightly more powerful, or their beams longer in duration, they would have succeeded in penetrating the Columnar's shields and impacting the extremely thin layer of armor covering the ship.

Bra'tac hoped they had hit them with their best shot, for if it was, they now owned them. The massive cluster ship fired again with similar results, but it was just shy of being able to penetrate the shield.

Two orange lightning bolts lept out and struck the ship...but they didn't penetrate the shields. Bra'tac's sensors indicated that they had weakened them by 27%, with a recharge rate manifesting itself at about a percent per second.

27% damage, 32 seconds of recharge...they were going to have to do better than that.

As the plasma cannons began to rack up an addition percent or two of depleted shields Bra'tac swung the Columnar around, exposing the aft turrets to the enemy. Two more lox bolts lept out at the cluster ship and impacted its shields, but they still held as more combined attacks tried to poke holes in the *Nieruie's* defenses.

The ship swung around again, so that when the forward lox generators recharged the enemy ship would be within their sights.

Enemy shield strength was now down 46%, with their recharge rate eating heavily into the damage the Alterran ship was dishing out, but if they maintained their rate of fire they would eventually win the war of attrition and breach their shields.

Another round of lox bolts from both fore and aft turrets nearly depleted the enemy shields, but it took a third shot from the forward turrets to finally do the job. Dozens of blocks disintegrated in a pair of massive explosions, throwing debris and intact blocks in all directions...but the continued plasma cannon fire suddenly found itself impacting against renewed shields.

Bra'tac frowned. These new shields were within the boundaries of the ship's former hull...and he suddenly understood. The cluster ship was so big that some of the central blocks couldn't extend their shields to the outer perimeter. A weakness on their part, but it also meant that once they had managed in destroying part of the ship, those central shield generators now

had a chance to manifest themselves...and since they hadn't yet been drained of power, they now deployed at 100% capacity.

"Be patient," Bra'tac told his gunners. "We maintain the advantage, but this enemy is resilient. We have to wear it down. Maintain your rate of fire and it will fall."

"We're on it," Sheppard said, firing the most massive blasts his weapons were capable of. The enemy ship was essentially sitting still and as such, easy to target. Sheppard even dared to pull an additional two cannons under his control and was successful in keeping his group of 14 under linked fire, enough so that he thought about taking a few more on, but those that weren't being used didn't have firing arcs on the one massive ship, so there was little more that he could do besides hold in on the mental trigger and rack up as many block kills as he could.

Then suddenly he saw several small blocks flash by on strafing runs...pieces of the ship, no doubt, that had been flung off during the explosions. For a moment he considered retasking his current batteries to track them, but as one exploded into a ball of debris from the point defense fire coming from the ship's computer he thought better of it and maintained as much fire as he could against the main target.

After a while the Columnar was able to breach the second shield and destroy dozens of more blocks...but a third shield materialized where those had been and the process had to be repeated again and again...but after the fourth time the new shields being deployed started to have less and less power at their disposal, hastening their downfall.

Still, it was going to take at least another half hour before the ship would finally be destroyed.

Outside the control ship lights flashed against the shields as the Alket made a surprise strafing run, dropping out of cloak directly in front of the ship. The five guardian blocks pursued it immediately, as programmed, but the command ship's guns were slow to react and couldn't track the Jaffa ship as it made a quick pass.

"Persistent," Jarro noted as the ship once again disappeared from sensors, "but fruitless."

Neela nodded her agreement as she watched the main battle hologram. "I think we've gathered enough data. It's time to go."

Jarro looked at her. "It will be some time before the elementals are eliminated."

"They are making no headway...and as soon as they are destroyed we will be their next target. Plot a hyperspace jump away from Confederation territory. We will take an indirect route back, lest they follow us."

"Jump plotted," Jarro said, quickly working the controls of his console. He also dispatched the five guardian elementals to join the main battle, hopeless as it was.

"Commence," Nella ordered, turning away and walking off the bridge.

Jarro activated the hyperdrive and the command ship silently slipped into the other dimension. He correlated the data they had gathered into six electronic files, one for each ship plus the ground installation. He routed them into primary computer storage that would automatically be uploaded into the Aschen computer network upon their return home.

After filing a brief report on the encounter and the dispersal sites of the bio weapon, Jarro too left the bridge and returned to his personal quarters. It would be another ten hours before the next leg of their hyperspace journey, and until then neither of them would be needed on the bridge.

All in all, the battle lasted 43 minutes and would have gone on longer if the individual blocks hadn't continued to attack the ship directly and instead spread out across the system or gone down to the planet's surface. Apparently that hadn't been the point of the battle, or so Bra'tac deduced afterwards. The ship at the edge of the system had disappeared from sensors, and from the Alterra's point of view the battle for Avalon had concluded, though there were no guarantees of if or when the enemy might return.

He figured that wasn't likely to happen any time soon. The arrival of the Columnar had probably spooked them, and while they might return some day it would have to be in far greater numbers. With that knowledge in mind, Bra'tac had released the 304s and left Avalon within the day, returning through the ship gates to Atlantis...with a sample of the bio weapon.

"Dear god," Carson said as he got his first preliminary look at the composition of the disease.

"I know," Jennifer said, looking at the same data. "This isn't a virus, nor is it a bacteria or any other form of microscopic organism I know of, yet it has elements of both."

"It can replicate independent of the host body," Carson continued, "yet it can affect it on a genetic level akin to a virus...oh, this can't be right."

"What?" Jennifer asked.

"Here," he said, pointing at one section of the computer analysis.

Jennifer raised an eyebrow. "Eight day termination sequence?"

"Aye, that's what I read it as. This little bugger is going to expand at an exponential rate then deactivate after eight days."

"Why?" Jennifer asked. "It can't possibly spread over the entire planet in eight days."

"You're missing the point, Love. It's not supposed to. It kills anything and everything biological in sight, then deactivates after a preprogrammed period of time, leaving the area uncontaminated for the enemy to then occupy."

Jennifer blanched. "You mean they meant to take over Earth?"

Carson nodded. "Looks that way. And if all the bio weapons had hit their targets, there'd be bloody little left on the planet to trouble them...plant or animal."

"Oh my god," she said, covering her cheeks with her hands. "What are we going to do? We've only got six more days before it stops itself, which means we need a cure *now*."

"I know. This beast is probably ravaging the infected areas as we speak. We need to work fast."

"I don't even know where to begin," Jennifer complained. "I've never seen anything like this before."

"Neither have I, but I know someone who can help with that," Carson said, walking over to the intercom. "Dr. Weir?"

"I'm here Carson," her voice answered. "Any progress?"

"Not yet. Is Bra'tac still here?"

"He went back to his ship, but it hasn't left orbit. I think he intends to stay here until you find a cure or until Stevenson comes back."

"Well get him down here, we need his help."

"Ok," Weir said cautiously, "but I wasn't aware he was a doctor."

"I don't think he is either, but he has access to Atlantis that we don't have."

"What are you getting at, Carson."

"I need him to authorize a medical knowledge download, like you said Stevenson gave to you."

Weir hesitated. "I'll ask."

"Hurry," Carson insisted. "If we don't have a cure within a few days it's not going to matter."

"Very well," Bra'tac said as Carson explained the situation. "But it will only be a temporary transfer. Your mind is too primitive for a full, permanent download."

"I understand," Carson said bravely.

Bra'tac nodded, then accessed the neural interface himself. A moment later he withdrew. "Look inside."

Carson rubbed his hands together. "Ok, here goes," he said, stepping up to the device. He pressed his forehead against the outer rim and a multitude of lights flooded into his eyes...and mind.

He reflexively closed his eyes, he couldn't help it, but the light didn't diminish. It was inside his head. Carson made sure not to move, and kept his head securely where it was...then it was over as quickly as it began.

"Nothing happened," he said after stepping back from the device. "Oh, boy..." he said, fainting.

"Carson," Jennifer said, half-catching him as he fell.

"That is to be expected," Bra'tac told her. "It will take a few minutes for his mind to process the knowledge."

"Why couldn't you have done this?" she asked, clearly concerned for Beckett.

"I could have," Bra'tac admitted. "But I do not have the aptitude for such things. There is more to wisdom than knowledge alone."

"Still," Jennifer complained as Carson blinked wearily.

"What happened?" he asked, trying to sit up...and quickly falling back down.

"Easy there," she said, putting her hand behind his head so it wouldn't hit the floor. "Take your time."

"On all that's holy..."he muttered to himself, "Why didn't I see it before?"

"See what, Carson?"

"This plague isn't at all hard to beat," he said, trying to sit up again. "We only need to deliver a chronologic recalibrator via a pseudovirus and it'll stop the bugger cold."

"What are you talking about?" Jennifer asked.

"No time...no time," he said, pulling himself to his feet. "Bra'tac...does your ship have an aerosol delivery system?"

Bra'tac nodded slowly. "I believe that was one of the secondary systems Stevenson added to the design."

"Then we might have a chance at this," Carson said, rubbing his forehead. "Get me back to the lab," he told Jennifer.

"Ok," she said, taking him by the arm.

"If you can provide the design, the ship can replicate the rest of the cure en mass," Bra'tac told him.

"Good," Carson said, getting his feet back under him. "Be ready to launch within the hour."

Bra'tac smiled and nodded, but said nothing more as he walked out of the room.

"Let's go," Carson said, almost dragging Jennifer forward.
"Slow down a bit," she argued. "You need to let yourself adjust."
"If I do that more people die, now help me," he said, trying to walk faster.

Later that day the *Nieruie* returned to Earth, but instead of making orbit it plunged into the atmosphere over South America. Bra'tac contacted the SGC and got an updated map of the infection area...though it was clear from above just where the plague was.

Large sections of the Amazon now lay brown and dead, visible even from orbit. Bra'tac leveled out the ship a couple of miles above the surface and began dispersing the counter agent that would deactivate the disease on contact. He flew a large ring around the infected area, hoping to stem the spread of the ever increasing contagion.

That said, the SGC had already given him a number of other spots around the planet that the plague had been transmitted to. He would pull a flyby of those as soon as he covered the majority of the two major areas.

Antarctica and Greenland would keep, given their lack of vegetation and inhabitation, but it was the infestation in central and South American that required the most immediate attention. He used up nearly 40% of his reserves on South America alone before flying northwest into Mexico. There he dispersed some 36% as the ship continued to produce more cure as they continued, grabbing biomass from the planet for conversion on their way thanks to the Asgard beams that Bra'tac had insisted on including in the design.

A few hours later the ring around the Mexican infection area was complete. Bra'tac then spread as much cure to the interior areas of both circles as he could before traveling to the minor infestations around the planet. He stayed on Earth, spreading the cure until the 8 day cycle on the bio weapon ran out, deactivating all remaining infections that Bra'tac had been unable to find and counteract.

With nothing left to do, the Columnar left orbit after snagging a few pieces of the enemy ships for study, leaving planetary defense in the hands of the remaining two 304s. The Alket had since been ordered back to Dakara and the Atlantis crew had all been safely delivered into Weir's care. He alone piloted the *Nieruie*, and set course to the nearest ship gate.

The prototype had proved itself well in battle, despite having only two of its four weapons systems operational. Now it was time to complete its construction, where it would gain its real 'teeth.'

Bra'tac returned the ship to Kestardra then returned to Dakara through the stargate, picking up where he had left off. Though they weren't the equal of the Columnar, his H'tel were the next strongest ships in the galaxy...and their completion and testing were his next tasks.

A week later on Earth, the news accounts of the killer plague and the 'miraculous' object seen flying over hundreds of cities and supposedly putting an end to the disease were the subject of world-wide debate. Many rejected the claims, while others were immensely grateful to still be alive. The pictures coming out of central and South America were undeniable...and many people floated their own version of what had 'actually' happened.

The belief in extra-terrestrials increased dramatically, but was eventually downplayed by a link to an ancient prophecy...thanks to some intergovernmental pushing. Had the Aschen attack not occurred at a convenient time, it was theorized among the I.O.A. upper echelon, there may have been no choice but to reveal the existence of the stargate in order to avoid an even larger panic over the undeniable 'alien visitation' that so many people had witnessed.

But that wasn't to be the case. Forever after, there would be unanswered questions and an increased interest in space travel and exploration...but the bulk of the populous would eventually be taken in by the Ancient prophecy that happened to coincide with the current year...

2012

Multiplication

1

The stargate on resource outpost 13 opened with the standard kawoosh illuminating the nighttime forest. It quickly retracted into the subtle fluctuations of the event horizon, dimming the ambient glow on the thick vegetation that engulfed the gate in all directions save one.

In front of the gate set on a perfectly perpendicular angle a long, narrow clearing had been sheered through the forest. Even the ground had been scorched clean of any vegetation and only now had thin sprouts of grass begun to reintroduce themselves to the hard packed dirt trail that stretched ahead for kilometers.

Out of the event horizon stepped a solitary Wraith, eyes covered in some type of tracking goggles. It spied the artificial clearing and hissed with a mix of satisfaction and wrath before blending into the vegetation and traveling parallel to the path to avoid detection.

It moved off barely half a kilometer before it came to a small clearing adjacent to the main line. Nothing was present, but the dusty ground bore angular lines...some type of buried structure lay here unused and the forest had begun to cover it over.

The Wraith cocked its head in consideration then moved on, making sure not to cross into the open. It traveled farther up the long corridor until it widened out into a 400 meter wide clearing...with three other corridors exiting at various angles.

Anger building, the Wraith continued on, taking the leftmost of the tracks and followed it to where it dead-ended in a wide open valley with several structures of Lantean design arrayed in neat rows, some of which extended up several dozens of meters into the air.

Several small craft sat adjacent to one of the buildings, attached end to end, and appeared to be the approximate width of the forest corridors. Off in the distance several dozen individuals could be seen moving in and out of multiple buildings with robotic precision.

The Wraith had seen enough. It backtracked slowly to the stargate, then waited patiently for several minutes to make sure it hadn't been followed. When no activity resulted, it pulled back the vegetation from the unused dialing device and activated the stargate.

With the wormhole established and no enemy in sight, the Wraith smoothly detached from the forest and slid back through the gate...

The Wraith emerged on the outskirts of one of their surface bases and immediately felt his connection with his brethren return. He communicated what he had found with a few simple thoughts, allowing them to see what he had seen.

A chill ran through him as he felt the queen's mind connect with his. She drew from him all of his memories and issued new orders... all within a handful of seconds.

The Wraith turned about and redialed the stargate to the world it had just scouted. Seven more Wraith emerged from the shadows and joined it, all 'males' and all scouts. They returned through the stargate and dispersed...

"That is not possible," Rodney protested to Stevenson in one of Atlantis's many scientific labs. This one Ryan had set up to assist in the retraining of acquired personnel.

Stevenson lifted an eyebrow patiently. "Why not?"

"Well, for starters, half of everything I know about space/time comes from his postulates...and more than that I've seen evidence of it firsthand."

"Really?" Stevenson asked curious, yet he knew for a fact that he was completely wrong.

"Yes, really," Rodney replied indignantly. "Einstein's theory of relativity is a proven fact. Nothing can exceed the speed of light in our dimension and will experience time dilation the closer it approaches that barrier. The only way you can achieve FTL is through transition to an alternate dimensional state that allows you to bypass the relativistic effects."

Stevenson leaned a bit closer. "For a self-proclaimed genius, you are rather gullible."

"Gullible?!" Rodney complained loudly.

"A universal speed limit is nonsense. The very definition of relative means you can have no absolutes."

"That's what one would think," Rodney said, raising a knowing finger for emphasis, "but when you do the math you find an undisputable escalating power ratio required to reach light speed...and even with your nifty Zed Pee Ems you can't produce enough power to breach that barrier, because infinite is rather...unreachable."

Stevenson rolled his eyes. Even with the basic neural download he'd given him, McKay wasn't about to drop this nonsense. The man HAD to be right, even when he was wrong.

"What was this evidence you were referring to?"

"As you're doubtlessly familiar with the *Tria*, that shouldn't be a great leap of logic...considering you're an ancient and all."

"What about it?" Ryan humored him with infinite patience.

"What about it? The ship's hyperdrive was damaged, so it had to use thruster-based technology to leave the Pegasus galaxy. They suffered from time dilation effects due to relativity as a result, which was the only reason why they survived 10,000 years and made our meeting them possible."

"Have you heard of stasis technology, McKay?" Stevenson asked sarcastically.

"So, what, they tucked themselves into stasis for the entire 10,000 year trip? We saw what kind of degradation that led to on the *Aurora*. No matter how advanced you are you can't cheat old age, not even with your fancy stasis tech. The only way they could have survived that long was due to time dilation, which was the result of their velocity approaching the speed of light. The faster they went, the more they slowed down."

"Do you have any idea how ridiculous that sounds? You just contradicted yourself."

Rodney held up his hands. "I know it may look that way to the untrained eye, but if you do the calculations it all adds up."

"Before you ramble on any more, it might be helpful for you to know that I've read the *Tria*'s logs."

"If that's so, then why are we even having this conversation?"

"First off, the stasis technology that the Lanteans' used was designed for Alterra. That's why the crew you found on the *Aurora* decayed."

Rodney frowned. "Why?"

"Because Alterra have a higher regenerative ability than Lanteans do, and way more than Humans."

"Slight offense taken at that, but go on."

"Some minor degradation occurs during stasis...think of it as freezer burn. Our physiology can heal itself as it happens, the Lanteans couldn't, not completely. The only way it works for them is to take breaks in between bouts of stasis to allow their bodies to rejuvenate. This is what the crew of the *Tria* did. They rotated in and out every two years or so for a three day interval."

"Ok, so for the crew of the *Aurora* that wasn't a possibility because the ship was damaged and the decks depressurized. Mystery solved there. But that doesn't have anything to do with the *Tria*'s time dilation."

"There was none."

"Not possible," Rodney said, determined.

"Ok, genius. The logs show that you contacted the *Tria* while it was still at near light speed."

"True."

"Was it a text message, or real time audio?"

"As I recall, they used a real time holographic image of the ship's captain," Rodney said, proud to show off his detailed memory.

"Then answer me this...how could the *Tria*'s captain communicate with you in real time if she was, as you say, experiencing time dilation at the moment of communication? It would have taken several of your months for her to utter a single word, given the differences between the timeframes."

"Well..." Rodney said, catching himself. "Actually, I..."

"See," Stevenson said, patting McKay on the back, "simple logic."

"What..." Rodney said to himself as he tried to reconcile the disparate data. "Wait a minute...if that's true, and I'm not saying it is, then why were they only traveling at near light speed?"

"Dark route paradox," Stevenson explained. "Everything within a galaxy is moving at approximately the same speed due to the velocities required to maintain galactic orbit."

Rodney nodded. "Anything remarkably faster would spin out of the galaxy and anything remarkably slower would fall to the center."

"Correct. This creates a relative medium through which a ship must travel. This medium is comprised of all matter within the galaxy, whether it be a planet, a cloud of dust...or a rock the size of your thumb."

Rodney glanced down at his digit, trying to comprehend. "Impact velocities."

Stevenson nodded. "Since everything else is moving at about the same speed, if you accelerate yourself multiple times light speed you run the risk of impacting the debris from the galactic medium...assuming, of course, that you can navigate your way around the big stuff. Now, a rock the size of your thumb floating in space as you hit it at ten times the speed of light is equivalent to a projectile fired at you at a velocity of ten times the speed of light. Do the calculations and you will see the kinetic force that has to be absorbed by the ship. In the *Tria*'s case, by her shields."

"You're saying the *Tria* couldn't go faster than light speed anyway?"

"No, I'm saying that the faster you go, the more you risk destroying your ship. With a potentia enhancing their shields, they could absorb debris velocities around 1.3-1.4 times the speed of light. That number drops as the debris gets larger. They could have gambled that they wouldn't run into anything in the intergalactic void and accelerated much faster, say 1000 times light speed, but doing so means even smaller objects will kill the ship...or at least put holes in it,

and possibly the crew inside. And when you get to such great velocities that a few molecules are enough to cause damage...well, it isn't worth the risk. The *Tria* kept her speed within range of what the crew knew was a safe speed, given their shield strength. Anything else, given how long the trip would be, was deemed too hazardous to try."

Rodney considered that. "Why not just use sensors to spot and avoid incoming debris?" he asked, realizing his own error. "Wait, wait...the sensors would be limited due to the relative incoming speeds."

"And the small size of the debris. The *Tria*'s sensors can't detect a marble at 100,000 kilometers."

"But all our...Earth's...hyperdrive designs are based around the theory of relativity, plus I don't know how many other technologies, and those technologies work. If his theories weren't correct we'd..."

"Just remember this simple formula and you should be alright," Stevenson offered. " $E = M$."

"Energy equals mass?" Rodney asked, more confused.

"No...Einstein equals moron."

Rodney sneered. "Very funny."

"I'm serious. Just disregard everything he said and it'll make understanding things a lot easier."

"Even his first postulate?" Rodney asked amicably, his defiance gone.

"Scientists don't get credit for stating the obvious," Stevenson said, leaving. "I'll be back in two hours. Hopefully by then you'll have your wits about you and we can continue from where we left off."

"Where are you going?"

"Zelenka needs help with a project."

"What! You've already given him work to do?"

Stevenson waved goodbye, leaving Rodney to stew. A dozen steps down the hallway Sheppard caught him.

"We have a problem."

"What?"

"Somehow the Wraith found one of your mining sites. We just got an automated distress signal and a bit of telemetry. Looks like they blasted it to hell."

2

Teyla made her way through the dense jungle under cloak until she came to the edge of a small pool, but unlike the hundreds of others she'd maneuvered around in her surface search, this one was special. Her armor's telemetry was detecting residual trace elements in the water and the bank of the pool where the tiny waves had floated the material and stranded it on the shore. To her heads up display the pool was slightly aglow, with a brighter ring around the edge.

Looking up, around, and down, Teyla made sure she was alone, then stepped into the pool. The displaced water was obvious around her invisible form, but she waited until her head was beneath the surface before she disengaged her cloaking device.

However, the color of her armor shifted to a murky green, similar in color to the haze in the water. The visible camouflage made her almost undetectable just a meter below the surface as she slid down the steep bank. A few steps in and the bottom dropped out completely.

She let herself fall through the dark water, but her heads up display showed her a bright diagram of the shaft's walls, the surface above, and the expanding tunnel below as she quickly sank. Her armor was quite heavy, and she used that to her advantage.

Fifty meters below the surface the tunnel/funnel ended and a large underwater cavern appeared. She continued to sink through it for a hundred more meters until her limited sensors tagged a large structure coming up beneath her. Her feet touched the surface of the Wraith facility and reestablished her equilibrium as she dropped down into a crouch. She glanced to the right and left, getting her bearings via the computer image of the darkness.

Content that she hadn't been noticed, Teyla slowly walked through the thick waters over the surface of the biological structure looking for an entry hatch. If she had to make one herself she could, but that would then flood the facility. The Wraith were coming and going by ship, so there had to be a way in.

It took two hours of searching before Teyla discovered an indented alcove in the 'roof' by accident. Her sensors said it was flat, but when she stepped onto a particular section of the facility her foot passed through a force field and she nearly fell in. The newly minted Alterra caught her balance, teetering on her other foot and slashing at the water with cupped hands to move her backward.

She slowly tipped toward safety and steadied herself. She manually adjusted her sensors through a virtual pull down menu and reconfigured them sufficiently enough to discern the field from the hull.

She had to give the Wraith credit for their ingenuity. Beneath the field was air, with the water suspended above. Several darts and a lowly lit hangar bay revealed itself when Teyla poked her head through the field, but here wasn't the place to drop down.

Teyla pulled herself back up into the water and swam across to the other side and settled on the edge. She lay down on her side and slid her feet down through the energy barrier.

With a sudden movement, Teyla was sucked through by gravity as her buoyancy was lost. She landed in a crouch between the wall and a parked dart. She stayed there, motionless, for several seconds while she surveyed the area. Neither her armor's sensors nor her eyes and ears could detect anything. The bay was empty.

Teyla stood up and sleuthed around the perimeter of the large bay, glancing upward at the powerful force field holding up so much water. Yes, the Wraith were clever, but they still had to die...all of them. And the sooner the better.

The headpiece of her armor retracted, opening her biological senses to the environment. The room smelled of must and the odd, familiar scent of Wraith biotech. Teyla walked over to the only door and pressed her ear against it. With her Wraith genetics gone, she could no longer sense their presence and didn't fully trust her armor's lifeform detector. Twice it had failed her in previous missions due to some unforeseen anomaly with Wraith biotech...and she'd decided to take a step backward and not use it unless absolutely necessary.

She felt more at ease relying on her skills than technology anyway, which had only been heightened by her transformation. Her hearing had become exceptionally acute, and while the Wraith weren't the noisiest of species they were heavy breathers.

Detecting nothing, she opened the door, standing out of view as she did so. She listened again...all clear.

Moving through the interior of the Wraith facility section by section Teyla reached out with her limited telepathic ability, searching for Human minds. After nearly half an hour of searching empty corridors she caught a wisp of sensation.

Figuring she'd pushed her luck enough, she redonned her hood and activated her cloaking device in concert with her lifeform scanner. To her chagrin, no Wraith lifesigns were showing. That worried her even as the crude map displayed several dozen Humans arrayed in neat rows...probably in cocoons.

Teyla deactivated both technologies and proceeded by ear. The Wraith weren't big on internal security, but there should have been at least a few walking around. And while prudence would have suggested staying cloaked, the field interfered with her vision slightly and dampened sounds by more than 30%. That wasn't good enough for Teyla, so she decided once again on the 'old school' methods that had served her well over her many years on Athos and then her stint on Colonel Sheppard's team in Atlantis.

The Alterra patiently made her way to the Humans without encountering any resistance...but where she had expected cocoons she found only one, along with liquid filled pods.

Teyla glanced around again, making sure she was alone, then pulled back a mass of tentacles revealing a translucent skin. Visible within was a small humanoid form which could have been Wraith as easily as it could have been Human, but Teyla was sensing a trace of a Human mind...in fact, it was the same trace as all of them.

Her eyes widened and she looked back at the man in the cocoon. He was unconscious, but his mind was more 'visible' to her than the others. Still, she wanted to be sure so she retracted the 'glove' on her right hand and pressed her fingertips to the man's forehead.

His mind and essence poured into her senses, giving Teyla an ethereal 'fingerprint' which she then compared to the others. She couldn't touch them, nor did they seem fully developed, but the faint presences she felt were eerily similar.

Teyla pressed her head against the pliable pod, getting in as close physical proximity as possible to boost her telepathy. She checked and rechecked the 'fingerprint' a dozen times, but in the end she still wasn't sure if it was the same, but she knew it definitely wasn't Wraith.

That said, her logic filled in the rest. Wraith captured Humans to feed on. These Humans weren't fully developed and in pods rather than cocoons. Children weren't culled and captives

weren't bred. She knew this from her own experience and the files the Lanteans left behind, though how they knew for sure was beyond her.

Her gut instinct told her she was right, which implied either a shift in strategy or a complete lack of understanding of the Wraith. Either way, they were cloning Humans, possibly as a runaround to the Hoffan plague or as a means to supplement their food supply.

Had they always been able to do this, was it a new technology, was it power hungry and therefore not previously used? Many questions ran through Teyla's mind, questions she couldn't answer. But whatever the answers, this wasn't good.

Teyla decided to move on. Her mission was to rescue any captured Humans, but she had no idea how many there were. If this was the only man, her task would be relatively easy, but if he wasn't, pulling him out now might jeopardize any others in the facility. She needed to do some additional recon before she acted...and record data.

To that end she engaged the data recorders in her armor and scanned the pods before moving on. Using a mix of her own senses and her armor's systems she located another set of cloning chambers...and a single woman in a cocoon. It was an identical chamber with 38 pods. Teyla marked the location in her armor's navigation system and moved on.

She found three more cloning chambers before she crossed her first Wraith. Actually it was three of them, two warriors and one male. The male led the way while the warriors pulled a struggling Human screaming behind them.

Teyla steadied her nerves and clamped down on her urge to kill them immediately and free the Human. Instead she shadowed them. They led her to an as yet unused cloning chamber where they sedated and secured the Human in the cocoon.

Where the man had come from was of primary importance, so she backtracked to where she'd discovered them then attempted to divine their route prior to their encounter. It took a little work, and a lot of dead ends, but she eventually came to a level filled with holding cells...a third of which held conscious Human captives.

Teyla crouched down out of sight. This was it. This was what she had come for...but there were so many of them, and she only had 84 tags. They'd have to double up.

First things first.

Off in the distance she saw a pair of Wraith guards and heard at least four more in various directions. She relented and used her lifeform detector to get more accurate numbers and discovered twelve in total, assuming none were being shielded by irregularities in the walls.

Slipping beneath her cloaking device, Teyla snuck up behind and followed one of the Wraith moving through the halls until it was alone and out of earshot. She reached her wrist up to the back of its neck and shot it three times, the third of which hit its head as it fell to the ground. Not sure if she'd been heard, she ran off under cloak and tracked down the next nearest Wraith and disposed of it.

Teyla went on a Ronon-esk tear, killing ten of the Wraith before an alarm finally sounded.

"*You're on the clock,*" she reminded herself as the final two Wraith came toward her position, unaware of her cloaking device. She caught them both in the neck with punch/shots directly into their throats. She decloaked and fired several more green bolts into their skulls to make sure they were truly down.

Knowing that there were probably more on the way, Teyla hurried to the first cell and pried open the spindle doors with her armored hands and several strategically placed energy blasts.

"Help us, please!" a woman shouted amidst an array of barely audible chatter coming from this cell and the others when they saw her wall-blue armor and exposed head.

Teyla knew better than to argue with panicky people, so she didn't bother to respond. Instead, she slipped a small adhesive disk out of her pocket beneath her armor and stuck it to the woman's forehead. A small blue light started to blink in the center of the tag as the woman reflexively reached up to touch it.

Before she could she disappeared in a flash of white light and Teyla grabbed two teenage girls, ordered them to hold onto each other, and tagged one on the arm. A moment later they both flashed away...and loud footsteps boomed from the left.

Teyla stepped out and fired several blasts down the hallway, killing two Wraith as she ducked under a stun blast. Several more quick shots killed the third Wraith and she returned to tagging the people in the cell she'd opened.

One of which she had to run down as he fled aimlessly away from the holding cells. She grabbed him angrily and smashed the tag into his exposed sternum, then left him and retreated to the next nearest cell. He vanished behind her.

She repeated the process for two more cells, killing isolated Wraith in the interim, before the heavy waves of reinforcements began. She didn't know where they were coming from, but they were coming in the dozens...which meant she had to stop tagging captives and fight.

Moving with the speed and agility that only an Alterran could achieve, Teyla ducked in and out of cover, sprinted up and down hallways, crawled above doorways, across ceilings, and over biological equipment as she evaded, separated, and thinned their numbers until she could fight them head on. She did this for nearly twenty minutes until the Wraith had either quit trying, or had run out of reinforcements to send.

Stepping over dead bodies left and right, she policed the corpses, firing additional shots to make sure they wouldn't spring back to life and take her off guard. Teyla proceeded to the other cells where she freed and tagged the remaining survivors, some 63 people total, then she went back and carefully extricated the captives in the cocoons.

Finally she got back to the first man she had found. He was the last Human to rescue, and she only had two tags left...but that would be enough.

He awoke with a gasp and Teyla caught him before he could hit the floor.

"Easy...I'm going to get you out of here," she said reassuringly.

"My...wife," he said stoically as he shook uncontrollably.

"I got the others out already," Teyla told him. "You're the last person left."

"Thank...the Ancestors," the man said, nearly fainting.

"You're welcome," Teyla said as he wavered in and out of consciousness. She placed a tag on his forehead and held him in a tight embrace, glancing at the cloning pods. They weren't fully formed yet...if she pulled them out now it would kill them.

She didn't like it, but there was nothing she could do for them.

With a flash of bright light the dim confines of the Wraith base disappeared, quickly replaced by the dull interior of the *Daedalus's* ring room.

Two of the crew took the man from Teyla and dragged him off to the med bay. She retracted her armor into her innocuous forearm jewelry, revealing neat, trim blue garments that clung to her body in a flattering, yet formal design where the armor had been. She flicked a bit of Wraith blood out of her hair and headed for the bridge.

"Quite a haul," Ford said from the command chair.

"Yes it was," she said, sitting down on the edge of the holographic ring that had replaced the archaic vertical navigational board behind the control stations.

"We all done here?" he asked.

Teyla nodded.

"Good, because we've been recalled," Ford said as his lieutenant began to break orbit under the anonymity of their cloaking device and the shadow of four Wraith cruisers.

"For what purpose?" Teyla asked. Stevenson had given her a crew and ship along with permission to rescue as many captives as she wanted. Over the last two months she'd accumulated a total of 104, plus those saved today. Such missions were time critical and she knew that any delay would probably prove to be lethal for someone, somewhere.

"A little recon," Ford said as they passed under the last of the orbiting cruisers.

"Apparently the Wraith hit one of Stevenson's replicator worlds. It's less than half an hour away and he asked us to check it out."

"Very well," Teyla said. "Bring us out of hyperspace in high orbit, just to be on the safe side."

Ford turned to his lieutenant. "Hear that, Chuck?"

"Got it," the only other crewman on the bridge said.

"I'll be back in fifteen," Teyla said, walking off.

"If you're going to get some food, bring me back a red bar."

"If you must know, I'm going to wash my hair, but now that you mention it I'm a little hungry too. Do you want anything?"

"I'm good," Chuck said as the ship entered hyperspace. "Nice work down there, by the way."

Teyla smiled faintly. "It's still not enough."

"You can't do everything yourself, Teyla," Ford consoled her.

"No...but I'm working on it," she said in a mixture of sarcasm and defiance as she left.

Chuck laughed after she was gone and Ford turned to him, shaking his head in awe. "Just be glad she's on our side."

3

"It looks like you pissed them off," Elizabeth said as she, Stevenson, and Sheppard stood around the holographic sensor data being relayed to Atlantis via the *Daedalus*.

"What?" Sheppard complained. "One hive ship and some ground troops. We've taken out more than that before."

"They've never reacted like that," Elizabeth said, pointing at the hundred plus Wraith ships, "before. At least not while I was here."

"Maybe they finally got tired of fighting each other," Sheppard offered.

"They're goading us," Stevenson declared.

Sheppard and Weir both turned to look at him. "Come again?" Elizabeth said.

"They managed to find one of our outposts...now they're trying to draw us out into the open and assess our strength."

Sheppard glanced back at the hologram. "Son of a bitch."

"What do you want to do?" Elizabeth asked.

"Teyla," Stevenson said into the air. "Can you give us a multi-spectrum scan?"

"One moment," her disembodied voice said. Shortly thereafter the hologram altered into a kaleidoscope of color. Stevenson input a variety of commands into the holoprojector and sifted through the data. After thirty seconds the distinctive hulls of the Wraith ships reappeared with nearly all of the cruisers twinkling as if they were coated with sparkles.

"The biomass construction of their hulls," Stevenson explained when Sheppard gave him a funny look, "ages over time, slightly altering its composition. New growth contains a few extra compounds that fade away after a couple years."

"New growth," Elizabeth repeated, looking at the fleet of cruisers. "You're saying most of these ships are brand new?"

Stevenson nodded.

Sheppard cringed. "I guess using Atlantis in a space battle kind of gave us away."

"Probably," Stevenson agreed. "Now they're gearing up for a second war."

"Which they won last time through superior numbers," Elizabeth added.

"This time with a backup food supply," Sheppard said, referring to Teyla's recent report.

"Teyla," Stevenson said again, "can you confirm the gate was destroyed?"

"It's gone," she said, subdued.

Stevenson nodded. "We're going to write this one off as a loss. Withdraw from the system and continue your previous mission."

"Understood. *Daedalus* out."

The hologram of the Wraith fleet disappeared and Stevenson began to leave the control room.

"That's it?" Elizabeth asked.

"For now, yes," he said, turning around.

Sheppard looked shocked. "We're just going to let them get away with this?"

"What would you suggest?"

"Well, what about the Columnar? It, plus the *Tria*, *Daedalus*, *Apollo*, and *Odyssey* should be able to take out those cruisers...right?"

Stevenson raised an eyebrow. "Do you really think they pulled out all those ships just so we could destroy them?"

"You think they've got something hidden up their sleeve?" Elizabeth asked.

"They wouldn't go to those lengths unless they had something to gain," Stevenson said pithily. "We're not ready to take the fight to them yet. We need to resist the urge to act impulsively. The loss of that outpost will have an effect on our supply chain, yes, but it hardly cripples us. We have more sites coming online every month, and with the expansion rate of current installations we'll overcome this deficit within the week."

"So it didn't really hurt us," Elizabeth summed up.

"Just the ego," Stevenson said. "Which it was meant to."

"I still don't see why we shouldn't destroy some of their ships when we have the chance," Sheppard argued.

"If it was me," Stevenson told him, "I'd have another fleet or two waiting just outside the system to tip the scales."

"An ambush?" Elizabeth asked.

"I don't know for sure...but it's not worth the risk. At least, not until we have some backup."

"Well then," Elizabeth said, moving on, "I guess that's that."

Stevenson left the control room, but Sheppard stayed behind with Weir.

"Is it just me, or did he give up a little too easy?"

"He was upset," Elizabeth told him. "He just wasn't showing it."

Sheppard frowned. "You sure?"

Elizabeth nodded. "Yep...more so than you, believe it or not."

"Really," Sheppard said, reconsidering.

"By the way," Elizabeth said, changing subjects. "You've got chair duty when we move the city next week."

Sheppard looked shocked. "Stevenson going back to the Ori?"

Elizabeth nodded. "He said you could handle it."

"Hmm...about time," Sheppard complained. "Where are we going anyway?"

"Some desert planet rich in neutronium...uninhabited of course."

"Of course," Sheppard echoed. "Sand's not as soft as water, is it?"

"Worried?" she teased him.

"Nah, piece of cake. See you at lunch," he said, leaving the control room. "How the hell do I land in sand," he whispered to himself.

"This is not what I signed up for," Rodney complained when he returned to his quarters.

"What isn't?" Jennifer asked, putting down the book she was reading.

"Forget the seven newbie projects I've been assigned, the humiliation of Zelenka getting priority status in the assignment roster, and having one of the scientists I respect the most being debunked like a 1st year grad student...but now Weir's given me an ultimatum that I'm never going to be able to meet."

"I got one too," Jennifer said, rubbing his shoulders. "I'll admit what she's given me is difficult, but I figured you'd be up to the challenge...especially if it means a chance of becoming an Ancient."

"Normally yes, I would, but this is totally unfair," Rodney continued to complain.

"What's unfair," Jennifer reiterated.

Rodney cupped his head in his hands. "Physical training."

Jennifer tried to suppress a laugh, but didn't completely succeed.

"Oh, what? You think that's funny," he said, standing up. "You think I'm flabby, don't you?"

"I never said that...but working out a little couldn't hurt."

"A little! She said I have to run."

"Run?"

"Run...the same time that Stevenson gave her to meet. 19:59 for five kilometers."

Jennifer shrugged. "Is that fast?"

"Way fast," he said. "Faster than I'll ever be able to make."

"And you don't like that sort of thing..."

"What's your point?" Rodney asked, pacing back and forth in frustration.

"She gave me something I didn't like either."

"Like what?"

"It's...personal."

"I'm your husband."

"It's *very* personal...frankly, I don't even know how she found out."

"What is it?" Rodney persisted.

Jennifer glared at him. "I told you it's personal."

"And you can't trust me?"

"It's not about trust...it's just something I have to confront on my own. You can't help me with it, and I'd prefer if you didn't ask me about it again."

"Is it something bad?"

"Rodney..."

"Ok, ok...if you want to keep secrets from me, that's fine."

"Don't take it that way."

"No, no. I'm ok with it."

"I know you're not...but it has to be this way."

"Are you going to be able to do it, whatever it is?"

Jennifer stiffened. "Honestly, I don't know if I even want to try."

"Why the hell not?"

"I don't like the idea that I'm somehow not good enough to do my job because I'm Human. I'm a darn good doctor, and I don't have to be upgraded to help people."

"Well that's just stupid," Rodney complained. "Of course you're good enough. But I for one would like to have you around for several hundred years, and to do that you're either going to have to become an Ancient, or I'll have to mummify your body..."

"Eew. That's gross."

"Yeah, I don't know why I just said that."

"Your eccentricity aside, I want to have you around as long as possible too."

"Well, then," Rodney said optimistically, "you're going to have to do whatever it is you don't want to tell me about."

"That works both ways," she said, eyeing him.

"What do you mean?"

"19:59."

Rodney slumped. "You did that on purpose, didn't you?"

"Maybe," she said playfully.

Rodney sat down next to her on their bed. "I really don't think I can."

"You can try," Jennifer prodded. "You didn't become a brilliant scientist overnight."

"True."

She grabbed his hand. "I'll take a swing at it, if you will."

Rodney sighed. "I'm going to regret this."

"Besides...you don't want Cadman becoming an Ancient before you, right?"

"Oh, god, you had to bring that up, didn't you."

"You work best under pressure," she kidded him as she slid up and onto his lap with her arms around his neck. "And the more pressure the better," she said, kissing him as she leaned him backward, smashing his body between the cushions and hers.

In one of Atlantis's restricted sections, Stevenson worked on a holographic model of DNA, reconfiguring base sequences to return some previous functionality that had been lost over the millennia. Given the mental development of the species, returning to a previous form wasn't possible...their biological hard drives simply weren't large enough to service a full consciousness, and he didn't want to revive them in a limited state.

He activated the computer modeling program with his most recent changes playing out. The holographic model expanded to a humanoid figure that grew 3% taller as a result. The mental capability statistics alongside the hologram also indicated an increase in brain functions in seven key areas...but a reduction in two others.

Stevenson highlighted the compromised areas and dug into the DNA strands responsible and continued to troubleshoot the differences between the genetic profile that he had implanted in his memory and the profile retrieved from the *Odyssey*.

A few minutes later he updated his model again, resulting in an improvement in one of the affected areas and a slight decrease in four others.

Undaunted, he continued methodically...and the holographic model of the Asgard body continued to subtly shift with each update.

4

Technician Ana Nordman stood watch in Atlantis's gateroom, a replacement for the recently promoted Devonshire, when the stargate activated. The blonde woman, barely out of her teens, frowned slightly as she looked for an identification code. All of Atlantis's teams were on site...maybe it was someone from the training center on Yavin.

The shield over the stargate disengaged without a code being transmitted and Ana's eyes went wide. The only person known to do that was Stevenson...and he was already on base.

She reached for the city's communication panel just as a woman walked through the gate and the wormhole shut down behind her. She stood tall and motionless a few feet beyond where the kawoosh would have materialized and said nothing. She simply stood there, still as a statue.

"Dr. Weir," Ana whispered into the link to her nearby office. "We have an unknown visitor."

Elizabeth stood up and dropped her datapad on her desk. "On my way," she said, stepping out of her office. When she did she got her first look at the visitor. The woman was tall and thin, dressed in an unusual robe that looked to be partially sheer. When Elizabeth made the full circuit around and down the steps she realized the garment wasn't fully solid. It was a mass of beads woven together in a complicated web-like pattern...and she could see her nude outline through the gaps.

"Hello," Elizabeth said cautiously. "Who are you and how did you get through our shield?"

The woman didn't answer. Her eyes were closed and she looked to be concentrating on something.

Elizabeth exchanged glances with the two security guards flanking the steps behind her and their replicator counterparts. The Humans shrugged. They didn't have a clue what was going on either.

"Ok..." Elizabeth said to herself, crossing her arms over her chest as she thought. A moment later the woman's eyes finally opened.

"Hi," Elizabeth said kindly, with a hint of sarcasm mixed in.

"*I am Andara,*" she said in Ancient.

"*My apologies. I shouldn't have assumed you spoke English,*" Elizabeth said quickly. "*How did you get past our shield?*"

"*Manually,*" she said, still not moving from her statuesque pose.

"*I see,*" Elizabeth said, wondering what exactly she meant by 'manually.' "*Well, what brings you to Atlantis?*"

"*I must speak with Stevenson.*"

Elizabeth's eyes widened, then she nodded. "*That can be arranged.*"

"*He is already on his way.*"

Now Elizabeth frowned. "*You were talking to him telepathically a moment ago, weren't you?*"

"*Yes.*"

"*May I ask how you know him?*"

Andara smiled slightly. *"He is my brother."*

"Your brother?" Elizabeth said, surprised. *"I'd hazard a guess that you're not from Earth...are you...Alterra?"*

Andara nodded politely, then her attention was caught by Stevenson coming down the stairs behind Elizabeth.

Weir gave him a 'why didn't you tell me' look, but Stevenson brushed her off.

"Later," he told Elizabeth as he walked by her and took Andara's hand in his in a greeting Weir wasn't familiar with. They appeared to have some type of silent conversation, then they walked off into Atlantis to who knew where.

Elizabeth, a bit flabbergasted, silently watched them go, noticing for the first time that Andara was barefoot...and had some intricate piece of jewelry woven into the back of her braided hair.

"What was that about?" one of the guards asked her.

"Beats me," she said, a little miffed. She was going to have a *very* long conversation with Stevenson after he'd seen to his guest.

"How bad is it?" Stevenson asked telepathically as they walked through the city.

"Two more planets have been infected," Andara told him evenly. *"Our fleet can't stop their runners from getting through to the surface."*

"Have the drones been effective?"

"Yes, we tested them on Jcora. They successfully intercepted two attempts by single runners...but then they started throwing multiple ships at us at once."

"I was afraid of that," Stevenson said as they stepped into one of Atlantis's transporters.

"We either need to widen the picket line or increase the concentration of drones...either way we need more of them. A lot more."

"The drones are neutronium heavy technology...as it is our supply of that element is extremely limited. I've been using most of it to create the replicators, which, in lieu of a traditional workforce are our only current means of fielding a sufficiently large logistics network."

The doors parted and they walked on. *"I understand, but if we don't do something quickly the Ferirola infrastructure is going to implode due to lack of available personnel as more become infected and incapacitated."*

"In a month we should have sufficient neutronium reserves to start fielding a larger number of defensive drones. In three days Atlantis will transfer to another planet, one rich in neutronium, and establish a resource collection hub such as we have here on Hoth. Given that we have available supplies to work with from the beginning this time, it shouldn't take very long to establish the subsurface mining conduits. As soon as the infrastructure starts to produce I'll route the majority of the neutronium to Dracona."

Andara shook her head. *"That's not enough. We need you there to help us. I can't do it alone...at least, not good enough to stem the tide. If we don't do something soon our defenses are going to be reduced to such a state that will literally beg for invasion."*

"I know," Stevenson said slowly as they crossed into one of the Alterra-only sections of the city. *"I didn't want to do this originally, but given the lack of adequate candidates there's only one way for me to be in several places at once."*

Andara frowned. *"What do you mean?"*

Stevenson directed her into a nearby lab...and once she was inside she understood. *"How long?"*

"Fifteen days...but I have to return to Destra tomorrow. I will be back here in ten days to oversee the final stages."

"Do you need a female template?"

Stevenson shook his head. *"Not now. Ask me again in a hundred years or so."*

Andara slowly took his meaning. *"You don't expect to find many others?"*

"I'm not counting on it," Stevenson cautioned, *"but I haven't given up hope entirely."*

The female Alterra sighed. *"A month then?"*

"At the most."

She nodded. *"I should return then, and do what I can in the interim."*

"Take a jumper with you. The pesqua onboard may prove effective against a single runner."

Andara frowned. *"Jumper?"*

Stevenson smiled. *"My apologies. I meant a navicula porta. 'Jumper' is a term the new Lanteans use, and I've gotten used to using it."*

"Will I be able to fly it without training?"

"The controls are intuitive...mental interfaces couples with hand controls. There's also an auto-navigation system if you have trouble."

She nodded. *"Thank you."*

"Actually, I'll go back with you now. That way you'll have two jumpers and twice the pesqua to use."

Andara smiled. *"And to make sure I don't hit anything in the city?"*

"If you're that worried you can ride with me and I'll remote pilot the second jumper."

She shook her head. *"As a last resort. I wouldn't be much of an Alterra if I was scared to fly."*

"You'll learn," he said, taking her by the hand as they headed back to the control tower.

"What do you mean she's an Alterra?" Sheppard asked Stevenson after he'd returned to Atlantis.

"Yes," Elizabeth chimed in, blocking the stairway in front of the gate. "Why didn't you tell us?"

Stevenson glanced between the two. "I wasn't expecting her to come here."

"You still could have told us," Sheppard argued. "When I go to hit on a chick it's kind of important to know whether or not she can read my mind first," he said sarcastically.

Weir glared at John for a moment then turned back to Stevenson. "How many of you are there now?"

"Four...she's the most recent addition. Her transformation isn't complete yet."

"Where's she from anyway?" Sheppard asked.

"Dracona."

Sheppard raised his eyebrows. "Ok...Avalona or Pegasus?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "It's not a planet, John. It's another galaxy."

"What?!" Sheppard asked, all kidding gone. "I thought Avalona and Pegasus were the only galaxies with Humans."

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow at Stevenson.

"There are seven," he told them.

"Seven!" Elizabeth exclaimed.

Stevenson nodded. "When the seeding project began, it was suggested that using multiple galaxies would increase the chances of success."

"If one galaxy of Humans was wiped out by an aggressor," Elizabeth said, understanding their logic, "then it was unlikely that that same aggressor would be able to extend their power and influence to another galaxy."

"Few civilizations have," Stevenson said, "even with the gate network we left behind."

"Did they all make it?" Sheppard asked.

Stevenson shook his head. "No...the seed species in Vela and Orona are gone. I don't know what happened to them. There are a few Humans left in Kestardra, and large populations in Dracona, Syrex, and Avalona, with a lesser number in Pegasus."

"You've been to all these galaxies?" Elizabeth asked.

"All 23 of them," Stevenson clarified.

Weir's jaw dropped. "Would it kill you to keep us in the loop?"

"You have no idea how busy I am...and how much I know."

"For starters, a map might help," Elizabeth argued.

Stevenson frowned and looked at Sheppard.

John sheepishly looked at Elizabeth. "I might have seen a map of the Ancient galaxies somewhere."

Elizabeth hit him in the shoulder. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"Ow...It didn't come up," he said, rubbing his arm. "And you're one to talk. He made you an Ancient."

"And not you," Elizabeth said, nudging him. "Jealous?"

"Maybe a little," John said, avoiding Stevenson's gaze.

Weir tipped her head towards the Alterra.

"What?" Sheppard asked.

"He's standing here. Ask him."

Sheppard bit his teeth together in frustration. He didn't like her putting him on the spot. "Ok, why not," he said, turning to look at him. "Why her and librarian boy, and not me?"

"You're not a loser," Stevenson said.

"Well, I'm in agreement with you on that," Sheppard said sarcastically. "So what's the problem?"

"You think you are," Stevenson said as politely as he could.

Sheppard frowned. "No I don't."

"Yes, you do," he said firmly. "You see yourself as a screw up and doubt your self worth on a continual basis."

Sheppard frowned angrily. "Stay out of my head."

"Ever since your father told you you weren't..."

"We are not having this conversation," Sheppard said, pointing forcefully into Stevenson's face before he turned and walked off.

Elizabeth stepped closer to Stevenson. "I'm sorry. I really shouldn't have done that."

"He brought it up indirectly...which is a good sign. One way or another he needs to face this."

"I know," Elizabeth said softly. "I just wish there was an easier way to do it."

"Leave him be for a while. He needs to think this through on his own...and he's probably going to have to vent a lot of painful memories in the process."

Elizabeth glanced up at the slightly taller man. "You leaving for Celestis?"

Stevenson nodded. "I'll be back inside of two weeks, but I don't want you delaying the move. He can handle it."

"If he can't..."

"I promise I'll build you a new city," Stevenson said, mentally activating the stargate.

"You'd better," she said just before he went through. The gate deactivated and Weir resigned herself to having a conversation with John sometime tomorrow. That'd give him enough time to work through the obvious stuff...then she'd help him with the rest.

If he'd let her.

5

Atlantis dipped low in orbit above 'Dune' and began to lick the atmosphere. Sheppard, sitting in the city's control chair, wanted to bleed off as much momentum as he could up high and make this as gentle a decent as possible. He used both the thin upper atmosphere and the city's engines to burn off momentum, and did so at an angle so both provided some upward momentum.

As a result, Atlantis's altitude didn't drop more than a few hundred meters. As more of the city's weight came to bear, Sheppard adjusted the engine thrust away from horizontal. Slowly, the orbital velocity dissipated and Atlantis merely hung in the upper atmosphere, its engines keeping the city aloft.

"Now," Sheppard said to himself. "Nice and slow."

He pulled back on the thrust and the city/ship began to decrease in altitude. With the target coordinates emblazoned in mind's eye, Sheppard slid the downward trajectory to the west/northwest. As the city eased down through the thicker than average atmosphere, Atlantis's sensors began to map out the sand dunes in the target area.

Sheppard swallowed hard. There were several over 300 meters high, crisscrossing each other in what had appeared to be flat terrain from orbit.

Finding another landing area was out of the question. Stevenson had tagged these specific coordinates because of the proximity of available resources, so he had to put her down here.

He slowed the city until it hovered two kilometers above the surface. Buying time, he looked for a suitably wide crevice between the dunes, but none were measuring large enough.

"Please work," Sheppard said, picking the widest gap he could find.

Very slowly, only a few meters per second, Sheppard descended the city between two massive dunes. As the city's pylons dropped below the dune crests he slowed the decent to less than a meter per second. The city's engines and Sheppard's piloting ability were strained trying to maintain a precision drop with such a mass.

Halfway down between the dunes the outer edges of the city's shield brushed up against the sand...and began to carve out niches.

Sheppard kept a keen eye on the inclination of the city as it pressed against the sand. With artificial gravity enabled he could have landed it upside down and everything would be fine, but when the city was settled and the AG was turned off, if he didn't have the level just right, every round object in the city would roll off tables and across floors...including an oversized glass marble on Elizabeth's desk.

Moving a bit of sand wasn't a problem, but the lower Atlantis dropped, the more sand had to be moved. It buffeted the city off center by several degrees, and Sheppard had to raise it back up a few meters and try again.

After three unsuccessful attempts an idea struck him...and he smiled at the reaction he'd get from people across the city.

He pulled back up a few dozen meters then tipped the city on its side by about 20 degrees.

Balancing the thrust to keep them still and sideways was difficult, but the city's computers handled the calculations well. Now was the tricky part. He moved the city laterally, using the massive shield as a plow and pushed into the southern sand dune.

The resistance mounted quickly, but he applied more power to the engines and eventually broke through. Smiling, he pulled the city back and made another run further to the west...then the east...then spun the city around and did the same thing to the northern dune.

Six swipes in all leveled out the sand enough for him to right the city and descend into the gap between the dunes. The pylons no longer touched, and the bottom side of the shield smoothed out the remaining inconsistencies in the sand beneath them.

Sheppard checked the tilt of the city...it was .2% off. He raised them back up again, just enough to support their weight, but with no altitude, and moved the city sideways, smoothing the sand below. He wiggled Atlantis around for ten minutes before setting her back down again. He rechecked the tilt...0.0%.

Smiling, he retracted the shields underneath the city until the base of Atlantis was touched the sand. The shield then reformed underneath, skin tight against the city substructure but maintaining the bubble over top of the city that would keep out the blowing sand and the 150F air.

He deactivated the AG field and felt his limbs get a little heavier. Frowning, he checked the planet's gravity...1.07g.

"Elizabeth," he said through the city's intercom. "Is this too heavy, or do you want the artificial gravity to compensate?"

"Keep it on," she said from the doorway. Sheppard didn't realize she'd been there.

He reactivated the AG field, which drew only a small amount of power to tweak the planet's natural gravity. After powering down the city engines and initiating an auto-diagnostic of the stardrive Sheppard sat up and the chair went dark.

"Well done," Elizabeth congratulated him.

"How long have you been there?" he asked, standing up.

"Long enough. I didn't realize the sand would be that much of a problem."

"You looking out a window somewhere?"

Elizabeth pointed a thumb behind her. "Just down the hall. Pretty impressive view...especially when you tipped the city over."

"Liked that, did you?"

"I'll admit, my heart did skip a beat. Good thinking, by the way."

"Well, we're down now. Don't you have a civilization to build?" he said, walking by her.

"John..."

"What now?" he said, turning around.

"What did your father tell you?"

"Why don't you just read my mind?"

"I can't...not like that."

"Well isn't that refreshing. I guess private matters will stay private for a while then."

"You didn't answer my question," she prodded.

"No, I didn't," he said, walking off again. She ran after him and grabbed his shoulder.

"Stevenson said this was important and the only reason he didn't make you an ancient before me. Now John, you know me. I'm not trying to be nosy...I'm trying to help you."

Sheppard's jaw clenched, as well as his fist...then he released both with a sigh. "He said I was a disappointment."

"Why?" she asked, putting her hand on his shoulder.

"I wasn't living up to his expectations...I wasn't living up to the family name. When I finally decided to join the Air Force instead of following in his footsteps...he just shook his head, as if he'd expected as much from a disappointment like me...and we never spoke again."

"Why does his opinion mean so much to you?"

"It doesn't...but ever since I was a kid he was on my case, and it got into my head. No matter what I do, sooner or later his voice pops into my head saying I should have done this, or I didn't do that, and I can see him shaking his head. I know that sounds pathetic, but for some reason I can't let it go."

"You worry he might be right?" she guessed.

John sighed. "Maybe...I don't know."

"Did he have your respect?"

Sheppard looked at the ceiling for a moment. "I guess he did, when I was young. Later on I just remember hating him."

"Why did you hate him?"

He hit the wall in frustration, then yelled, "Because no matter what I did it was never good enough. He wouldn't give me credit for anything. It was always what I didn't do, or what I didn't do right. He had me pegged as a screw up. I couldn't get him to change his mind...and now I can't get it out of mine."

"Did you ever consider that his impression of you didn't come from you?"

Sheppard frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Maybe he wasn't really seeing you for you. Maybe he was envisioning himself in your shoes, in which case no one would be able to measure up."

"I know what you're saying...but it doesn't matter. It got to me then, and it's still there now."

"Then he wins," she said, a bit of challenge in her voice.

"Wins what?" he mumbled, not liking where this was going.

"You left him and your family, but inside," she said, poking him in the chest, "you never did. If he truly couldn't see you for what you are, then getting his approval wasn't possible. It was like a scam, where the game is fixed so you can't win. You're not concerned with what he thought of you...you're worried that he might have been right. You care about the quality of person you are, that's why, inside, you'll never quit. It's part of your personality, and a reason you're so good at what you do."

"So what's the magic answer?" he asked, leaning his back against the wall.

"The only person you need to prove yourself to is you...your dad thought less of you than you really are. Inside you rejected that idea...you fought it. You knew you were better than that, but you also thought that if you proved yourself to your dad he would acknowledge that fact...but because he didn't you feel that you didn't do something, that in some way it's your fault and not his."

"Still looking for that answer."

"You have to see the truth...that your dad's opinions weren't about you, they were about his ego. I'm guessing, of course, I never met the man, so stop me if I'm wrong. But it seems as if he was going to criticize you no matter what you did. If that's the case it wasn't a fair test...it wasn't a test at all. It was a lie...he lied to you, and because you're a perfectionist you didn't care about the lie, just the slim possibility that there might be some truth in it. Problem is, you still think like he's an impartial judge who will clear your conscience if you finally do the right thing."

He won't...if for no other reason than he's no longer alive. But if he was...do you think he would have treated you any differently?"

"I doubt it."

"Even if he knew everything you've done here?"

"Probably not."

"Then forget him. If his opinion of you is a matter of his ego and not based in the truth then it doesn't matter. One of the things I've learned from the Ancients is that the truth is the antidote to most problems. You have to unravel the lies first, then you'll be able to see your way through this...and yes, that may be painful, but you can't let this continue. You know that, I can see it in your eyes."

"Every time I try to think this through, I end up getting nowhere. Logically I can make sense of it, but I can't feel it, and until I do all the logic in the world isn't going to help."

"What do you feel?"

He sighed. "Like a loser."

Elizabeth chewed on her lip. "I see."

The two of them remained silent for a long time.

"Do you ever feel your self worth...your skill, or as Ford might say it, your mojo?"

Sheppard half smiled. "Not usually."

"When have you?"

"When I'm not thinking. In combat, when I'm sick, when I know something that Rodney doesn't and I get to gloat."

"Don't we all," she said, referring to that last bit. "You mean when you're pressed to your limits?"

"I guess so."

Elizabeth nodded. "So you put yourself into situations, took on challenges, where you would be pressed."

He nodded.

She shook her head. "I wish you could see yourself through my eyes. You'd realize how ridiculous all this is."

Sheppard looked at her. "And what do you see?"

"This..." she said, cupping his head in her hands and kissing him.

She pulled back and kissed him a second time, then held the third for a long time before gently pulling back. "And that's not my hormones talking," she clarified.

Sheppard blinked, not sure what to say.

Elizabeth stepped back. "Remember that feeling the next time you even consider the possibility that you might be a loser. Your dad thought you were, I know for a fact that you're not...but in the end what we think doesn't really matter. It's what you think."

With that last word she turned around and walked off, both to leave Sheppard time to think and to get away from him after what she'd just done. She hadn't planned on doing that...it was just a spur of the moment idea, and frankly something that she'd wanted to do for a long time.

Sheppard stood where he was, leaning against the wall, and let her go. He replayed the kiss through his mind several times, wondering if that had really just happened. More than that, he could feel it inside him. He could feel her...appreciation for him. He let it sink in a while, just standing in the empty hallway and thinking things through. An hour later he finally left, walking away whistling Bond tunes.

Stevenson stood inside a long, large lab in the restricted sections of Atlantis holding a small green crystal. On it was Ryan's complete mental profile, every memory, every habit, every inclination, including the full knowledge granted him by the repository of knowledge...then edited inside the confines of what Ryan jokingly referred to as 'the cone of silence.'

Nearby, in another small lab, he'd made a few special modifications to the infrastructure. Now, at the press of a button, he and everything within the room would transition into an alternate dimension...one where the ascended empire couldn't snoop through the computer systems as he downloaded his secrets into data format.

He'd spent several days deleting the sensitive knowledge from his profile and adding a small amount of additional 'programming' to the mix. Some things he could only trust to himself, and given that his mind was the only one shielded from ascended intrusion, it made any questions to the contrary moot.

Ryan pressed a few control buttons on the alcove in front of him then inserted the crystal.

Nothing happened visually, and a moment later he retrieved the crystal, slipped it into his pocket, then hit one final button and stepped back.

The translucent panel in front of him retracted into the side of the alcove and a bit of steam rolled out. Then, dressed in a light blue version of the white uniform Ryan wore, a duplicate version of himself stepped out of the alcove.

Ryan raised an eyebrow, but said nothing, vocally or telepathically.

The clone stretched a bit, blinked twice, then looked at Ryan. *"Don't worry. I'm alright. Everything went as planned...and the pain is gone."*

"And the gaps in your memory?" Ryan asked.

Greg frowned. *"Detectable...annoying...but necessary,"* he said, glancing around. *"Am I the first?"*

"Yes. The others are fully developed, I just haven't imprinted them yet."

"Let's test a theory," Greg said, holding up his fist.

Ryan did likewise. They moved their arms in sync and both threw 'paper.' They went again and both threw 'scissors.' On the third time, Ryan threw 'paper' and Greg threw 'scissors.'

"Myth busted," Ryan noted, putting his hand down.

"How old is the imprint?" Greg asked.

"Four weeks," he said as he telepathically updated his duplicate on recent events.

Greg nodded. *"Shall I go to Dracona, or one of the others? You have to be the one in Destra...you're the Orici, not me...or them."*

"I know. If you want Dracona you can have it, unless you'd prefer another assignment."

"First come, first serve, huh," Greg said, looking back at his 24 brothers still in their alcoves. Ryan had dressed each of them in identical, yet differently colored uniforms. *"And you're wondering if I have a predisposition?"*

"I doubt it would show up yet, but you are encouraged to diversify by choice or predisposition, if such a thing manifests itself."

"I imagine it will," Greg said, mirroring Ryan's thoughts. *"If it's all the same to you, I'll take the city/ship project."*

Ryan frowned. *"That's still years off."*

"Not the design phase. We both know there's a lot of room for improvement, even if we choose to keep the spires."

"I hadn't considered that...recently."

"Well, now that I don't have to worry about everything else I have the freedom to consider other angles."

Ryan nodded. *"Very well. It's not a high priority project right now, but it needs done. Get yourself through the verification training before you attempt using the mental interface."*

Greg raised an eyebrow. *"You finished it, I assume?"*

"Of course."

"If that's all, I'll get on it right away."

"One last thing," Ryan said. *"I wasn't able to get your physical template as close to mine as I'd hoped. Don't expect your kinetic memories to match up exactly when you're running through the obstacle course."*

"That, and I'm all of two minutes old," Greg said, predicting Ryan's next statement. *"I'll take it slow."*

Ryan nodded and Greg left the lab for the specialized training center he'd constructed for the explicit use of his clones. All of them were going to have to physically check out before he'd let them leave Atlantis. He was activating each of them individually so he could check their mental state immediately...just in case there had been an unanticipated problem with the duplication process.

Ryan walked down to the second slot and inserted the crystal into Nick's alcove and downloaded his mental profile again. A moment later the translucent panel in front of him retracted into the side of the alcove and a bit of steam rolled out. Then, dressed in a dark red uniform, his duplicate stepped out of the alcove.

Ryan raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

The clone stretched a bit, blinked twice, then looked at Ryan. *"Don't worry. I'm alright. Everything went as planned...and the pain is gone."*

"Well?" Ryan asked Elizabeth as he sat down next to her in the concealed observation room overlooking the training facility with the clones in action.

"Very...freaky," she said, hesitating.

"It's not the first time we've done this."

She turned to him in shock. *"There are more of you out there?"*

"No," Ryan said, shaking his head. *"I meant this isn't the first time the Alterra have done this."*

"Oh, sorry. Maybe it is just because I'm a newb, but somehow this just seems...wrong."

"That's because you don't understand it."

"Enlighten me," she said as she watched identical copies of him run, jump, punch, lift, and throw as they ran through a set of predetermined drills which also included use of their 'special' abilities, some of which Elizabeth didn't realize Ryan even had.

"For starters, they aren't me."

She frowned. *"I thought that's exactly what a clone was."*

"No. Every being is unique, no matter how close they resemble others. Each of them," he said, pointing through the one way panel, *"has their own unique core energy. We can't copy that, and we can't create it. We've tried to learn why for millions of years, but there's something about life itself that we can't pin down. We have, however, learned how to predict and manipulate it."*

"I'm not sure I like the word 'manipulate.'"

"I didn't mean it like that," he chided her. *"There are two types of clones. Ones with core energy, and those without it. Your body is one of the latter."*

Elizabeth glanced down at her arm when Ryan poked her. *"Which is why there aren't two of me in here?"*

"Right. I synthesized your body from your genetic profile. It was 'alive' so much as your autonomic systems were functioning, but there was no one at the controls. The only way to reproduce core energy is to start with cells that already contain it. Then, and only then, will a new core form. We don't know why, exactly, but the process has been studied and documented thoroughly."

"What about cells from a corpse?"

Ryan shrugged. *"Depends how old it is. Eventually the core energy fades from the tissue. If you want to clone a living being from ancient cellular tissue, you have to graft the DNA from that tissue onto a neutered, living cell from another species."*

"Like Jurassic Park..."

"Oddly enough, yes," he admitted.

"So you could bring the dinosaurs back if you wanted?"

Ryan smiled. *"A discussion for another time. Let's stick with this one for now."*

Elizabeth frowned. *"More secrets...maybe I'll have better luck with them."*

"I doubt it. Besides, there are reasons why I haven't told you everything yet. In time I will. I promise."

"Really...that's quite a change."

"Lantean or not, you're going to play a major role in what's to come. These things you will need to know in time."

"I can live with that...now, about the cloning and how I shouldn't be freaked out by all of this."

"Core energy," he said, back on topic, "is different for each individual, randomly so. It doesn't matter the nature of the parent organism, so those people out there aren't going to have the same core energy as me. It would be as if I'd put you into one of those bodies. You would still be you and not me."

"I get it...though the thought of being male is, interesting."

"I can still read your thoughts, you know."

"I've given up being embarrassed around you. If you don't like what I'm thinking, don't look," she said, unconcerned.

"I wasn't criticizing."

"I can sense that," she told him, cherishing the irony, "and how you think the old me would have reacted differently. I don't know...I guess maybe I've grown up a bit."

"With thoughts like that?" Ryan kidded her.

She laughed. *"Point."*

"That's called growing up without growing old...in some ways you end up younger than before."

"Core energy," she reminded him. "They're all different inside."

"But that's where the individuality ends," he said, serious again. "Normally when we clone people we allow them to develop from infants...no different than you having an identical twin at birth. Right now, however, we don't have that kind of time, nor the personnel to run a proper maturia, so I forced their physical development to match my profile...or as close as I could get it. The construction of the brain is also included in this, and must be in order to download my memories and skills. Without a match, much would be loss due to incompatibility...like trying to run a large program on too small of a hard drive."

"*They have your memories?*" Elizabeth asked. "*And that doesn't bother you?*"

"*Meaning a sense of privacy? No. I don't have any embarrassing secrets to hide, and things I once thought of as such lost their importance when I became Alterra. The life I lived on Avalon is barely a wisp of memory.*"

"*Interesting,*" Elizabeth said, forming a question in her mind that she didn't want to say out loud.

Ryan raised an eyebrow. "*Not as a hobby,*" he said, referring to her wondering about any childhood sexual explorations he might have had, "*but exploring one's functionality isn't something to frown on.*"

"*I hadn't looked at it that way,*" she admitted, a bit red.

"*Guilty conscience?*" he asked.

She turned even redder, then checked herself. "*I guess my reacting like this is kind of silly...but you know how our former culture viewed such things.*"

"*Leaving a portion of your functionality unexplored would be the mistake,*" he told her, "*much like your physical training. You understand yourself more now that you've gone through the learning curve.*"

"*That I have,*" she admitted. The running had been good for her in many ways, and now that she'd gotten a taste for it she wasn't about to quit. She made sure to get at least a short workout in every morning before she attended to her duties. "*And I guess Earth isn't very knowledgeable on sexual matters.*"

"*No, they're not. They see it as all manner of things, but the simple truth is it's a biological imperative to reproduce. Work through the logic from that starting point and it's not difficult to understand.*"

"*Which brings up a question...if you don't mind?*" she asked hesitantly.

"*Alterra and sex?*"

"*Yes.*"

Ryan shrugged. "*After you get past the newness of it in your adolescent years it isn't a big deal. Inherently it's an illusion, and as such is counter to the truth, so you don't have any Alterra sex fanatics. However, once you pick apart your emotions and discover what part's truth and what part's illusion it simply becomes a biological function. On occasion it can be used for stress relief or distraction, but on the whole Alterrans don't use it much.*"

"*What about reproduction?*"

"*Some do,*" Ryan admitted, "*but most Alterra females don't want to go through the pregnancy cycle, and I don't blame them. We use labs like they were grown in,*" he said, pointing at the clones, "*to develop them to the point where they can be put into a maturia. In fact, most Alterran sex happens in the maturia as they learn and grow.*"

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. "*Is that by design?*"

"*Yes. Part of their training involves sexual exercises designed to give the young ones an opportunity to study and experience what is essentially a binary function. Leaving it up to random social interactions is like trying to learn to pilot a jumper by listening to someone else talk about it in the commissary.*"

"*Is this peer to peer, or with their trainers?*"

"*Both.*"

"*How young are they when this training happens?*"

"*It begins around age twelve.*"

"*Twelve! Isn't that a little young? They're not even fully mature at twelve.*"

"Humans aren't," Ryan clarified, "but Alterrans mature quicker. A twenty year old Human is equivalent to a twelve year old Alterra."

"I didn't know that," Elizabeth admitted. "So how long do they stay in the maturia?"

"It varies depending on when they test out. Usually it's around age 30."

Elizabeth frowned. "So they're in 'school' even though they're adults?"

"Physical maturity isn't the end of learning, Elizabeth. Some things, like the sexual training, can only be properly learned once they're physically mature. You couldn't run like you do now when you were a kid...your capabilities are limited until you become an adult. People on Avalon have it all backwards."

"Hmnn, I hadn't thought about that. I guess I kept looking back at my youth as if my best years were behind me."

"Your 'youth' is a myth," Ryan told her. "What most people call 'youth' is the maturation cycle when your body and mind are still growing. Part of your functionality is on auto-pilot at the time, which makes you less capable than an adult version of yourself. Once you fully mature that auto-pilot shuts down and you can really start to kick butt...but most Humans don't have a clue what to do and begin to deteriorate. For them, in their ignorance, laziness, apathy, etc, they were better off with the auto-pilot. That's why they think their 'youth' evaporates with the years."

"Wait a minute," Elizabeth stopped him. "The 'auto-pilot' as you called it...is part of the subconscious mind's functions?"

Ryan nodded.

"Ok, so when it kicks off you have to start...peddling on your own. Like training wheels on a bike? When you're new, they keep you from falling over...but you can't make sharp turns with them on. You take them off once you learn to ride, and suddenly you can do a lot of things you couldn't do with them on."

"Good analogy," he said. "But some people never learn to ride while the training wheels are on. They come off automatically once the maturation cycle ends. They don't train to increase their abilities, often they do stupid things that directly damage their body and mind, all the while the attrition of the environment wears them down further."

"Attrition," Elizabeth said, fully understanding, "that your body can heal if it's strong enough, but it won't get strong unless you train...and if you stop training you'll end up losing your strength and the attrition will win in the long run."

"Which is why I insisted that you begin training before I'd make you a Lantean."

"If I don't train, I'll eventually succumb to attrition too, it'll just take longer since my natural healing ability is higher than a Human's."

Elizabeth glanced out the window. "What about them? They're fully mature now."

"That's why they have my mental template...they know everything I know, including how to train and why it's essential to their longevity. They don't have the learning curve...but over time they will learn additional things to add to the knowledge they gained from my template."

Elizabeth rubbed her chin. "How long before they're ready to get to work?"

"A few days at most," Ryan said, a little subdued. "We just need to make sure there weren't any complications with the cloning process...so they're testing their functionality now."

"No sex training, I take it?"

Ryan shook his head. "This isn't training, just a basic test."

"Where does homosexuality fit in?" she asked, curious.

"Nothing more than a glitch in your sexual programming...easily correctible. Takes about thirty seconds in the DNA resequencer."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"Huh, and to think of all the trouble that debate's caused on Earth."

"Primitive civilizations are prone to such ignorance-induced problems...it's why we didn't decide to repopulate the galaxies on a whim. We knew the type of problems that would arise when we devolved our form, but it was either that or extinction. This way, at least, we stood a fighting chance."

"And it worked," Elizabeth said, squeezing his shoulder. "Not to mention that fact that everyone on Earth wouldn't exist if you hadn't."

Ryan half smiled. "It's not over yet. Not by a long shot."

"The risky part is, right?"

"The helpless part is...but we're not to the risky part yet."

Elizabeth frowned. "Something else you can't tell me?"

"Afraid so."

"As long as you've got a handle on it."

"I'm working on it," Ryan clarified.

"Good enough for me," Elizabeth declared. "But someday, you are going to have to tell me what's really going on."

Alba Longa

1

"Sensor sweep," Davra ordered as the Traveler ship exited hyperspace. "Let's make sure we're alone."

"All clear, Captain," the navigator reported a moment later.

"Very well. Proceed with surface scans," he said, leaning back in his chair.

"Preliminaries show breathable atmosphere and temperate to tropical climate. Two percent axial tilt...which means no seasons to speak of. Little to no surface topography, 30% of this hemisphere is covered by surface water...the rest has dense vegetation, no signs of technology."

"Patience, Keeva. Let's see what the other side holds before we jump to any conclusions."

"Davra, this is only the second truly habitable world any of us have found outside the gate network. Don't you think that's worth getting at least a little excited about?"

"First things first," the Captain insisted. "Take us through a quick trip around orbit before we start the regional scans."

"Fine with me," she said, accelerating the ship into a tight, low orbit for maximum speed, "but I still say we've found a gem. There's not a lick of ice down there."

Davra didn't say anything more. He simply watched the crescent of new surface features creep across the horizon. Suddenly small ridges started to appear...nothing too large, but given the lack of any other identifiable elevation on the world these stood out to the naked eye and the computer which was updating a spherical hologram as they progressed.

The more Davra saw, the more a knot started to form in his gut. Something about these ridges didn't sit right with him, and he had a sneaking suspicion that this 'gem' of a world might turn out to be another disappointment like their last. Three weeks ago they'd found a small, grass covered world of moderate temperature that appeared to be habitable from orbit. When they'd gotten around to landing their surface probes they quickly discovered the 'surface' wasn't quite solid.

The entire planet was a massive bog, and while technically habitable it wasn't what they'd been hoping for. They'd completed their analysis in depth and added the survey to the catalog of non-gated worlds for Atlantis. Perhaps Stevenson could find a use for 'bog-land,' but without a livable surface or any useful geological deposits, what that use might be was beyond Davra. They'd made the mistake of reporting it in early, before they'd completed their full survey, and this time he wasn't about to jump the gun.

The ridges, now covering a spherical area of about 100 million square kilometers, ended as suddenly as they began and the smooth surface features of the planet reappeared. The rest of the hemisphere appeared as its twin, but something about that cluster of ridges didn't sit right with Davra.

"Change course," he ordered in a whisper. "Bring us back over those surface features. Use the deep scan system Stevenson gave us. Let's see what's beneath the surface."

"Changing course," Keeva said without complaint. She was curious too, despite her enthusiasm. When she activated the specialized sensors she got a weird look on her face.

"What's wrong?" Davra asked.

"Our scans are being scattered. All I've got is a grainy image, but there appears to be a network of structures beneath the surface...a lot of structures."

"Natural or artificial?"

Keeva shifted the sensor readings to the holoprojector...another gift from Stevenson.

The angular and often grid-like pattern of subsurface chambers and connecting tunnels put to rest any doubt of the structures' natural formation.

"Captain we have incoming!" Keeva half shouted. "Numerous objects rising on an intercept course from the surface."

"We've seen enough for now," Davra said evenly. "Break orbit."

The Traveler ship accelerated upwards quickly, but the smaller ships coming from the surface were gaining on them.

"Captain?"

"I see 'em," he said as two larger contacts emerged from hyperspace in front of them. "Make ready to jump to hyperspace."

The fighters rising from the surface began firing green energy weapons at the Travelers' engines while even more fighters poured out of the two capital ships.

"We can't take much of this!" Keeva yelled as she flew an evasive course and the Captain returned fire with the ships' weapons. The shields were now taking small hits from the fighters, a few every second. One of the oddly shaped craft exploded under the impact of the Travelers' weaponry as four more large ships emerged out of hyperspace in front of their new trajectory...they too deployed fighters."

"I think they want their home kept a secret," Davra said, concern evident in his voice. "Get us clear now or *we* won't be going home!"

"I'm trying," she said, tipping the ship over and heading back down to the planet at full thrust. A loud bang sounded from behind and the ship slew to port.

"Shields breached," Davra yelled.

"Hang on," Keeva said as they passed through the last of the fighters that had been trailing them. She managed to get a hyperspace window formed in front of them just above the atmosphere. The Traveler ship dove into it like a bullet fired into a pool of water.

Keeva breathed heavily. "That was too close," she said as the proximity sensors pinged an alarm.

"We're being followed," Davra said just before a ship-wide alarm sounded.

"Intruder alert!" Keeva said unnecessarily.

Davra punched a few buttons. "Engineering level," he said, pulling out his sidearm. "Stay on the bridge and keep us ahead of them. Send a distress signal while you're at it."

"I'm on it," she said, turning back to her station as the Captain went aft.

When he neared the engineering level he heard sounds of fighting ahead. Several Traveler weapons could be heard firing, as well as several large bangs, but he couldn't discern any alien weapons fire. He'd assumed that when their shields had gone down the enemy had managed to get something aboard...and they had to kill whatever it was before it took over or disabled the ship. If they dropped out of hyperdrive now they were as good as dead.

Two seconds down Davra came to the penetration point in the hull and his jaw dropped. How the thing hadn't purged their atmosphere he couldn't say, but one of the alien fighters had rammed into their hull and the clearly exposed cockpit told him that his crew was fighting the pilot.

He gave the fighter one last look, then took a step aft when he caught a glance of something out of the corner of his eye. Davra stepped backward and confirmed his glance. There was a thin layer of goo in the seam between the fighter and his damaged ship. Whoever these people were, they'd designed their fighters to do this...it hadn't been an accident or a last ditch maneuver.

Davra shook his head and ran aft.

When he emerged in the engine room he found six of his crew dead, with another fourteen injured. Twenty more crowded the area, save for a small section of floorspace that held the bodies of three aliens with grayish skin and visible cybernetic implants in their skulls. The armor that they wore had multiple blast marks...apparently the things had gone down hard.

Suddenly they felt the ship drop out of hyperspace.

"Haverson, what's wrong?" he asked the second engineer. The first lay dead a few meters away.

The young boy looked around for a few seconds, checking equipment, then turned back to the captain and shrugged his shoulders. "Nothing, Captain. The engines are fine."

"They're not fine," Davra argued, pushing his way through the crowd as a bang sounded on the port side. "Check the ship," he ordered everyone. "There may be more intruders."

"Captain," the boy said after running a quick diagnostic. A second bang sounded from the starboard side. "The hyperdrive disengaged because of a direct command from the helm station."

Davra raced back up to the bridge. If the aliens had simply disengaged the engines then maybe he could kill them and jump the ship back into safety...it also meant that Keeva was probably dead too.

A few minutes later he burst back onto bridge, pistol leading, and stopped dead in his tracks. Keeva was still in the pilot's seat...and flying the ship through an enormous asteroid field.

"You are absolutely crazy," he said, retaking his seat. He was glad that she was still alive.

"If you have a better idea..." she said, pulling the ship hard to port. A small thump sounded on their right side.

"Why aren't the shields up?"

"I need the engine power. They're still behind us. Feel free to take the guns again."

"I don't believe this," he said, pulling up the targeting program for the aft firing arc. Sure enough there were several fighters weaving through the field after them...

"Like hell they are," he said, firing a few shots. They missed the much smaller fighters, but caused one of them to go evasive...right into one of the floating rocks.

Davra expected some snide comment about his targeting ability from Keeva, but she was totally preoccupied with keeping *them* off the rocks.

"Commander Dex?"

Ronon was in mid swing when Corporal Jorson spoke behind him, but he didn't falter. He completed his uppercut, followed by two quick jabs, then a headlock which he reversed and flung his opponent head over heels into the training mat. He released the new recruit and helped him to his feet.

"You're fast, but your brain can't keep up with your body. Stop trying to think ahead and learn to react. You have to feel your leverage and work on one grip point, one moment at a time, one moment flowing into another hold, punch, or block and continuing on to the next. If you can learn to do that even *I* will have trouble taking you down."

The thin man nodded respectfully. "Feel, don't think ahead," he repeated.

Ronon slapped him on the shoulder then turned around to lock eyes with the Corporal. "More recruits?" he guessed.

"Yes and no," Jorson said. "A new group came in a couple hours ago, but one of them says he knows you...and he has combat experience with the Wraith. He claims he was a... 'runner.'"

Ronon's look grew even more serious than usual. "Take me to him."

"Yes, sir," Jorson said reflexively as he led his commander back to the newly constructed set of barracks. They'd been recruiting so many Pegasus natives that they'd had to expand their infrastructure three times over the past year. All together, Yavin now fielded a green army of 1,500 'regulars' that had passed Ronon's minimum standards to go offworld on missions, but the training center fielded another 25,000 recruits...all of which now fell under Ronon's direct command.

Sheppard, Teyla, Ford, and even Brand had all gradually moved on to other assignments, due in part to Ronon's undisputable success with his original 'green team.' Ronon hadn't hesitated to take the reins...and the army that he was building had started to feel more and more like home. None of these recruits were Setidans, nor were they up to their caliber, but the core group was no longer a disparate group of mill workers and field hands...they were soldiers. Not the best, or the brightest, but they had heart, as much so as his fellow Setidans in some cases. These men and woman had suffered for generations under the oppression of the Wraith. They knew the stakes...and finding the motivation to endure Ronon's tough and sometimes cruel training had never been a concern.

Ronon Dex was proud of what they'd accomplished, but he wasn't satisfied. He was a Setidan and these were his men. He wasn't going to be comfortable fighting alongside them until they'd reached Setidan standards...and he wasn't going to let them rest until they had.

The Corporal led Ronon into the second level of the 27th barracks where a Sergeant Ketts had a group of three dozen men and four women seated in rows as he gave them basic instructions in a very loud and clear voice. He stopped the moment he saw Ronon and saluted with a fist to his shoulder.

Ronon waved away the gesture as he looked over the newcomers. As he did one man in the back stood up silently. Their eyes locked for several long seconds.

"You," Ronon said in a harsh whisper.

The man smirked without any trace of humor. "I heard you were recruiting to fight the Wraith. Figured you could use my help."

Ronon walked forward, the others scampering out of his way, until he stood directly in front of the man. "You don't belong here."

The man stiffened. "If that's the way you want it, then I'll leave."

Ronon shook his head humorously. "No, you won't."

The man stepped a few inches closer to Ronon. "Who's going to stop me?"

They stared at each other for a moment, then Ronon finally broke the silence. "Sergeant."

"Yes, Commander?" he asked, stepping to his side, but keeping his distance from the other man.

"Have this man transferred to 1st barracks and the elite training group. He's no rookie."

The Sergeant hesitated for the briefest of moments, then caught his drift. "Immediately, Commander" he said, motioning to one of his lower ranking staff.

The slightly shorter man raised an eyebrow as the two still hadn't broken eye contact.

"Well, that went better than expected."

Ronon finally broke into a smile and extended his hand.

Kiryk took it in a firm grip. "Quite a place you've got here."

"Growing by the day," Ronon said, noticing his armband was gone. "What happened to your gadget?"

"Permanently broke a while back. Sold the pieces to buy food and gear."

"Well, those days are over. The Ancestors are supplying us with everything we need now."

"So I'd heard...but I didn't believe the rumors."

"Believe it," he told him. "In a few years time we're going against the Wraith hot and heavy on the ground while the Ancestors kick their butt in space."

"Looks like I came just in time," Kiryk said.

Ronon grabbed him by the shoulder and led him away from the raw recruits. "Welcome to the party."

2

Weir, Ryan Stevenson, Matt Stevenson, Daniel, and Sheppard sat around the circumference of the briefing room tables as they viewed the video playback from the *Tria*.

The ship was moving through hyperspace for a few seconds, then reverted to realspace in the middle of nowhere. The prow of the ship was dark, with the only source of exterior illumination being the distant stars. There were no planets or objects of any kind within sight or within the sensor telemetry that was playing on a second adjacent hologram.

Suddenly a hyperspace window formed and a Traveler ship emerged a few hundred kilometers ahead. It was trailing a thin line of smoke and flew towards them with all haste. On the *Tria*'s telemetry readings the assembled group saw her shields go up and her weapons armed. Less than a minute later two large ships emerged from hyperspace in pursuit and immediately deployed fighters. A moment later they opened fire on the *Tria* with their main guns as the Traveler ship took cover behind its ally.

Several golden energy blasts from the *Tria* returned fire experimentally, but the alien ships' shields held. The *Tria*'s guns shifted to the approaching fighters while several dozen pesqua sprouted from the Ancient warship and flew towards the diverging warships, one of which was trying to slip around the port side of the *Tria* to get a shot at the Traveler ship.

The Ancient weapons passed through the enemy's shields and took out their emitters. The protective energy fields dissipated as several more pesqua shot out and intercepted a few of the fighters that had gotten by. The *Tria*'s energy weapons then returned fire into the unshielded enemy craft.

The port ship began to show significant damage as the *Tria*'s shields deflected wave after wave of enemy fire. Two of the remaining fighters made a kamikaze run at the front of the ship. They impacted the shields, crunched, then bounced off incapacitated.

After thirty seconds of punishment the starboard enemy ship broke apart, spraying debris in all directions...including several pieces into its twin. Seemingly doomed to defeat, the port ship attempted to circumvent and ram the Traveler ship, but it proved too fast to catch, even injured as it was. Out of options, the dying enemy ship turned into the *Tria*, but its momentum was caught by the ship's tractor beam and slowed.

It did manage to bump into her shields, but they held as the now point blank fire coming from the *Tria* ripped the enemy apart. Soon the battle was over, with a couple of pesqua mopping up the last of the fighters...then the holograms went dark.

"One of the fighters rammed the scout ship, boarded it, and killed several of the crew before they were taken down by successive hits from their standard side arms," Matt Stevenson said as he pulled up another hologram. This one was one of the dead alien bodies now present in Atlantis's med bay, which had become his chosen area of expertise.

He looked and sounded exactly like Ryan, except that Matt had altered his hair color to a deep red and lightened his skin a couple of shades with a few genetic modifications. Though it wasn't his cup of tea any more than it was Ryan's, Matt had elected to start rebuilding the medical division of their civilization, with Keller and Beckett being his primary assistant/students.

"I don't suppose any of you have seen this species before?" Ryan asked.

Daniel shook his head. "Nope."

"Me neither," Elizabeth said.

Ryan glanced at Sheppard. He did know something.

"I have," John said.

Weir frowned. "When?"

"Not when, but where...ish. These things attacked my team in a different reality, when we got stuck aboard the alternate *Daedalus*. They also took a poke at Atlantis...in the other reality."

Ryan searched his memory. He'd read through all of their mission reports.

"You saw these things in person?" Matt asked, beating him to it.

"Oh yeah," Sheppard said. "Killed three of them on board the ship...come to think of it, they got onboard the alternate *Daedalus* the same way. Crashed one of their fighters into the hull."

"Do you recognize the technology?" Daniel asked the Stevensons.

"Not specifically," Ryan answered. "But it's nothing new to us."

"I'd hope not," Daniel said. "Never the less, they don't appear very friendly. Elizabeth, didn't you say something earlier about discovering a number of advanced civilizations in Pegasus?"

"Yes," she said, remembering back to her brief time as an 'ascended' replicator, "but this wasn't one of them."

"Larrin and Mike have been quietly making contact with those civilizations," Ryan told them. "Most of them are Human, with moderate level technology, but this...this is different. The analysis we did on the debris the *Tria* brought back suggests a technological level slightly higher than that of the Wraith."

"Interesting," Daniel mewed.

Sheppard eyed him. "You wouldn't say that if you'd met them face to face."

Daniel shook his head. "I meant the fact that they appear to be hiding is interesting. It was only after the Travelers scanned their hidden base that they reacted...and then they pursued them across a quarter of the galaxy."

"Intent on destroying them," Sheppard argued.

"I'm not disagreeing," Daniel said. "I just think there's more going on here than meets the eye."

"Point taken," Elizabeth said, "but the question remains...what are we going to do about it?"

"For the time being," Ryan said firmly, "that system is off limits. I've notified the rest of our fleet and installations to be on guard for both the ships and the species in question. I've also ordered our scout ships to keep clear of the general vicinity for the time being. We can update the survey on those worlds after we exhaust the rest of the list."

Ryan pointed at Sheppard. "I'm sending the *Apollo* back to that planet on a stealth reconnaissance run. I want you to go with Mike, given that you're the only one that's had previous experience with this enemy."

"Sure," Sheppard said.

"Anything else?" Ryan asked.

"I know this is probably a stupid thing to say," Daniel piped up. "But are we 100% sure they're hostile? I mean, yes, they attacked our people, but are you really willing to write it off that easily?"

Sheppard turned in his seat to face Daniel on his left. "What does it take with you? They killed several of the Traveler's crew. What more do you need?"

"I'm just trying to point out that we can't assume what happens in an alternate reality will be the same in this reality. Trust me, I've had some experience with these things."

"You have a small point, Daniel," Ryan said evenly. "However, attacking and killing our people can't be overlooked. We're going to settle up with them, one way or another. But right now, this operation is in data collection mode."

"So, this couldn't possibly be a misunderstanding?" Daniel questioned, unsure of why Ryan was jumping to conclusions.

"A lesson in diplomacy, Daniel," Stevenson said, a bit tongue in cheek. "If someone's initial reaction in a misunderstanding is to kill you, then they're probably not going to be amicable even after the misunderstanding is sorted out. If they fire on someone for encroaching on their territory, then they're a menace that has to be dealt with. If they're trying to protect their anonymity by destroying our scout ship, same scenario."

"Fair enough," Daniel argued, "but since we know where they are, why not at least try and open up a line of communication?"

Sheppard rolled his eyes.

"That's an option," Ryan said evenly, "but not a foregone conclusion. Data first, then we'll decide how to respond."

Daniel nodded, seeming to accept that.

"Anything else?" Ryan asked.

There wasn't, so they ended the briefing. The five of them left to return to their separate duties, but Ryan continued his conversation with Matt as the two of them headed off into different parts of the city.

"*Keep working on the neural components,*" Ryan told him. "*There's something familiar about them.*"

"*I know,*" Matt replied, "*but I can't quite put my finger on it yet.*"

"*I'm going back over the debris again. I keep getting the feeling we've seen these guys before.*"

"*Same here,*" Matt said, breaking their link. He hopped into a nearby transporter and traveled back to the med bay where he joined Beckett as he slowly dissected one of the bodies.

"See here," he said, pointing at a particular nerve cluster in the corpse, giving Carson a few pointers. "You need to follow the tendrils into the implants and disconnect them inside..."

Back in Avalona, the gate center sat quietly as an incoming wormhole formed in the yellow gate. A few moments later a figure dressed in a large overrobe stepped through, his face obscured by the shadows of the hood. The facility lit up in response to his presence while he casually walked across to the opening in the far wall that led up to the control room.

Familiar with the layout of the facility and the control boards, the man pulled up an activity log for the time since he'd last visited. A plethora of data poured forth and the man smiled beneath his hood.

"At last," he said to himself. Further down the list of activity he noted the manufacture of two new gates. He pulled up the sensor data from the timestamp on the construction of the gates and noted the design of ship used to transport them.

"The Tria," he noted with some amusement. "*And here I thought you'd been destroyed.*"

He switched functions and displayed the map of the Ancient galaxies and their interconnected gates. Accessing computer memory, he pulled a search of recent intergalactic connections, displaying both their points of origin and their destinations.

Starting with the original connection to Pegasus that Stevenson had made after his escape from the SGC, the man watched as he had moved from galaxy to galaxy on a regular basis. He correlated the end point of most of these connections and raised an eyebrow. Atlantis had been moved to a location he hadn't expected...twice. The last fairly recently.

"*You've done well, Ryan. Better than I'd hoped. But what about the big pieces of the puzzle?*" he said, ordering a different search. In response a long, thin line appeared from Pegasus and stretched off the map. When he rescaled it to see its termination point he smiled unguardedly.

"*So you have made contact...very good.*"

Again he entered a new search function, this time he frowned at the results. "*That's not right,*" he said, seeing a plethora of 'dead' gates in Vela. He remote dialed one of them and brought up a visual from the other side. It showed nothing but dense vegetation.

He shut it down and dialed another, and another, and another until he came to one rubble strewn landscape, perfectly preserved due to the lack of any atmosphere what so ever.

The man dipped his head and sighed. "*We needed them...*"

He spent another hour going through a variety of searches, gleaming what data he could from the traffic logs. In the end he was satisfied, and a bit eager to get underway, but first there were a few things he had to attend to. He gated back to somewhere in Avalona through the red gate and disappeared from the gate center's sensors. The lights shut off automatically and the facility powered back down.

3

The *Apollo* exited hyperspace outside the enemy star system to hide their hyperspace window from the enemy's sensors then proceeded back to the planet in question under cloak.

"Nothing," Sheppard commented once they'd made orbit. "Even the debris is gone."

"According to the report, there wasn't much to clean up," Mike said in the captain's chair.

"Still, I'd think there would be something," Sheppard said as a technician helped him with the sensors at a back station. "There's nothing up here...space around the planet is completely clean."

"That's the way it should look," Mike told him, bringing the *Apollo* down into a lower orbit, but still keeping it above the atmosphere. "No inhabitation means no space junk."

"Still," Sheppard argued, "I'd at least expect a few rocks."

"No moons and no asteroids near the orbital track of the planet makes that unlikely. If they're intent on keeping their existence a secret, they're doing a good job of covering their tracks. The planet and orbit looks pristine."

"Except for those mountains," Sheppard pointed out as they came into view. "Kind of obvious isn't it?"

"If we could use our active sensors I'd show you how wrong you are," Mike said good-naturedly. "The Travelers detected both a stealth system masking the underground structures and a false signature representing tectonic activity across the planet creating topography at this location. I agree it is a bit visually obtrusive, but anyone who cares to take a closer look will find all the appropriate data backing it up."

"So why didn't it work?"

"Ryan upgraded the scout ships with Alterran sensors."

"Ok, so what are we going to do now if we can't uncloak to use our sensors?"

Mike smiled. "Remember on the way in we dropped several cloaked sensor buoys?"

"I still can't get past the contradiction of *cloaked*...*sensor* buoys," Sheppard said. "But yeah, I do."

"Watch," Mike said, sending a signal.

On the *Apollo*'s passive sensors a small blip appeared in high orbit and began to descend to the planet's surface.

"I thought this mission was stealth recon?" Sheppard asked, amused.

"We're still cloaked," Mike argued.

"Think they'll take the bait?"

"Either way we'll gain something useful."

"How?"

"It's going to crash into those ridges."

Sheppard smiled and clapped Mike on the arm. "I like your style...and the hair."

The blue haired Stevenson smiled as a number of fighters began to rise from the surface to intercept the probe. The recorders on the *Apollo* immediately tagged their surface coordinates and zoomed in on those locations. Nothing was visible aside from pristine, grass-covered slopes.

Mike pressed another button and the probe exploded before the fighters could get to it. Nothing but tiny fragments was left for them to study, as had been planned.

"Come on, there's nothing here," Mike said under his breath. After a short delay the fighters agreed with his assessment and began to return to ground.

"Here we go," Mike said, enlarging the holograms of the previously tagged sites. When the fighters got to them they appeared to ram directly into the hillsides...then disappeared.

"Concealed hangar bays or tunnels," Mike guessed. "Probably holographic emitters covering the entrances."

"Sounds awful advanced for a bunch of brutes," Sheppard said offhand.

Mike frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Well, the ones we fought on the alternate *Daedalus* didn't act very intelligent...determined as hell, but all the growling and snarling and pointed teeth didn't exactly strike me as the computer programmer type."

"Hmmn, you may have a point there."

Sheppard raised an eyebrow. "I do?"

"Maybe," Mike cautioned. "Some species have different castes for different tasks...such as the Wraith. Could be this species does too."

"I don't know. Brutes piloting ships?"

"That thought had occurred to me," Mike admitted. "It does leave a lot of questions hanging."

"So what now?"

"Now we try and find where their large ships are hiding," Mike said, retrieving the sensor data from the Traveler ship, which he had on file. "Judging from the entry vectors of their hyperspace windows it looks like they originated from several locations. We're going to pick one and follow it up for a couple of light years. See if we can get lucky."

"You know, you're a lot easier to talk to than the other Stevensons," Sheppard said. "Why is that?"

Mike turned to look at him, smiling. "I'm a space monkey like you. If I had my choice I'd be in the pilot's seat of a small combat ship, pitting my skills against the enemy directly. I'm not too big on the 'sit behind the scenes pulling the strings' positions."

"I know what you mean," Sheppard said, visualizing Elizabeth's position. "But aren't you all supposed to be the same? I mean, you *are* clones."

"Up here," Mike said, pointing at his head. "But not here," he said, thumbing his chest. "Have you ever known any identical twins?"

"A few."

"Were they the same? Personality wise?"

"All but one pair...they were polar opposites. Even looked different too."

"The body changes to match the person inside," Mike told him. "By the way, don't ever let someone convince you to swap bodies. They can do a lot of damage."

"I'll keep that in mind," Sheppard said suspiciously. "Is that what Alterrans do at parties?"

Mike laughed. "No. We don't have parties."

Sheppard raised an eyebrow. "No parties?"

"Let's just say we're workaholics," he said as the *Apollo* slowly arced up out of orbit.

A set of rings activated in a subsurface structure beneath a benign rural world on the red gate network, depositing the robed man back in his personal lair. He walked over to a nearby computer terminal and began locking it down beneath a plethora of security codes.

Next, he shut down the small facility's power generator. Backup lighting kicked on, illuminating the spartan chambers in a dull blue glow. The man retrieved several small crystals from a wall niche and walked back to the rings, where he departed. Once the rings settled the backup lights ceased as well. The facility where he had spent many of his long years now lay dormant. He didn't expect that he'd ever have need to return there again.

On Dakara a ceremony was being held, commissioning the first three H'tel motherships. Thousands of Jaffa stood in attendance as the ships took off from their berths one by one and headed out amongst the stars. Now that the Jaffa had the ability to defend themselves, with both from their ground-based weaponry and the ships in orbit, they could begin to expand beyond Dakara and incorporate other Jaffa worlds into the System Lords' domain.

This, Bra'tac expected, would draw the ire of many within the crumbling Jaffa Nation, but now that they had the basis of a proper fleet the others would have no viable choice but to accept their acquisitions, the first of which would be Chulak.

Bra'tac's history with the planet and the willingness of so many of its inhabitants to join him on Dakara made it the obvious first choice. Some, he knew, would not welcome the annexation of their world into his empire, but the vast majority would. After all, a world was not an individual entity whom he could ask for permission. Chulak, like all others in coming days, would be given the opportunity of joining Bra'tac's forces. If the vast majority of the inhabitants chose to join, he would be willing to tolerate a small number of malcontents.

However, if the planet was split or opposed to joining, he had decided not to press the issue. Unity was the underlying principle that he was building his Jaffa Empire on, and forced submission would undermine his long term efforts. Only those planets wanting to join...and several had already petitioned him to do just that...would be incorporated into the empire. Those that did not would be dealt with amicably, hopefully becoming friendly neighbors.

Bra'tac had no notions of engaging in a Jaffa civil war, and was determined to preserve as much of their current strength as possible while adding his Alterran-inspired infrastructure at a relaxed, methodical pace.

To that end, one of the three H'tel was being dispatched to Chulak with an army of engineering replicators, a few thousand loyal Jaffa, and one Paul Stevenson who had recently arrived to assist Bra'tac as Master Builder. Together they would begin incorporating and transforming Chulak into a second base of operations and homeworld for the half million Jaffa that had already flocked to his cause. Dakara's infrastructure was already being pressed to sustain them all, despite the prolific building capability of Stevenson's replicators.

The other two H'tel would remain in orbit as sentinels safeguarding the home of the 1st System Lord as well as serving as command and control platforms for the small fleet of Ha'tak's and Al'kesh that had trickled in over the past two years. Twice again larger than a standard Ha'tak, yet stretched laterally so that they were still capable of moving through the Alterran supergates if needed, the newly minted vessels still had the angular lines of the infamous pyramid design, but there was a subtle, smoother aesthetics built in that belied their Ancient technology.

Bra'tac had designed the vessels to iconically draw on both the history of the Jaffa and their future as servants of the Alterra...and based on the reactions of the throngs assembled in celebration around the Dakara shipyard he had succeeded spectacularly.

One thing that Bra'tac lacked, however, was an acceptable First Prime. He had several candidates that would be suitable in the old roll, but between himself and Ryan Stevenson, they had both agreed that any First Prime would be on a fast track to becoming an Alterra and a subsequent addition to the System Lords. As it was, none of Bra'tac's men measured up in that regard...and the one individual on his mind wanted nothing to do with his mission. He hoped in time that would change, but for the moment he would have to do without unless another suitable individual rose to notice.

"What do you have?" Ryan asked Nordman as he walked up onto the gate room platform.

"A message for you," she said, pulling up the document from the long range 'fax' machine. "It's code-locked."

Ryan frowned. "Let me see."

As he dug through the prompts for the code sequence Ana saw his eyes widen.

"Is there a problem?" she asked.

"No," Ryan said as he input the archaic sequence and the message unlocked. Inside was simply a set of gate coordinates. "Change of plans. Tell Lorne and Cadman their transformations are going to have to wait. I don't know how long I'll be gone."

Ana looked concerned. "What is it?"

Ryan shook his head slowly. "I don't know," he said absentmindedly as he dialed the 9 chevron address. He input the proper code prompt into the restricted dialing device warily, wondering what this was all about.

The DHD accepted the code and dialed the coordinates in Ida on the green gate network. Ryan mentally reviewed the intel data from the other side as he walked down the stairs. Conditions stable. No detectable threats.

"Do you want backup?" Nordman asked over the railing.

"I have to do this alone," he explained, mentally turning on his personal shield emitters held in his forearm jewelry. He let out a small sigh and stepped through the event horizon.

He emerged into the ruins of an Alterran mining planet, one that he hadn't tried to refurbish yet. The eons had beaten the crap out of the place, so much so that none of the equipment worked. The previous structures had been reduced to little more than monoliths strewn about the landscape.

"Hello, Ryan," a 'voice' said from ahead of him telepathically. The robed man stepped into view a moment later. *"Thank you for coming. I've been awaiting this day for quite some time."*

"You've got some explaining to do," Ryan challenged, also telepathically. *"That code for starters, and how you accessed this network."*

"My apologies, where are my manners." He pulled off his hood, revealing trim, yet slightly chaotic hair along with a pleasant demeanor. *"My name is Janus..."*

4

"My name is Janus. I was one of the Lanteans that survived the war against the Wraith and evacuated from Atlantis back to Earth."

Stevenson recognized the name. *"The Attero device."*

Janus's demeanor slackened and he nodded regretfully. *"Unfortunately yes, that was my doing. I take it you've been reviewing our history?"*

"I have. But the Lanteans were never given access to the other gate networks...nor the code you used. And while it's possible that a Lantean could survive 10,000 years, records indicated that few did."

Janus's smile returned. *"A sharp mind requires a fit body."*

Stevenson nodded slightly in deference.

"However, I must point out that I am actually 12,000 years old, give or take. Earth years, of course. I assume the Alterra here still use the same?"

"Avalon standard, yes," Stevenson answered, his eyes narrowing. *"What do you mean here?"*

Janus sighed. *"It's a long story, and best I begin at the beginning. Before I do, though, let's move to some place more private."*

Stevenson glanced around. *"I was under the impression that this planet was unoccupied?"*

Janus pulled two wristbands out of a pocket in his overflowing robe and attached one to his wrist. He tossed the other to Stevenson.

Ryan telekinetically caught it a meter in front of him and looked it over closely. *"What is it?"*

Janus didn't say anything. Instead, he pressed the small jewel-like button and disappeared in a wash of light.

Frowning, Stevenson pulled on the wristband and did likewise. Suddenly the view around them shifted in spectrum...and Ryan realized they had transitioned to another dimension.

"There," Janus said, satisfied. *"Now we can talk without the Ascended Empire knowing."*

Stevenson's eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed with suspicion. *"Explain."*

"I know you've used the Repository of Knowledge and possess the collective knowledge of the Alterra," Janus began slowly. *"Do you recall the temporal experiments during the time of the plague?"*

"Yes," Ryan said, both of them still using telepathy as they stood in the center of the blue-hued ruins. *"We attempted to create a time travel device so that we could go back to the beginning of the plague and discover its source. We were never able to make it work."*

"No, they didn't," Janus echoed, *"but the files on that attempt were stored in Atlantis's database. I used them to perfect the technology in hopes of returning to the period prior to the Wraith invasion and preventing their takeover of Pegasus. I had also considered traveling all the way back to before the plague killed the Alterra and assisting them...except I wasn't sure what would happen to me if the Alterra survived, because then there would have been no need to create the Lanteans."*

"You made it work?" Stevenson asked disbelievingly.

Janus smiled awkwardly. *"I thought I had. In retrospect I was incredibly naïve...and, I'll admit, a bit arrogant. I incorporated my designs into a navicula porta, but was unable to test them due to the council's reluctance to pursue any temporal research due to such causality paradoxes that I mentioned. I was about to forego my research and pursue other projects after we returned to Earth, but just before the evacuation happened my time machine appeared in orbit and was shot down by the Wraith besieging the city."*

Stevenson thought back through the mission reports he'd read. "Weir."

Janus smiled again. *"Quite right. She was the only survivor, and after a bit of deceit on my part to the council I arranged for her to remain behind and insure the city survived until her expedition from Earth could reclaim it. Might I ask...is she still alive?"*

"No," Stevenson told him. *"The one you speak of expired shortly after her removal from stasis. Her counterpart from this timeline is alive though."*

Janus nodded, then pushed aside thoughts of the past. *"Both time devices were destroyed by the council, but given the 'success' I witnessed I didn't let the matter drop. After we returned to Earth we didn't remain together for long. The council dissolved and we all went our separate ways, though we did try and keep track of each other's whereabouts."*

"Given the freedom I had, and using technology brought back to Earth from Atlantis, I rebuilt my time device and began experimenting with short jumps...nothing that would cause any catastrophic paradoxes, but enough to begin collecting data. After a number of years I had concluded that when I made a jump that I and everything else contained within the navicula porta was immune from causality paradoxes. That should have been a warning sign...but I didn't pick up on it."

"Let me guess," Stevenson said, putting the pieces together. He already had the files from the Alterran experiment in memory. *"You disregarded the protocols we established, wondering why we had overlooked certain avenues of research."*

"Indeed," Janus said, looking even more embarrassed. *"As you already probably know, I wasn't actually traveling through time..."*

"You were traveling to alternate realities," Stevenson finished.

"Not traveling," Janus said, his scientific demeanor back. *"I was creating new ones with each jump."*

That revelation caused an eyebrow to raise on the Alterra. *"Created?"*

Janus nodded. *"I know you didn't do research into this area for several reasons, and as you suspected there were unforeseen consequences. When I traveled back to before the Wraith invasion, I actually caused the original timeline to split from that point, with the new branch running parallel to the original...only that the new timeline's dates didn't match up with the original. The time I jumped to synced up with the time I had left."*

"So the new branch aligned with your personal temporal progression," Stevenson said, beginning to understand.

"Yes, that's why I mistakenly believed I was time traveling. I was able to relive past events...and even alter them, but that's because I wasn't actually in the original timeline. I was in a duplicate. It took me several hundred years and thousands of jumps before I realized my mistake...by which point I was thoroughly lost."

"You didn't know how to transition between existing timelines," Stevenson guessed.

"No," Janus said, shaking his head. *"I couldn't. At least, not for a while. Eventually I traveled back, creating a new timeline, and warned the original Alterra of the plague and asked*

for their assistance. They helped me construct a device to move from one reality to another and told me of other races that had done the same...some with disastrous results."

"The quantum mirrors," Stevenson said offhand.

"The what?" Janus asked.

"A few years ago the Humans on Avalon discovered an artifact that they dubbed a 'quantum mirror.' They never knew anything about it, except that it allowed them to transition between alternate realities. I know that it came from a species called the Vrattikel that sought to set up an Empire across realities...but they never perfected the technology. Some of their people died from incompatibility issues when they encountered their duplicates."

"That's because the technology didn't completely separate them from their original realities," Janus explained. "The Alterra and I discovered this flaw quite early and it took a lot of work to eliminate it. A clean transition between realities has no setbacks, but there are a lot of ways for things to go wrong with it. I don't believe any other species that they knew of had successfully created a similar technology."

"None that I know of," Stevenson told him.

"Well, after we'd perfected the technology we went our separate ways. They began preparing for the plague and I started randomly searching through the realities trying to find my way back home. It was random transitioning for a long time, during which I realized that there must have been other timeline splitting going on besides my own, for there were alternate realities so bizarre that they couldn't possibly be a result of my jumps. It occurred to me that these timeline splits could result from any point in the universe..."

"Alternate realities aren't natural," Stevenson speculated. "They're a result of time travel experiments."

Janus nodded. "So I began to realize."

"Interesting," Stevenson mewed. "Please continue."

"My first priority was to develop some sort of navigational system to track my movements between realities. This proved somewhat difficult, but with time I managed to create a system that would mark the 'location' of each reality I had been in. With this new technology I began transitioning a lot, building up a database of timelines. When I had gathered several thousand I began research towards a sensor package that could pinpoint other realities that I hadn't been to yet. Many years later I succeeded, then I began to unravel the interconnected nature of the timelines."

"You plotted the diversion points?"

"Yes, and once I was able to do that I was able to start compiling a database to use as a road map. In time I was able to find my original reality again, but not before discovering an impossible chain of events in several timelines. All of a sudden the Alterra returned after being dead for millions of years. I did some checking and discovered you...or rather, your duplicates."

"And?"

"We were never told about the Repositories," Janus said, half complaining. "We didn't realize the Alterra had any plans outside of Pegasus until we evacuated to Earth and found the primitive populations there."

"If you knew there were others out there," Stevenson explained, "you might have considered breaking quarantine to make contact with them. Pegasus was an untouched galaxy, and it was hoped that you wouldn't contract the plague there, hence the separate frequency for your gates to keep you isolated."

"Yes, I know, and it was a prudent measure, but still it felt like we were left out of the loop."

Stevenson scoffed at that. "You were given Atlantis and a developmental advantage over the other seed species. You had a chance to rebuild our civilization directly, then you blew it when the Wraith kicked your butts."

"Normally I'd be inclined to argue the strength of the Wraith in our defense, but then I've seen how easily you defeated them in other realities...so I can't disagree. We did screw up, in many ways. I'm glad the Alterra had a backup plan. It means our failure wasn't the end of their hopes."

"Actually, you were the backup plan. The Repository was the primary."

Janus frowned. "Really...must have been an unanticipated variation between realities."

"You couldn't have gained access to our codes by mere observation," Stevenson said, getting back to their previous point. "Someone had to give it to you."

"Quite right," Janus noted. "You did."

"I told you to use the Repository?" Stevenson challenged. "I know you are Alterra, and while I can't read your mind I can feel the difference in you. You're no Lantean."

Janus nodded slowly. "You're getting ahead of me. When I discovered the rebirth of the Alterra I investigated. I was curious how it would play out, so I made another time jump, creating an alternate reality from the distant future, essentially pulling it back in sync with the present. I could then transition back into the reality I had been in while knowing the 'future,' though now that the timeline had split there was no guarantee that events would play out the same way."

"Something went wrong..." Stevenson guessed.

Janus stared at him for a moment. "When I went a thousand years into the future I found a large and vibrant society. I decided to take it a bit further and went forward a million years...and they were all gone. I back tracked to the point where they disappeared, creating more alternate realities as I did...and discovered that they were fighting a war beyond measure. When they lost they were completely annihilated. No contingency plan. No backup. The survivors were hunted down and eradicated. The Alterra and all their allies were erased from the universe."

Ryan's jaw clenched with his teeth grinding together. "Go on."

"I went back to the first reality I had met you in. Several years had passed and you were just getting your footing. I told you what I had discovered and you confided in me your about your secret mission against the Ascended Empire."

"That explains these," Stevenson said, holding up the wrist band.

Janus nodded. "My mind is shielded against them, as yours is, but I didn't want to take the chance of them being able to intercept our telepathy."

"Shielded how?"

"If you'll bear with me..." Janus implored. "Knowing the secret with which you'd been entrusted I began exploring the timelines, both those that I created and existing ones. Through them all one constant remained...you lost. Badly. Most of the timelines you didn't exist in, but the ones where you did emerge and began to rebuild the Alterra you were eventually drawn into a war to counter the threat they posed. You started the war each time...and each time you failed."

"How?"

Janus wavered. "It's complicated. Needless to say, I told your duplicate all this and he was as concerned as you are now. I also traveled back to my original timeline, but it was

running 7,000 years behind. I had been lost in the alternate realities for 3,000 years and no matter how many transitions I made, no matter how many alternate realities I created, all existing timelines progressed one year at a time. If I jumped forward 7,000 years in my original timeline I'd end up creating an alternate, branched off from that point."

"Why not put yourself into stasis or a time dilation field?"

"I considered that, but both would leave me vulnerable to outside influence. I could be killed within either device if someone tampered with it from the outside. So, instead of waiting and hoping for you to arise in my original timeline I chose to return to the alternate reality and assist you there."

"Still no joy?"

"We thought we had a handle on the problem. It took us 5,000 years to get to a point where we were comfortable with our readiness...then we challenged the Ascended Empire. It worked...but then they blindsided us. We fought a 500 year war, gradually losing ground. Towards the end you told me to leave, take what I had learned, and use it in another reality to defeat them."

"I died?" Stevenson asked.

"I don't know. We had a failsafe plan, which he could have used, but we still retained three galaxies at the time and he wasn't willing to quit, but he couldn't see any route to victory. So I left, but I was still 1500 years shy of your emergency in my original timeline...if you emerged at all. So instead of traveling back there, I created an alternate timeline starting from just before we started the war against the Ascended Empire. I told you and my alternate version everything that had happened and left them to try and find a solution."

"Then you went forward again," Stevenson guessed.

"I did, which created another alternate reality. The alterations they'd made bought them more time, and the war dragged out longer, but in the end they still lost. So I tried again, and again, and again. Every time, every change, every alteration failed. At last I argued with you not to challenge them...to wait it out. I went forward again and discovered that it didn't matter. Several hundred thousand years later they attacked you, with the same outcome. They will not tolerate the Alterra...we're too advanced. If we don't stop them, they will stop us eventually."

"You said 'us.'"

"In the first attempt, when I spent 5,000 years helping you rebuild, you told me to use the Repository, but not to accept the secondary programming. I don't know if I listened or failed the tests, either way I was transformed but not the way you were. After Sheppard died from the attempt you didn't want anyone else trying."

"Sheppard?" Stevenson asked.

"You thought he could handle the stress, and he did pass the Repository's tests...but the constant flux was too much for him. After a few years it spiraled out of control and killed him. That's why you didn't want anyone else to attempt the accelerated advancement."

Stevenson's eyes narrowed. "He should have partially stabilized before that."

Janus tilted his head warily. "It gets worse," he warned. "You progress through a series of developmental stages. You told me that you barely survived some of them. You didn't know that when you had Sheppard try."

"How then is your mind shielded?" Stevenson asked. "That should have been in the secondary programming."

"You did it, later on when you learned how. You didn't want the Ascended Empire knowing what I knew...or what we had planned. And I got rather tired of working and living in an alternate dimensional facility to keep them from prying."

"So, how much longer do you have until you catch up with me in your original timeline?"

Janus smiled wryly. "My reality hopping, time traveling days are over. This is my original timeline and I'm here to help you find a way to stop the Ascended Empire."

5

Mike whistled appreciatively while Sheppard's jaw hung open. "That's an impressive sight."

"Yes it is," Mike echoed. The view out the *Apollo's* forward window was telling. Off in the distance there was a large 'fork' with five prongs...and on each prong were docked ships, the same make and model as the large enemy ships the *Tria* had destroyed.

"Ok," Sheppard said slowly, counting ships. "What do we do about it?"

"Report back what we've found."

"I mean after that," Sheppard said. He'd counted 78 on the nearest prong, and the others were equally thick with ships.

"I don't know," Mike said honestly. "Our tech is superior to theirs, but numbers do create an advantage. The Columnars were designed to counter a threat such as this, but as of now we only have one operational, and it's already deployed to Dracona."

"Designed how?" Sheppard said. "I know they can kick the crap out of about anything, but..."

"Strong shields designed to weather a large amount of damage in a short span of time coupled with a large number of weapon systems that can be used to attack multiple targets at once. Why else did you think it had so many plasma cannons and four Lox generators?"

"Don't you need a lot of gunners for that?" he said, half dodging the question.

"Yes, you do. And currently we don't have the numbers to field full crews even if we had the ships ready."

"If you don't mind me asking...why not just make more clones?"

Mike turned his attention away from the enemy space station and looked at Sheppard. "With so few Alterra, any clones produced will make up a disproportionate percentage of the population. My group was created out of need, but Ryan didn't do so lightly. I doubt you'll see any more of us. The original idea was to convert trustworthy people into Alterra, but with clones you're getting a newbie...and there's a chance you might get someone...unworthy out of the process, despite the memories and knowledge granted to them."

"By unworthy you mean...an evil Alterra?" Sheppard asked, not liking his own question.

"A small possibility," Mike admitted, "but given what we know, even one could cause quite a lot of damage."

"I can image," Sheppard said, then hesitated. "Then again, I probably can't."

"Once we get a small fleet of Columnars built, they'll have an Alterran captain and a crew made up of Lanteans and Humans. Replicators wouldn't do any better than the ship's computer which, to be fair, can handle the weaponry adequately given clear operational orders. It's when things get fuzzy that machines can't be trusted."

"Still," Sheppard argued. "A million of the combat drones the *Apollo* has, launched on their own against a fleet like that has got to be effective."

"I never said self-guided machines weren't effective," Mike clarified. "They just don't have the...accuracy of target acquisition and troubleshooting capabilities that the Alterra require."

You give these drones and other automated attack craft to a commander who doesn't care about being sloppy so long as the mission is achieved and such machines will be quite effective."

"But that's not how Alterra fight, I take it?" Sheppard asked.

"No...we don't make sacrifices of personnel or planets. If we don't have an accurate shot, we don't take one. Friendly fire is abhorrent."

"No argument there," Sheppard said quickly, "but doesn't that leave you in a strategic disadvantage?"

"Maybe for rookies," Mike said, glancing out the viewport, "but the more skilled you become in warfare, the more options open up to you. We can overcome such strategies from our enemies without having to sink to their level, but such things take careful planning and years of preparation. It's not something we can throw together on a whim."

"Like ordering your people on suicide missions carrying explosives?"

Mike's eyes narrowed. "Darkside tactics like that do have their advantages in combat, and based on what we've seen from this race," he said, motioning out the window, "I suspect they operate much the same."

"Darkside, huh?" Sheppard asked, noting the Star Wars reference.

"That's the closest English term I know," he said as the *Apollo* circled around the 'fork' and saw the thicker backside 'handle.' "Looks like this is also a shipyard," he said as several inset bays showed partially constructed duplicates of the ships docked on the prongs.

"I don't suppose this is their only station?" Sheppard asked rhetorically.

"Based on the entry vectors of their ships, I'd say we're looking at at *least* four locations in total."

Sheppard nodded. "How long until the Columnars are finished?"

"Another year," Mike said regretfully.

"Let's not poke the bee hive until then, ok?" Sheppard pleaded.

"You read my mind," Mike half joked as he maneuvered the *Apollo* away from the enemy installation. "We've seen enough. Let's get this intel back to Atlantis. We've got some rethinking to do before we start laying into the Wraith."

"Whoever they are," Mike reported to the others in the conference room, "they mean business. Their tech may not be as advanced as ours, but it's still effective. Analysis of the *Tria* battle data suggests a five to one ratio. Their primary weapons are potent, and can overload our shields if they can sit and pour fire into them."

"But if we can fire pesqua through their shields..." Elizabeth pointed out.

"We can't count on that always being the case," Ryan told her. "Shield dynamics can be altered to resist the pesqua, which we can then reattune to get through again. If your enemy knows what they're doing, and possesses sufficient technology, they can render the pesqua's shield penetrating capabilities moot."

"Janus," Sheppard spoke up. "You know anything about these guys?"

The former Lantean exchanged glances with Ryan, then hesitantly answered. "I have encountered them in several realities, but as I said before, there's no guarantee that events in this timeline will play out the same as the others. And to tell you the truth, I've made several mistakes in the past when I anticipated something to be the same and it turned out not to be the case, and it usually is something you wouldn't expect."

"Understood," Ryan told him. "We'll make sure to verify anything you tell us before we act on it, but right now we're in the dark and any light you could shed on the situation would be useful."

"Very well," Janus relented. They'd just been through a two hour debriefing session as Janus explained his reappearance and answered a plethora of questions...minus the sensitive information, of course. Even now one of the ascended could be eavesdropping on their conversation. "I'll start with what I know from my experiences in this reality."

Sheppard raised his eyebrows. "The Lanteans ran into them?"

"Not exactly, but there are some things you need to know first. When the original Lanteans settled in this galaxy, they did so through several means. Many planets were colonized with various levels of development, but all planets were grouped together into one of several prefectures. Each one served as a supply and support network centered on a copy of Atlantis."

Sheppard perked up. "I think we found one of those..."

Janus glanced to Ryan.

"Agartha," Stevenson told him.

Janus frowned. "It was evacuated and destroyed early in the war."

"Beat up, yes," Sheppard told him. "Destroyed, no. It still had a little power left and a few drones, which the locals were using to fight off culling raids."

"How were they firing the drones?" Janus asked.

Sheppard shrugged. "The royal family possessed the gene."

"That's disturbing," Janus said regretfully. "The evacuees must have deceived the council, hoping that the Wraith would also believe the city destroyed. The only way the native population could have gained the activation gene was for one or more of the survivors to have interbred with them, which suggests only a handful remained behind. Possibly a single individual."

Elizabeth frowned. "Was that sort of thing common back then...I mean the Lanteans deceiving each other?"

Janus sighed. "It wasn't common, but it wasn't unheard of either, which actually ties in with what I was going to tell you. Another of the city/ships, name Abba Longa, was home to a man by the name of Remus. He rose to prominence in the city, then staged a peaceful revolt, seizing power for himself and his supporters. The council refused to take any sort of military action to resolve the situation and merely exiled those on Abba Longa from the rest of Lantean society."

"There was an exchange of personnel," Janus continued. "Those that had not taken part in the overthrow left Abba Longa for other worlds, while those that favored Remus and his philosophy migrated to the city from across Pegasus. The prefecture that Abba Longa serviced was split and annexed by other adjacent prefectures...isolating the dissidents."

Daniel raised a hand for him to stop. "What sort of philosophy?"

"Remus believed in unfettered research, and didn't hold to many of the restrictions placed on Lantean scientists. No line of scientific inquiry was off limits, in his opinion, regardless of the moral implications. An acquaintance of mine in the scientific community named Romulus was of a lesser, yet similar mind and left Atlantis to join him. He wasn't nearly as extreme in his beliefs, but he too felt...restrained. After he left, I had no contact with him due to the communications blackouts imposed by their exile until the war with the Wraith began. Despite the misgivings between us, Abba Longa fought alongside the rest of the Lanteans in the war. When it eventually fell, Romulus returned to Atlantis with a number of other evacuees. He was one of the few that survived to war's end and evacuated back to Earth."

"Once on Earth, he established the beginnings of what eventually became the Roman Empire, but then he vanished and we knew nothing of what happened to him. That is the last information I have from this timeline."

"Hold on a minute," Sheppard interrupted. "If the Wraith couldn't destroy Atlantis, how did they destroy the copies?"

"A mixture of arrogance and naivety," Janus answered. "The architecture was copied, then some alterations were made based on our needs. However, the advanced weaponry that the Alterra constructed on Atlantis was deemed unnecessary and not included in the copies. Even the old style Alterran warships were redesigned for 'peaceful' purposes and eventually evolved into the *Aurora*-class vessels, one of which you still possess."

"By peaceful you mean pacifists?" Sheppard asked with a touch of disdain.

"Nearly," Janus admitted. "We did of course equip the cities and ships with some basic weapons, usually the pesqua due to their shield penetrating capabilities, but anything else was looked at as almost...barbaric."

"Figures," Sheppard complained.

"When the Wraith attacked us using ships designed to fight without shields it took away the pesqua's advantage. Our small supply of pesqua were quickly expended, leaving our ships and cities with no ability to counterattack. Their shields would hold up for a long time, but eventually the Wraith would overwhelm them. In this way they captured several of our ships with their potentia intact...which further complicated the problem."

"So we heard," Sheppard noted.

"We quickly redesigned our ships and cities with larger pesqua storage holds, assuming that in greater numbers they would be able to counteract the Wraith's armor advantage and destroy their ships...which they did. But the Wraith kept producing more and more vessels...their numbers negated our enlarged carry capacity and they began methodically encroaching into our territory. As you asked, they would attack one of our cities, lose a massive number of ships to our pesqua until our holds ran dry, then they would arrange their ships in orbit and pound our shields until they could overload them or drain the potentia powering them."

"Seeing our disadvantage we immediately began designing and producing energy based weaponry similar to what Atlantis was equipped with. We established a satellite defense network around Atlantis and two other cities. It slowed the Wraith down considerably, but couldn't stop them. Only Atlantis, with the original Alterra weaponry, could hold them at bay. We had scavenged as many potentia as we could from other installations and our production facilities before they were destroyed, so we never had a need for power in Atlantis. We sat there, besieged for many years trying to find a way to counter their numbers...but we never did. Eventually we gave up and left."

"I'm curious," Elizabeth spoke up. "Why didn't you take Atlantis back to Avalona? It is a flying city."

Janus hung his head. "When I said we gave up, I meant it holistically. The council abandoned the war and Pegasus entirely. They didn't even try to rebuild our civilization in another galaxy. Their spirit was broken. Most of them, honestly, returned to Earth to die, each in their chosen way."

Elizabeth hung her head for a moment. "That's sad."

"Yes it was," Janus agreed, "but some of us didn't give up. Several finally learned how to ascend...which brings me back to Romulus."

"He ascended?" Daniel asked.

"I don't know," Janus said cautiously. "Everything I'm going to tell you now is knowledge from alternate realities. The Romulus I knew...I can't tell you for certain what happened to him...only his alternates."

Daniel nodded.

"Romulus spent several years as one of the ascended, then retook corporeal form in Pegasus...where Remus and several survivors of Alba Longa were attempting to rebuild in secret, hidden from the Wraith. They didn't have much to work with, but most of them were scientists who then dedicated themselves to rediscovering the technological secrets they once possessed, absent any moral restrictions. Those bodies you have in the med bay are their handiwork."

Ryan and Mike's eyes widened, which surprised Weir, Daniel, and Sheppard more than Janus's revelation.

"As you're no doubt suspecting," Janus continued, addressing the other Alterra, "these creatures were engineered to fight the Wraith. They use them as expendable soldiers and designed them with a lifespan of only three years, after which they have to be replaced. They did this so that any losses against the Wraith would be next to meaningless, given that these troops had to be replaced anyway. Once they built up a sufficient supply base to be able to field and resupply an army of these creatures on a magnitude capable of challenging the Wraith they launch them against each other, letting attrition wear the Wraith down while they continued their production of these creatures endlessly."

"How long?" Ryan asked.

"If this reality proves similar to the others, another hundred years or so before they have sufficient, sustainable numbers...but it usually doesn't come to that. Immediately after we destroy the Wraith they emerge from hiding to attack us...with shields reconfigured to resist our pesqua," he added.

"Sons of bitches," Sheppard said under his breath.

"Are Romulus and Remus still alive?" Mike asked.

"Depends on the reality," Janus said. "In some they were, but they had to cheat to do it, using clone bodies to sustain themselves. Given their lack of technology, they suffered a significant diminishing return every time they transferred into a new body. It's also possible that Romulus ascended and descended to rejuvenate himself. Either way, there's a good chance they're still alive. If they're not, then their descendants are carrying out their plans in their stead."

Sheppard looked at Mike and nodded his understanding. "I take it these creatures are the product of the 'unworthy' ones?"

Mike tilted his head in consideration. "It would be far worst if they'd retained the Atlantis databanks, but yeah. Based on what Janus told us, these things are designed to be used in conjunction with darkside tactics."

Ryan raised an eyebrow at the term 'darkside' but let it pass.

"Great," Sheppard said, summing up Janus's speech pithily. "Evil Lanteans."

Verification

1

John woke up disoriented, seeing nothing but blurry white. His head was pounding and his eyes felt like they were going to pop out of his head. It took him a few moments before he realized he was hanging upside down...that explained his swollen head, but the white light nearly blinding his eyes was still a mystery.

He squinted and rolled up in a sit-up and looked at his feet. They were fixed against the white blur, he couldn't move them at all. Some sort of translucent material covered them like glue, but he couldn't make out what. His abs started burning from the exertion so he grabbed his pant legs to hold himself up as the blood drained out of his head, clearing it.

John's eyes started to adjust to the glare and he realized that the mass of white was light reflecting off the snow above, below, and around him. He was in some sort of snow cave...and his feet were stuck to the ceiling in a mass of clear ice.

"What is this?" John asked, staring into his knees. Off in the distance he heard a low, echoing roar... "No," he said, disbelievingly. "No, it can't. Uh uh. This can't be happening."

Again, the roar came. This time it sounded closer.

"Oh crap...come on, John," he told himself as he futilely tried to pry his feet loose. He let go and dropped back to his inverted position as another, closer roar/gurgle echoed from the tunnel in front of him. He looked around, trying to see anything other than the white snow and ice and caught a glint of a non-white object to his left.

"Son of a..." he said, not believing it. A small cylindrical metal object was half buried in the snow. John reached towards it, but he was a meter short. He tried rocking himself sideways, but that didn't work at all with his feet solidly sealed in place above him.

A slight rumble reverberated through the ice and fear spiked in John's gut. A couple of seconds later another followed it, then another, and another followed by a very loud roar.

"No, no, no," John whispered angrily. He was completely helpless.

A few meters down the tunnel a large white-haired thing plodded around the corner. It roared deafeningly loud when it saw him, then raised large, claw covered hands and walked towards him.

John couldn't do anything but watch. "Somebody...help!" he screamed, knowing it wouldn't do him any good. The creature moved up on him and dug its claws into his throat. He felt the blinding pain...

...then woke up in his bed in Atlantis, sweating heavily.

"Oh, hell," he whispered, sitting up. He felt his neck out of reflex...it was still there, intact and covered with beard stubble but no blood. He breathed heavily for a minute then laid back down, the nightmare already vanishing from his memory.

"That's the last time I watch Star Wars before bed," he swore to himself as he closed his eyes and tried to get some sleep.

A wormhole formed in the center of the yellow gate, with a large kawoosh leading the way. It quickly retracted into a stable event horizon. The activation attracted the attention of several nearby Priors who altered the Doci through their interconnected staffs. A long moment later the Orici stepped out of the event horizon into the newly rebuilt city of Celestis.

Four nearby Priors bowed with respect as he passed them by. Before he was fifty meters from the gate the Doci found him.

"*Orici*," he greeted him respectfully, but did not bow more than his head.

"*Doci*," Ryan returned the greeting. "*Status?*" he asked as the head Prior dropped into step with him.

"*Twelve percent have begun construction, but only three percent are complete*," he said apologetically.

"*Twelve is more than I expected*," Ryan told him. "*I hope you're not overextending yourselves*."

"*I have made sure we are not*," the Doci assured him, "*but there are so many villages to renovate that we cannot afford to be lax. I assure you we are working with all diligence and speed, but we have not sacrificed the integrity of craftsmanship to do so*."

"*As it should be*," Ryan agreed. "*Take me to one of the completed projects*."

The Doci nodded and the pair walked off to a ring platform hidden within the architecture of the city. They used it to transfer to the set of rings near the Ori stargate on the planet.

The two upright prongs of the gate were just outside the edge of the forest on the furthest extreme of the plains that as of now were covered with a thin layer of water that made them shimmer in the daytime sunlight. Situated directly in front of the stargate, yet sufficiently distant from the threshold, a small pillar rose from the ground constructed of the same gleaming silver metal.

The Doci pressed three buttons head high on the pillar, then another two at hip height.

The small gap at the top of the stargate connected with a brilliant arc of energy, then the oblong event horizon formed with an equally distorted vortex. Once it settled, the Orici and Doci stepped through the gate to one of many planets within Destra. This one, in particular, had been one of the first reconstructed after the brief yet brutal civil war the Ori had fought after the truth of their existence had been revealed.

The stargate on the other side was also situated in a forest...but off in the distance two cities rose above the tree line.

Ryan turned around as the gate deactivated and saw another three domes in the distance. Where there had once been primitive villages, the Ori had replaced them with more advanced structures on the Orici's order. Living simply didn't necessitate living primitively.

There was a series of stone paths leading away from the gate, of which the Doci let Ryan choose. Together they walked several kilometers toward one of the domed cities, discussing a myriad of subjects along the way. Every time they met the Doci was eager to hear more of the Alterra and their history with the Ori...and Ryan was happy to oblige.

When they reached the outskirts of the 'village' they came before two small structures adjacent to the entrance to the dome. They sat nestled up against the twenty meter high wall that the dome then sprung from. Stationed just above the structures were two concealed weapons nodes imbedded into the wall.

Half a dozen guards exited the checkpoint buildings and immediately fell to their knees in respect. The two leaders walked by them and into the city.

Once they got through the thick walls, they emerged into a wide courtyard with a view of the sun overhead. A transparent dome capped the sky, with a number of towers rising beneath it. One came from the structure in the center of the courtyard, the others came from buildings ringing the perimeter. Other buildings surrounded those, then there were the walls. It wasn't a large settlement, but it would house over a thousand people comfortably.

That said, the streets and buildings were spartan in nature. No ornamentation was visible aside from that which had been built into the infrastructure. There were no carts, tables, chairs, kiosks, or anything else that had been typical in the previous village at this location. A scattering of people moved about until they laid eyes on the pair...then they froze in their tracks and looked on them with awe.

Ryan observed them, felt their minds briefly, and took notice of their clothing. They'd adopted a slightly altered version of their previous garments. These had less cloth and more trim lines, with just a hint of Alterran design to them. Almost all of the garments bore the Ori symbol over the left breast or the collar.

One mind, however, stood out from the rest. It too was surprised to see the Doci and the Orici in their small village, but that surprise quickly turned to anger. Forewarned, Ryan knew the stone was coming before the man even threw it.

The Orici stopped the paving stone in mid air, then slowly turned his head in the direction of the man. The Doci immediately stepped between the two of them, but Ryan mentally called him off.

"Come here," the Orici demanded. When the man stiffened and held his ground, Ryan telekinetically pulled him across the courtyard until he was barely a meter away.

The Orici looked him in the eye for a long moment, reading his mind. "Not only was your attempt to harm me futile, your ire is misplaced. I did not kill your sister."

His jaw visibly shaking, the man uttered a quick reply. "The Ori... sent her to die. You are...the Orici. You are as guilty as they are."

"Were," Ryan corrected him patiently. "The ascended Ori are dead and gone. Those who sent your sister and her husband off into another galaxy to fight a war not of their making are no longer here for you to avenge yourself against...and had you tried when they still lived, they would have wiped you from existence with a mere thought."

"You are like them," the man said, more defiant by the minute. "You are them."

The Orici pointed a finger and the stone, still suspended in the air, traveled back to the place in the courtyard where the man had pried it up. It settled back into place, making the white tile courtyard whole again. Ryan then reached out a hand and touched the man on the forehead. He bled off his anger and stared directly into his eyes, his words sounding aloud and within the man's mind.

"Let go of the past. Your sister is lost, but you are not. Live in her memory...do not die in it, as you tried to do today," he said, then left the man standing in a mixture of shock and awe as he and the Doci continued onward.

John woke to find himself again hanging from the ceiling of the ice cave. This time he knew where he was and looked up at his feet to confirm it.

"This has got to be another dream," he said, his head pounding again. He pulled himself up and stared at his knees as his head cleared. The clenched muscles and stretched joints, however, told him this was real. As his head cleared he tried to figure out what was going on. He'd had dreams before, but in them there was always a part of his mind that was shut down,

some reasoning or sensation that was denied to him, but right now he could feel everything and with the blood quickly draining from his mind he found he could think clearly too.

"What is this?" he asked aloud as the first distant roar sounded.

"Not again," he said, looking around for the small metal cylinder. He knew he was short of it, but reached anyway...still a meter off.

He couldn't reach it, so instead he tried to claw away at the too smooth ice covering his boots...*his boots*.

If he could unlace them...but no, the ices were laced over too. Damn.

The second roar sounded, just like it had before. John knew he didn't have much time left.

He released his hold on his legs and let his body swing back down. He tried to rock himself forward and back...hopefully cracking the ice above him. He tried for seven swings, but did little more than make himself dizzy. His feet were stuck solid.

The pounding of footsteps began and John began to panic. Of all the ways a person had to die...helpless was the worst.

The creature came around the corner and John committed himself to at least go down fighting. Hanging upside down he balled his fists and waited for the creature to come within range.

The white ball of fur and claws stomped towards him and John swung at it with his eyes closed. He felt his fist bounce off its dense muscle beneath the fur...then he felt the claws tearing at his throat.

With a start John woke up in bed again, the recent nightmare quickly fading from memory.

He pulled the thermal cover off his bed and quickly stood up, feeling his neck for cuts. Nothing.

"What the hell is going on?" he half yelled as his eyes fell on the clock beside his bed. His morning alarm wouldn't go off for another two hours but, tired as he was, he didn't feel like going to sleep again. Instead, he got dressed and headed down to the commissary to get some early breakfast cubes. An hour later and all traces of his nightmare would disappear from his memory. The next night he would go to bed without a clue that it was about to happen again.

2

"Not again," John said disbelievingly as he woke up, finding himself hanging upside down in the same snow cave as before. He hurriedly began looking around and considering his options...he wouldn't have long before the creature came back to kill him.

"Come on," he said, feeling through his pants and heavy coat. "There's gotta be a knife here somewhere." Off in the distance he heard the first roar.

"Damn it!" he said when he couldn't find anything. "How the hell am I supposed to get out of this?" Again, the metal cylinder caught his eye.

A thought struck him. He began hurriedly taking off his jacket.

Making sure not to drop it, he grabbed the cuff and swung it toward the object...it brushed over the top of it.

"Good," he said, pulling his torso up so he could clear his head a bit. The blood was still swelling in his head. After a moment, and the sound of a second roar, he dropped back down and swung the jacket up and over the top of the cylinder...and dragged it toward him.

The cylinder stayed put, but some of the snow around it was pulled away. John tried again and again, getting more snow each time, but the cylinder wouldn't move more than a couple millimeters...he just didn't have the leverage.

John tried continuously, with no success, up until the time the creature came and slit his throat with its claws.

"No!" he cried, exasperated as he once again found himself hanging upside down.

He quickly pulled off his jacket and started pulling away the snow from the cylinder, but he wasn't making much progress. The roars came again, spaced exactly the same as the last time, then the footfalls, then the creature came into view...and it killed him again.

"Damn it," John yelled angrily as he found himself upside down in the snow cave again. He pounded his legs with his fists, trying to dislodge them as he twisted back and forth. They wouldn't move...but his knee joint did, popping out of place.

"God..." he cried, which was followed by the first distant roar.

He looked around, hoping to see something different this time, something he could use to cut himself free...but the only thing in sight was snow and the metal cylinder.

John reached towards it, knowing he wasn't going to reach it, but at this point it didn't matter. He couldn't just hang here and get killed again. He had to do SOMETHING.

"What the hell," he said, reaching towards the cylinder and trying to pull it with the Force...

Nothing happened.

"Yeah...didn't think so," he said, looking for something else. He jerked his arms up and down, trying to get his torso moving so as to pull his feet out of the ice.

Again, no luck.

In the back of John's mind his father's disapproval echoed beneath his growing dread as the creature's footfalls became audible. He couldn't get himself out of this...he was incompetent...he could never do anything right...he probably deserved this...what a waste... Again the creature came into sight...and again it killed him.

John found himself in the same cave again, but didn't waste any time complaining about it. There had to be a way out of this. This had to be some sort of test...or torture. George Lucas's revenge, maybe, for him stealing the name of his planets...

Whatever, he wasn't just going to lie down and die...not that he could lie down, given that he was hanging by his feet...but it was just a metaphor.

Lucas...his way out of this lay right beside John, out of reach.

He twisted his head and looked at the half buried cylinder.

There was no way. This wasn't Star Wars. He wasn't a Jedi. He'd tried it already. This wasn't a dream where he could will it to happen. His body was real...this was real, however impossible that was. Maybe if Stevenson had made him an Ancient he could have reached out and pulled it to him using telekinesis... but he hadn't. John was still just a Human, and unless a burst of cosmic radiation hit him and turned him into Mr. Fantastic, there was no way he was going to be able to reach it.

The creature came again, as it had numerous times before...and killed him.

The snow creature plodded around the corner, looked at John and roared. It lifted its clawed hands and lunged towards him.

John's eyes didn't move from the cylinder. It was his way out, he knew it. But it was still beyond his reach. He felt the claws at his throat...then he woke up, jumping out of bed.

"What the hell," he said as the images and sensations began to fade. He walked to his sink and splashed some water on his face, trying to think through what had or had not just happened.

Fifteen minutes later all memory of the snow cave and his recurring nightmare would be expunged from memory. He would go about his daily duties completely unaware of what had happened to him while he slept.

John found himself in the cave again, and his eyes went directly to the cylinder. It was the way out, he knew it. But he couldn't get to it, like some cruel joke. His salvation was right in front of him, like the thirsty guy in mythology who was standing in a pool of water, but whenever he reached down to drink it the water receded beyond his reach.

The cylinder was right there...*right there!* He knew what it was, even though it was half buried. But how was he supposed to get to it?

He knew how, but it was impossible...that was the joke of it. He had to be an Ancient, or a Jedi, to be able to get it.

John reached his hand out anyway...nothing. He let it flop back down, hanging below his head. He couldn't even touch the ground to make and throw a snowball at the creature. He was completely helpless.

Again the white mass came, and again it killed him.

John hung upside down, the nightmare beginning again just as it always had. There was always silence for a few moments, then the roars would begin, then the footfalls...then the

slicing claws and his groundhogesk death. He didn't know when the last time had been, or how many times he'd been here. He just knew that he was here again and unless his luck changed he'd die just like he had the other times.

"Think, John, think," he said, pulling his torso up to try and clear the blood from his head. "If I'm Luke, then I should be able to use the Force...why can't I?"

"Uncertain are you..." a strange voice said beside John, startling him enough that he lost his grip and fell back upside down. Off to his left was a ghostlike little alien.

"What the..." John said as his brain adjusted to the upside down view. "What the hell took you so long? You know how many times I've died already?" he said as the creature roared in the background.

"And learned, you have not," Yoda's translucent image told him.

"Learned what?" John asked in a hurry. "How about you cut me free and we can discuss this elsewhere?"

"Dead I am," Yoda said, laughing. "Free you I cannot."

"Perfect," John said, taking a swipe at him. His hand passed right through. "You just come by to chat?"

"Strong you are in the Force. Free yourself, you must."

"I tried!" John yelled in frustration as the first audible step boomed through the cave.

"Do...or do not," Yoda reprimanded him as he began to disappear. "There is no try."

"Thanks for nothing!" John screamed in anger as the creature appeared around the corner. When it got within reach he punched it out of frustration, but it didn't stop the claws from slitting his throat.

"Think, John, think," he said, hanging upside down again. "The toad didn't appear for nothing."

He replayed their conversation in his head...but got nothing from it. The roar came again.

"Do or do not...do or do not," he repeated. "Ok, he told that to Luke because...because..." he said, trying to remember the movie.

For some reason his conversation with Stevenson flashed to mind...his insistence that John thought he was a loser.

"Confidence," John said with hope. "I have to believe it."

He looked at the cylinder, closed his eyes, then reopened them. He slowly reached his hand out and tried to pull it to him.

"Damn it!" he said, giving up after a few seconds. "This is pointless," he complained as the creature neared again.

He thought back to the movie...replayed the lines in his head. Yoda wanted Luke to lift the ship out of the water...Luke said it was impossible...he tried anyway...got it part way up, then dropped it...it couldn't be done...Yoda scolded him about him always seeing what couldn't be done...then Yoda lifted it out of the muck...Luke says he can't believe it...

"That," Yoda voiced echoed through the cave, yet his image didn't appear, "is why you fail."

The creature came around the corner again and walked toward him, claws raised and ready to tear him apart.

John ignored it. He looked at the cylinder and didn't take his eyes off it. He didn't reach out for it, nor did he say anything. He just stared at it as the creature plodded forward and reached out to kill him...

There was the sound of tearing flesh and a short scream from John that echoed through the cave. Unnoticeable in the melee, off to the side, the cylinder twitched...

3

Five Ori motherships flew through hyperspace in formation, crossing to a system on the outskirts of Destra...one that had been recently surveyed along with many thousands of others on the orders of the Orici. For whatever his reasons, the leader of the Ori had chosen this particular 7-planet system and had the Doci assemble the construction taskforce with all haste.

The Doci had remained in Celestis while the Orici personally oversaw the operation. Currently they were less than a day away from their destination, but there was a final piece of business that had to be concluded before they arrived...the selection of a Prior to take on the Orici's oversight duties during his frequent trips outside the galaxy.

Altogether there were twelve Priors aboard the five ships...seven of which were aboard the Orici's flagship and who had been summoned into his private chambers so they could be personally informed as to who would have operational command.

But before they were to arrive he had another guest summoned to his clandestine sanctum...

The exterior doors parted, revealed a pair of guards on either side that allowed a single man to pass. When he had crossed the threshold the doors closed, leaving him a bit bewildered.

"Hello?" Tomin asked carefully.

Another set of doors opened and the Stevenson walked into view.

"Orici," Tomin said respectfully, half bowing but not dropping to a knee. "I was told you asked to speak with me?"

"Yes. I know that you are one of the few who came to the realization that the Ori had deceived you on your own accord. I know that you are one of the four that used the Alterran Ark to brainwash the Priors into believing the same. I would ask, given all that has transpired in your life, why do you now still serve the Ori?"

"I serve the Orici," Tomin humbly corrected him. "Not the deceivers."

Ryan smiled slightly. "Why do you serve the Orici? I am, after all, heir to the deceivers' legacy...and I have instructed that the book of Origin be embraced once again."

"I have always known there was wisdom in it," Tomin said passionately. "And that you made a few alterations."

"That I did. But you still haven't answered my question. Why do you serve the Orici?"

"Because you have not lied to us," Tomin said reverently. "You have gained the loyalty of the people, not just through your selection as Orici, but because you have opened our eyes to the truth. I am no exception."

Stevenson raised an eyebrow. "Is that all?"

"No," Tomin said, lowering his head. "I have many misdeeds to atone for. I don't expect that I can ever succeed, but I must try."

"And you believe serving me is the path to that end?"

Tomin raised his head. "I do."

The Orici nodded. "Then I would ask for something more of you."

"You need not ask," Tomin said genuinely. "I am yours to command."

"Never the less, I am asking."

Reluctantly Tomin nodded. "What do you wish of me?"

"The place we are traveling to is the location I have chosen for the new homeworld of an ally of mine. Their race was nearly wiped out, but I intend for them to rebuild here, under our protection. I need someone I can trust to ensure that they come to no harm."

"If I might ask, Orici, who are they?"

"They call themselves the Asgard, and given a chance they will grow into a powerful ally...one which we will need in coming days. Peace is a luxury we shall not have for long, and we must make the most of it when we are able."

Tomin nodded. "I understand."

"Do you accept this responsibility?"

"I can make no promise of results, but I vow not to cease in my efforts until my duty is acquitted..."

"Kneel," the Orici ordered.

Tomin did as bidden and Stevenson walked up in front of him. "Look at me."

Tomin raised his head.

"The power I am about to bestow on you is a sacred trust. It is meant to give you the ability to help others...not to bring ruin down upon them. I know you have already learned this lesson well from your failures...and the deeds you were commanded to do. I give you this standing order for all time...do what is right, even if it should mean disobeying me."

Tomin's eyes watered, but he didn't lower his head. He'd been instructed not to. "I am humbled by the trust you place in me."

"I do so with reason, Tomin. I have searched your heart and mind. Though you have done evil deeds, you are not an evil person. If you were, you would not have questioned what you did. You would not have come to accept the truth and turn your back on the Ori, which you were right in doing. Let go your guilt. You cannot erase the past, but you can cleanse the person in the present. Let Tomin, Prior of the Ori, be as blameless in thought as he is in spirit."

The Orici raised his right hand over Tomin's head. From the jewel encrusted device he wore over his palm a white light burst forth expanding into a large energy field that obscured Tomin from view. A moment later the light receded, revealing the pasty flesh and pale hair of a Prior.

"*Rise*," Stevenson said in Ancient. The transformation had also included a knowledge upload in the process.

Prior Tomin stood, barely moving as he looked the Orici in the eye. "*Hallowed is the Orici*," he said, also in Ancient.

"*Hallowed is the path of truth*," Stevenson mildly corrected him as he telekinetically pulled a new Prior's staff from a far corner of the room into his hand. He held it out in front of him.

Tomin took it slowly, sensing the mental link through it to the Doci. It glowed bright as the head Prior briefly communicated with him, then fell dark as the link ceased.

"*What would you ask of your Prior?*" Tomin asked, not believing what had just happened.

"*Come*," the Orici said, leading the Prior into one of the side rooms. Inside there was a large holographic projector depicting the settlement they were going to build for the Asgard...it was unlike anything Tomin had ever seen.

As soon as John found himself in the cave again he immediately reached out for the cylinder with his mind. He didn't say anything, didn't fidget around, didn't mentally swear or consider his doom...he just pushed aside the numbness from the blood pooling in his head and concentrated.

The cylinder pulled out an inch.

John suppressed a shout and continued to concentrate.

It moved another inch.

The first roar sounded in the distance and John knew he was on the clock.

Another jerk and the cylinder was free of the snow. He reached out his hand and tried to pull it to him.

The cylinder leapt off the ground, moved towards his hand, and fell short directly beneath him. The footfalls of the creature boomed a warning that his time was almost up.

One more... he thought as he focused. It was barely four inches from his fingertips.

Suddenly the lightsaber jumped into his hand and he clenched his fingers around it tightly.

"Finally!" he yelled, fumbling to find the activation switch as the creature rounded the corner.

The blue blade extended from the small metal cylinder and John was about to swipe it through the ice above his feet when he realized he didn't have a good angle. Instead he pointed it toward the creature as it rushed him.

The blade burned halfway into the thing's hairy chest before it roared in pain and backed off, staggering.

"Yeah! Want some more of that, huh!" John yelled, mocking the creature.

For a long moment the ice monster just stood there looking at him. When John raised the blade toward his feet the creature took a step forward.

"No you don't," he said, pointing the blade back at him. The white mountain of hair back stepped.

"That's right," John encouraged it as he hung upside down. He looked carefully up at his feet, aiming for a spot a few inches in front of them, then whipped the blade up and through the ice and back down in front of the creature before it could do anything.

"Good boy," he said when the creature barely moved in response. The cut he'd made was a few inches deep, but it wasn't enough to dislodge his feet. He needed to cut all around them, but with hairy frosty over there that wasn't a likely option.

John looked up again and planned his next cut. With a flick of his wrist he nearly sliced off his left leg, coming within half an inch of his boot as he made a deep cut in the ice. The creature didn't move...it hung back with its arm over its chest as dark blood seeped from the hole John had cut in its chest.

He wiggled his feet, but he was still firmly stuck in the ice ceiling.

"Number three," he said, making another, slower cut on his right side. All of a sudden the creature was upon him. He hadn't seen it move, only a sheet of white hair obscuring his vision. On reflex he pulled the lightsaber down and into the blurry mass as he felt his neck get cut.

The creature fell to the ground...half of which leaned into John, popping his knee out of socket. He felt the cut on his neck carefully, then pulled his fingers back...bloody.

"Well...at least you're the dead one this time," he said as he made several small cuts near his feet. After a couple minutes something above him gave way and he dropped onto the lumpy, hair cushion beneath him...his feet still glued together in an ice cube.

"Ah..." John said, feeling the blood drain back into the rest of his body. "That's better."

Carefully he used the lightsaber to cut his feet apart and peel off the layers of ice clinging to his boots. A few stomps later and he was walking again, yet with a significant limp.

"Later," John said to the corpse as he headed for the exit of the cave. He had to half drag his left leg, but somehow he managed to stay on his feet.

When he neared the entrance the air got impossibly colder, with a stiff wind blowing snow at near horizontal angles. A large drift half covered the cave opening and John had to wade his way through it. He closed his half mask over his face and tried to see his way through the blowing snow.

About to give up hope and return to the cave, John spotted a glow in the west. He squinted his eyes against the snow and discerned a small blue light. Something inside him told him this was where he needed to go.

"What the hell," he said, slogging his way through the knee high snow. Whatever it was he was heading to was at least a half mile off and his progress was painfully slow, but sometime after his fingertips began to lose their feeling he finally made out what the object was...

An active stargate. The blue chevrons stood out in stark contrast to the white landscape, and at this range he could even make out the glow from the event horizon.

"Son of a bitch," he said, frowning beneath his mask. He could have sworn he heard something. Feeling suddenly insecure, he tried to pick up his pace. By now his knee had all but numbed up...that was the good news. The bad news was that so had the majority of the rest of his body. He felt like a stick figure, shuffling aimlessly through the snow, but he had to hurry no matter how difficult or ridiculous it looked.

Faint but audible, he heard more roars...many, many roars.

"Move...it...John," he said through half frozen lips. He had to get to the gate before them.

He was about 200 meters away when a loud roar gurgled behind him. He kept moving but stole a glance over his shoulder. Another of the creatures had emerged from the cave and stood howling at the entrance. Behind it another came out.

But that wasn't the worst of it. John could hear separate roars in at least two other directions. He couldn't see any of them yet, but he had no idea how many other caves there might be or even where they might be.

John made sure to keep a firm grip on his lightsaber. If he couldn't make it to the gate in time he didn't want to die helpless again. If it had just been one of the creatures he'd have given himself a 50/50 chance, but with more than one he doubted he'd be able to survive. His only chance was to beat them to the gate...he just hoped it didn't shut down, or worse, turn out to be an incoming wormhole.

First things first. He had to get there ahead of the creatures. He hobbled on and spotted a group of them coming out of the ground about 400 meters on the opposite side of the gate, charging fast.

"Argh," he half yelled as he willed his awkward body onward. He was within fifty meters now and the creatures looked to be 300 meters away...he didn't know about the ones behind him and he didn't feel like looking.

He didn't half to. The ones behind him roared again in unison...then the others from all around him responded. If he hadn't already been frozen the sound would have chilled him to the bone.

30 meters...25meters...20 meters...he was so close. He altered his path to reach the side of the gate with the chevrons on it.

15 meters...the creatures ahead were within 50...the ones behind him were closer, he could feel their footfalls.

10 meters...a gurgle/roar sounded very close behind him. He could have sworn he heard their breathing.

5 meters...3 meters...1 meter...

A giant claw swept into John's shoulder from behind, but it did so knocking him sideways through the event horizon.

The familiar sight of wormhole travel ensued and spat him out the opposite gate in a bloody heap...onto warm sand.

John rolled over and ignited his lightsaber, pointing it back at the event horizon. He held it there for thirty seconds, but the creatures didn't follow him through. A few moments more and the gate shut down.

"Ah..." he sighed, falling onto his back and resting for a bit.

An earthquake eventually woke John from his stupor. He rolled over onto his good shoulder and looked around...

...endless sand dunes...and the gate he'd come through had vanished. He was in the middle of nowhere.

"What now?" he said, beginning to get uncomfortably hot. He stood, despite the shaking ground, and peeled off his bloody jacket. Beneath he found two long but shallow slashes across his should in addition to the one across his neck.

The ground quakes continued, but they seemed to be coming from a particular direction. John tried to look across the heat waves distorting the light but couldn't see anything...aside from a plume of sand.

"You've got to be kidding me?" he said in dismay as the dust cloud came his way. He began backpedaling, but his knee slowed him down. Before long the dust was upon him and a giant armored worm rose up out of the sand.

"Oh sh..." he said as its mouth came down on top of him.

4

"Good, good," Rodney said, hovering over one of the *Tria's* control stations.

"Engines to station keeping," Larrin ordered her crew from the control chair as she continuously adjusted the ship's shields to resist the waves of stellar radiation being emitted from the very nearby pulsar. Without the constant modifications in conjunction with the *Tria's* sensors, one or more of the erratic plumes could overstress a portion of the shields and penetrate the hull. As it was, she was having a difficult time cycling through the six shield emitters in paired sequence so as to not burn out any one of them.

"How's it look on your end?" Rodney asked through the open channel.

"You need to be four dekmas closer," Janus told him from the space station. "Other than that, your position is fine."

"You hear that?" Rodney asked Larrin.

"Yeah, I heard," she complained. "We're about fried as it is...now you want me to take us closer?"

"Just a little," Rodney pleaded.

"Do it," Larrin ordered her crew. The helmsman input the new coordinates and the *Tria* thrust closer to the pulsar's surface. A few moments later Rodney gave him the kill sign.

"There..." he said a bit too loudly. "Janus?"

"You're good," the Alterran scientist said. "You may begin deployment."

"Thank you," Rodney said sarcastically. Like he needed permission. "Prepare for deployment," he announced. "Make sure the cargo bay doors are facing away from the star."

"I've got it," Larrin announced. The ship began to roll over on its side.

"Nice," Rodney whispered as he accessed the bay door controls. "Launching now!"

Outside the Lantean warship a small sphere slowly drifted away from the largest of its cargo bays. As soon as it was clear Rodney closed the bay doors.

"Clear!" he announced. "We need to get moving before it starts to bleed off energy."

Larrin was already a step ahead of him. The *Tria* turned quickly as it accelerated up to a higher altitude. It continued on an outbound trajectory, quickly diminishing the stress on the shields.

Meanwhile Rodney was studying his readouts closely. The sphere had already begun to expand into the girder-like framework that housed the collection arrays. Even now they were absorbing energy from the pulsar and using it to power the deployment. The more it expanded the more surface area it gained, but most of the radiation passed through the massive gaps in the framework. It reminded Rodney of the quizzical children's toy spheres that expanded in and out...the ones he always got his fingers pinched in when he visited his sister's house.

Janus was also monitoring the progress from the station, so Rodney didn't feel it necessary to keep him apprised of the progress. It was fascinating to watch, and though this was the fourth such facility the Alterra had recently constructed, it was the first project that Rodney had been a part of.

Soon the collector had expanded to over three kilometers in diameter. By now it was a wisp of a frame, barely visible as its shields protected it from the harsh environment even as other shields began collecting sufficient charge to...

Suddenly that wispy frame locked into place and a large, visible bubble formed around the entire construct. Rodney knew the shield was invisible, but the waves of the stellar radiation were causing considerable disruption to the matrix that was visible.

"Janus?" Rodney asked, preempting the next stage.

"Relay station is aligning," he told him. "We'll have to wait until it's ready before we link them up."

"I know...how long?"

"Forty three seconds," Janus told him.

"Standing by," Rodney noted as his hand hovered over his control board. Outside the ship the collector suddenly became visible to the naked eye as its capacitors filled and it had to begin shunting the excess power into space. It appeared as a small glowing blue dot superimposed on the yellow/white mass of the star.

A few moments later Janus's voice returned.

"The relay station is ready. You may begin shunting power now."

"Thank you," Rodney said, pressing a series of buttons that would command the collector to redirect the energy along a tight beam to a relay satellite in higher 'orbit,' though that term wasn't technically accurate. Neither facility was moving, instead they were using their onboard anti-gravity engines to hold fixed positions above the surface to facilitate the transfer of power.

On the monitors the small glowing orb disappeared and a thin power stream jutted in a straight line out to the relay millions of kilometers away. Traveling at lightspeed, the stream reached the satellite quickly, then was redirected to another location where the potential factory floated far away from the dangerous pulsar.

"Power transfer at nominal levels," Janus's voice reported. "Buffers charging. You're clear to proceed with the second deployment."

"Larrin?" Rodney prompted.

"Heading back in," she said as the *Tria* turned about. "Let's see if we can speed this up a bit this time."

"Believe me, I don't want to be exposed to this much radiation any more than you do," Rodney half protested, "but these collectors have to be damn close in order to get enough juice to charge a ZPM."

"Won't matter," Larrin countered, "if we get killed and the other collectors are destroyed in the process."

"True...true," Rodney agreed. "Ok boys," he said, addressing the rest of the crew. "Let's see if we can hit this one spot on, shall we." He swung across to another control board. "One down, sixteen to go."

John ran out the open wormhole into the desert again, this time without any bleeding cuts, and immediately looked around. He did a full 360 with the gate disappearing when he had his back to it.

"Gotta be something," he said, scanning the horizon. Off to the south there was just a trace of elevation on the horizon.

"Rocks...gotta get to the rocks!" he said, taking off at a full run. He did not want to get eaten by that worm a second time.

By the time he reached the edge, the earthquakes had begun. John darted in and out of small rocks on top of the sand until he reached a solid, almost flat outcropping of rock in the middle of the desert about the size of a football field. He ran to the center and turned around, looking for the worm.

Right on cue it burst out of the sand as close to the rock as it could. It roared then crashed back into the sand, wiggling itself beneath the surface.

John gave it a defiant finger then searched the rocky platform. Nothing else was visible in all directions...but there had to be something else here.

Suddenly his foot slipped and he almost fell on his ass.

"What the..." he muttered, regaining his balance. He looked back where his foot had been and saw a small crack in the stone where water was seeping out. It flowed off the rock then soaked into the nearby sand, a long stream no wider than his smallest finger.

John reached down and touched the water. He tasted the bit on his fingertips then spat it out...it was salty. He stood up and resumed his search.

After half an hour of close inspection he found nothing, so he sat down in the center and thought. In the distance he could see several worms surfacing at random spots. He guessed there had to be at least four of the things in total, if not more. Leaving the rock was out of the question...especially since he had nowhere else to go.

The sun was heavy from above and already John was getting dehydrated. As much as he hated the sun on the previous world, he was beginning to hate the sun here even more. His mind flashed back to the crack in the rock and he began thinking of ways to purify the water.

With no gear whatsoever that wasn't going to be an option. Aside from his heavy winter clothing, which he'd already stripped off, he had nothing to work with. The only piece of technology he had on him was his lightsaber.

John raised an eyebrow. "Maybe..."

He stood up and walked back over to the crack. He ignited the blue blade and drove it straight down into the rock.

When he pulled it back up a surge of water sprayed up like a fountain.

"At least I'll be able to take a shower," he said literally. He stripped off his tank top and shorts and did just that in the cool water.

After he'd thoroughly refreshed himself he redressed and sat down to think again. He couldn't turn his impromptu shower off, so he just sat and watched the water roll off the rock and began to make a stream through the desert. Most of it just absorbed into the sand, but the part that didn't began to eek away from the rock along the surface.

Another flash of inspiration struck him and he ignited the lightsaber again. This time he cut a large chunk of rock out near his previous hole and was nearly knocked aside as the water pressure blew it up like a cannon ball.

"Whoa..." he yelled, getting out of the way as it fell back down. The water was blasting up with the power of ten fire hydrants and running in all directions off the rock. John's feet were covered in water and he waited to see what would happen, if anything.

Most of the water, it seemed, was flowing off in one direction...to the northwest. There, the previous stream had now become a river meandering off into the desert. The sand eroded away as it was carried downstream with the water...revealing something beneath the sands.

"Son of a bitch..." John said, taking the lightsaber and enlarging the hole in the rock.

The extra water turned the raging river into a water knife, cutting through the sand like a blade while nearly knocking John off the rocky platform. He was now knee deep in water...it was coming out that fast.

As soon as the complete surface of the object was cleared of sand it activated, sending a kawoosh skyward before settling into the familiar view of an event horizon. The water of the river suddenly began pouring through.

John tilted his head to the side in consideration. "Waterslide, I guess," he said, slugging his way against the current until he got to the source and the downward side...then he let it carry him off the rock, through the river, and down through the wormhole...

"Aaahhh!" John yelled in freefall. The exiting gate was situated at the top of a long ridge and the source of a high waterfall.

His arms and legs pumping wildly, John managed to get his body somewhat aligned with the water before he hit...hard.

His body dove deep into the pool and was pushed further down by the cascading waters overhead. John sucked in a mouthful of water and panickly swam to the side. Once the pressure of the waterfall dissipated he struggled to rise to the surface where he coughed the water out of his lungs.

His head dipped beneath the surface and he got a mouthful of water again, then he fought to get his nose and mouth back into the mist-laden air. He spat out the new water and tried to swim to the water's edge some thirty meters away and covered with green and red plants...so many in fact that he couldn't see the ground beneath them.

"What the hell is going on?" he complained as he pulled himself on shore. He flopped down on his stomach and coughed again. The small plants made for a comfortable bed, but if the previous worlds were any indication he couldn't just lie around and rest.

He pulled himself further up the shallow incline on his hands and knees until he was beneath the tree line. He briefly looked around then turned his attention back to the way he had come.

Where the gate had been was now a normal waterfall coming over the cliff. It fed into a large pool...which then exited in a fast moving river through an incredibly dense jungle. John couldn't visibly follow it more than a few meters beyond the pool before it disappeared into the foliage.

"Oh crap," he said, realizing he'd lost his lightsaber during the fall. He looked back at the incredibly clear pool and saw a tiny twinkling object at the bottom...moving slowly toward the river's exit.

"No you don't," John said, standing up and staggering around the edge of the pool. He wasn't about to lose his only weapon.

"No, no, no!" he yelled as he saw it beating him to the exit. He was barely going to miss it, so he made the snap decision to run and jump head first into the water...

His head pounded from the impact...he must have suffered a slight concussion from the initial fall, but his hand managed to find the metal cylinder. He grabbed onto it fiercely then tried to right himself in the water.

Before he could find the surface he felt the current take him down the river and his head suddenly broke through into the air as his feet found a rock beneath him. He caught a quick breath before he was knocked off the rock by the flow and dipped beneath the surface again.

He bobbed along, catching air when he could, but by no means could he control his route. The river was moving so fast that all he could do was hold onto his prize possession and try to

keep the water out of his lungs. He continued on like that for longer than he could recount until the water's speed suddenly dropped off and he fought for a measure of control.

He got his head level and above water as he swam in place. The river had widened into a delta. That was why the speed dropped off, but ahead several islands diverted the flow into different channels. John thought about trying to swim to one of the islands when he suddenly noticed the brush moving and decided against it.

He really hoped there wasn't anything in the water going to eat him.

The flow carried him into one of the center channels and the water's speed picked up again, but not as much as it had before. The bottom of the channel was flat and smooth so there was no white water to deal with. John tried to stay in the center of the stream and look ahead as far as he could. The last thing he needed was another surprise.

The channel suddenly turned and recombined with another of its twins on the right and the water's speed increased again...and suddenly went sharply downhill.

"Oh crap," he said, sliding downhill on nature's version of a waterslide. He veered directly into a large rock, but was able to catch it on his feet. Unfortunately that catch twisted him over and he began sliding down head first on his back. He knew that was a recipe for disaster, so he fought the current to turn himself around.

He succeeded just in time to wedge himself between two large rocks. The water flowed through a small crack between them with the rest forced to go around either side. John pulled himself up out of the lukewarm water and onto the mossy rock, nearly slipping back in twice.

"Ah..." he said in relief just to get a moment to think. He held perfectly still, trying to get his wits about him. His lightsaber was still in his right hand, thankfully, and he had a small cut on his left shin from one of the rocks earlier. That, in addition to the pounding in his head was the worst of it, but he knew it could have been far worse.

Slowly he began to look around and it took him a moment to realize there were higher rocks behind him on which some type of platform had been constructed.

"That looks promising," he said, tucking the lightsaber into the waistband of his shorts...and having it slip through and out the pant leg, where it fell towards the water.

His hands were quicker though, and he snatched it just in time.

"Bad idea," he said, gripping it lightly in his teeth. It stretched his jaw a bit, and he hoped it wouldn't cramp up on him, but he needed both hands free to climb.

The rocks were slick with moss and water, but John was diligent and determined. It took extraordinarily long to reach the top, some five meters up, but even climbing that far was impressive with his trembling and fatigued arms. Paddling against the water to keep from drowning had really drained his energy.

John got a grip on the metal framework of the platform and wiggled up to shoulder height, allowing him to see over the edge. It was perfectly flat, some three meters square, and covered in a mesh plate.

John hooked his fingers into the holes on that plate and used the extra grip to pull himself up over the edge. He flopped over onto his back and rested for a moment, but kept his ears open for trouble.

After a few long heavy heaves of air he rolled up into a sitting position and assessed his situation. Below the platform the river continued sharply downhill as far as he could see to the 'south' as he deemed it. Rivers always flowed south, right?

Off to the east one of the other channels fed into a raised aqueduct that traveled in a straight line over the treetops in a subtle descent to a larger facility below...one with a barely visible active stargate on it.

"Looks like that's where I'm headed," he said, glancing overhead. The four corners of the platform had metal girders angling upward and meeting in the center, onto which a zip line had been attached. John followed the direction the line stretched with his eyes.

It also headed toward the larger facility.

John flexed his hands, assessing their strength. He was tired and didn't want to slip and fall...not only because it would be a painful death, assuming he died and wasn't just horribly injured, but he also didn't want to restart at the beginning in the snow cave and have to go through this all over again.

He looked around for any dangers and, finding none, he decided to stay put for a while and regain his strength. A little prudence wouldn't hurt...he hoped.

After more than an hour John stood up and grabbed the handlebars of the zip line attachment. He held the lightsaber in his mouth again and tested his weight...his arms felt alright, but he was only going to have one shot at this. No matter what, he had to hold on.

He took the lightsaber out of his mouth and spit, then gripped it in his teeth again.

"Hherre oees," he mumbled past the metal. With three quick steps he ran off the platform and careened down the zip line over the river. His momentum carried him nearly parallel to its flow, but slightly off center so that he eventually passed over the treetops, some of which he had to twist and bend to avoid hitting with his legs.

Halfway down he felt his arms begin to give way, but he clenched his muscles even tighter and willed himself to hold on. He'd picked up speed on the descent and figured he should make it through the second half faster than the first.

Suddenly the trees disappeared beneath him and were replaced with a large half-encrusted lava field some twenty meters below jetting up waves of heat that instantly made his skin sweat. After a long thirty seconds the lava ended and the edge of the main structure passed beneath his feet...but it was too far to drop. He had to hold on until he reached the terminus.

Looking through small eye slits as he held on with all his strength and concentration, John saw the zip line pass through two 'forks' that signified the edge of the landing platform. He zoomed through them and the ground came up to within a meter of his feet when he did.

Now the only question was how was he going to slow down? He was moving at 70 kph and there wasn't a hand break.

As he got to the middle of the receiving platform his question was answered. The flexible line transitioned into a solid metal pole that slowly began to arc upward. His speed slowed and a ramp beneath him kept his feet within reach of the ground when he finally came to a stop.

He began to slide backwards when he finally let go. He dropped into a crouch and let his arms burn...that he did not want to do again. If he'd known what it would be like he probably wouldn't have tried it and found some other way to get here. He'd almost slipped off over the lava field.

John pried the lightsaber out of his mouth and suffered through a muscle spasm in his jaw as reward. When it died down he glanced around looking for the stargate.

It was down two levels, 300 meters to the west. He spied a nearby grated staircase and took off immediately. The sooner he got out of here the better.

He stopped as soon as the thought crossed his mind. Was he better off? Or should he rest here for a while? He had no idea what would be on the other side.

John opted for a compromise and walked on...slowly.

When he finally got to the gate it was, fortunately, still open. John took a deep breath and walked through.

He emerged on the other side at the base of a tall mountain with a trail before him. The bluish light emanating from behind him disappeared along with the gate, leaving only a ghostly yellow glow from a partially obstructed pair of moons overhead. Otherwise it was completely dark.

"What now?" he asked, gingerly taking to the trail.

He walked on for nearly an hour without incident when he came to the next gate. This one, like all the others, was a blue gate and the event horizon was open. He wasn't to the top of the mountain yet and this had been too easy. He wondered if this one might be some type of fake that would lead him somewhere nasty...or some giant monster would emerge out of the night to eat him on approach.

"No, it's real," Stevenson said from around the corner of a large rock. Another path led up the mountain and Ryan was standing at the base of it.

John glared at him vehemently. "What the hell is going on?!"

5

The Alterra shrugged. "All Padawans must undergo trials before they become Knights."

John looked at him disbelievingly. "You're saying this is all some sort of test?"

Stevenson nodded. "Pretty much."

"You son of a bitch," John said, stepping forward and punching Ryan off his feet.

Stevenson fell onto his back then sat up smiling. "I suppose I deserved that."

"You have any idea how many times I've died?" John yelled.

"I know exactly how many," Ryan said, standing up. "But...there are a few things I need to explain. First of all, I'm not the person you believe me to be."

"Oh no?" John asked, not really caring. He was considering punching him again just for the hell of it.

"No. I'm the tiny chip inserted in your head."

John's eyes narrowed dangerously. "What?"

"This is a virtual testing simulation, similar to what the Alterra have used for eons when live testing became too lethal for practical applications. Such danger was only applicable for training purposes in a synthetic environment, one with pain suppression protocols so the subject won't experience the full pain of...failure."

"Let me be the first to tell you," John said slowly and angrily. "I think you're broken. I felt *everything*!"

The image of Stevenson slowly shook his head. "No...you felt enough to treat it as real, but had those scenarios been live, the pain would have been much more intense. However, given your background and experience, the pain suppressors were diminished slightly to maintain a sense of realism."

"Oh they were, were they?" John asked sarcastically. "Let me guess. Stevenson?"

"He wanted to ensure a valid test," the program explained. "You've had similar real life experiences that would have belied the sanitized nature of the program in comparison, thus the realism had to be enhanced to avoid that eventuality."

John turned away from him for a moment, his fists balled in anger. "I don't believe this! I am so going to kick his ass, ancient powers or not."

"I understand how traumatic this has been," the program half apologized, "but it must be. An easy challenge would prove little. In order to measure your caliber you have to be pressed. Those with exceptional skill require exceptional testing."

"Is that some sort of backhanded compliment?" John asked, still quite angry but now beginning to get intrigued.

"You could take it as such," the program said. "However, my presence here is not merely to explain the test to you. You have reached the end, if you choose. The gate is quite real. All that is required to end the test and earn the transformation into a Lantean is to walk through that gate."

John's eyebrows rose. "Wait a minute. You're saying this test was to determine whether or not I get to be an Ancient?"

The program nodded. "Yes. Walk through that gate and you're finished. Stevenson will be informed of your success and will make the necessary genetic alterations."

"That's it?" John asked. "I just walk through the gate?"

The program nodded.

"The ground's not going to fall out from under my feet or anything?" he asked suspiciously.

"No. All that is left for you to do is to step through."

"That doesn't make any sense," John complained. "Why tell me now? Why not just let me go through and find out afterward from Stevenson?"

"Because it doesn't have to end here," the program said, its tone darkening. "There is the other path."

John immediately caught on. "There's another gate, isn't there? An Alterran gate?"

"Correct," the program said, a hint of admiration in its eyes.

"What happens if I die up there?" John asked.

"Then the entire program resets and you must make your way back here. The only way to end this simulation is to pass through one of these two gates. You have already earned the privilege of becoming a Lantean, but if you move on you risk losing it..."

"...and having to redo all that again," John finished for him.

"Yes."

John sighed. "Can you be killed?"

The program raised an eyebrow. "I will reset along with the simulation, if you're referring to this avatar. If you're referring to the microscopic insert in your brain, there's nothing you can do from inside the simulation to harm it...and very little you can do once you're awake without doing significant damage to yourself."

"Thanks," John said, igniting his lightsaber's blue blade. He lunged forward and decapitated the image of Stevenson.

John glanced between the blue glow from his blade and the blue glow coming from the gate's chevrons. "That felt good."

He stepped over the body and started up the other path that led to the Alterran gate.

Two weeks later John emerged onto the top of the nighttime mountain. There was a small clearing on the plateau surrounded by dense forest and ominous sounds of trouble. Bloodied and limping as he climbed the last few feet of trail to the summit, John studied the open red gate on the other side of the clearing.

He turned around quickly at the sound of another raptor call, his blue blade interposed between him and the trail up the mountain.

"Too easy," John declared, looking at the few dozen meters left to get to the gate. He spied a small rock about the size of his head off to his left. He pointed his free hand at it...

The rock lifted off the ground and John Force-threw it across the clearing to the ground in front of the gate...

Suddenly a rectangular patch of soil disappeared down into a large pit. John carefully walked up to the edge and looked down inside it. At the far bottom were a number of vertical spikes.

"Thought so," he said as he heard a very nearby raptor call. He didn't have much time before they caught up to him again. He took a few long steps backward then hobble/ran towards the edge of the pit and jumped...

Using the Force to enhance his fatigued muscles, John launched himself into the air and across the small chasm directly into the open event horizon...

The ever so sweet view of passing through the wormhole signaled his success and deposited him in an empty stone room. The gate shut down and disappeared behind him...when he turned back around the Stevenson avatar stood before him, clapping.

"Well done," the program congratulated him.

"Is that the end?" John asked, wanting to be sure.

"It is...and I've just relayed your completion of the scenario to Stevenson. The message went into the transfer buffer, so he must not be on Atlantis now, but when he returns he'll transform you into an Alterra."

"Good," John said satisfactorily. "But there's one thing I want to know first."

"Yes?"

"Did Stevenson design this test? I mean, with all the Star Wars stuff and the rest? It doesn't seem very...Ancienty."

"He designed the basic parameters for the test, but the...particulars...were drawn from your memories. In essence, you designed your own test."

"I had a feeling it was something like that," John said, mentally kicking himself.

"So, are we finished here?" the program asked. "Or would you like to review your stats?"

"I'll pass, thanks," John said irreverently.

"For what it's worth, your testing parameters, both those imposed by Stevenson and those you imbued for yourself are far above the standard simulations we use in training. My program is an enhanced version of the original, so I have the base template for comparison."

"Meaning what?"

The Stevenson avatar smiled. "You earned it."

John nodded his thanks then there was a flash of white light...and he woke up in bed.

He sat up slowly, running everything through his head. The memories were clear...they weren't fading away this time.

He swung his feet out from under his thermal covering, stood up and stretched...feeling better than he'd felt his entire life. He frowned and stretched out a hand toward a can of silly string on his counter that he was saving to use on Rodney.

It didn't move...he hadn't been transformed yet. So why was he feeling so good?

Just another question, he guessed, that'd have to wait for Stevenson when he got back.

Oddly enough, it was Stevenson that found Sheppard first three days later. John was in one of the sparring rooms going at it with one of the training replicators. They both had what looked and sounded like wooden swords and were engaged in a clumsy, yet energetic fight.

Stevenson stepped aside from the doorway and leaned against the wall, not interrupting as he watched them spar. It was more of a learning fight than a contest, and the replicator had obviously been geared down to a lower level for Sheppard to contend with, but John was showing as many bouts of skill as he was awkwardness. Ryan wondered what had prompted him to pick up sword fighting. He'd always known him to favor guns.

"That's enough," Sheppard told the replicator. "Return to your bin."

The replicator, in the form of a tall male, walked over to one of the equipment racks on the wall and disassembled into base components and reformed into a small cube where it would await its next opponent.

"Not bad," Stevenson commented.

"Care to step in?" Sheppard asked.

"Alright," Ryan said cautiously. "But I have to warn you, I train with Bra'tac every now and then with staffs."

"Not exactly the same as a sword, but thanks for the warning," John said amicably.

"After you," Ryan said, pulling the replicator's sword up into a guard position.

Without a word Sheppard stepped forward and thrust his 'blade' toward Ryan's midsection.

The Alterra swept it aside easily with his enhanced strength, but to his surprise Sheppard reversed his motion, undercut his opponent's blade, and took a swipe at his legs which Stevenson hopped over.

"Not bad," Ryan commented, taking a decent overhead swipe at Sheppard, who ducked to his left out of the way of the blow and pushed it further aside with his own sword.

"I've had a lot of recent practice," John implied heavily.

"So I've heard," Ryan said, continuing to spar with him. "I thought you would have been a little mad at me for not asking your permission?"

"I was," Sheppard admitted, swatting aside Ryan's thrust. He spun his blade around in a 180 and nicked the Alterra's shoulder. Stevenson got his blade into place before Sheppard could make a second, harder hit. The blades locked for a moment, with their faces less than two feet apart.

"But not now?" Ryan asked.

"No..." Sheppard said, forcing Stevenson back, then he disengaged his blade and made two quick swats at his head before ducking down and swiping at his legs. Ryan caught his attempt on the middle of his blade then ran his sword up John's and jabbed into his torso.

Sheppard rolled backward out of the blow onto his back, then rolled onto his feet, bringing his blade back up as he did so.

"I assume the program explained why I had to make it harder than usual?" Ryan asked.

"It mentioned something," John said, increasing the ferociousness of his attacks. Apparently he'd been holding back against the replicator.

"I had to make absolutely sure," Ryan said, backing up as he played defense, "that you were ready to become my second in command."

Sheppard froze. "Second in command?"

Ryan nodded, touching his sword's tip to the ground. "I needed to know that you were the type of person that wouldn't give up...no matter how difficult the situation became."

"What about your clones?"

"They each have their chosen niches, but right now I'm the only coordinator. You'll be the second."

"Coordinator? Is that some sort of title?" Sheppard asked.

Ryan shook his head. "We don't use titles or positions. We also don't use a hierarchical command structure like you're used to. We co-op along our skill sets instead of using a chain of command."

"Then what does 'second in command' actually mean?"

"I'm in charge of everything that happens within our civilization," Ryan explained. "Right now that's not a lot, but eventually that will be thousands of planets and billions of Alterra. That's too large a number for me to monitor, let alone control. I coordinate the civilization-wide issues and imperatives, but I don't get heavily involved in any one thing."

"Jack of all trades, master of none," Sheppard offered.

Ryan smiled. "Something like that, but since I have the knowledge of the Repository I'm a bit more well rounded. Right now I'm the best at almost everything, but that will change in time. Take Matt for example. His medical knowledge is equal to my own, but he's elected to head up the medical division. Over time he will gain a bit more knowledge in that area than me, and a lot more experience. When that happens, I won't overrule him in medical matters because I'll trust him to know what he's doing more than me. Likewise he won't overrule me in my area because he won't have the experience."

"So, everyone just gets along," Sheppard asked, not believing it, "without any chain of command?"

"Yes, we do."

Sheppard shook his head. "I don't see that happening."

"You're still Human. Once you begin to change you'll see a difference. Besides, you've done this before, just on a smaller scale."

"When?"

"How you dealt with your team while Atlantis was under I.O.A. control."

"Ok, so we didn't stick with protocol all the time..."

"Because?" Stevenson prompted.

"Well, I guess it was because we trusted each other to get the job done."

Ryan smiled. "Exactly. That's the way the Alterra work on a civilization-wide level. Those with the skill and expertise fill the niches in the structure where they will be the greatest assets. Because I'm the first of the new Alterra, and because I'm the one that used the Repository, my niche is guiding the civilization rebirth and coordinating between the various divisions of our society as they develop. Someone has to be aware of everything that is going on while everyone else focuses on specific areas."

"I don't know," Sheppard said. "Coordinator sounds like a desk job. I want to be in the thick of things when the fighting starts."

"Perhaps 'coordinator' was a bad description..." Ryan offered. "How about 'troubleshooter'?"

"Hmm...does that mean we go where the trouble is?"

"It does."

Sheppard nodded. "That sounds better. Where do the others fit in?"

Ryan nodded. "Bra'tac is a System Lord. That basically describes itself. The System Lords will always be Alterra, without exception, but if I put you or someone else in that position it wouldn't work well, myself included."

Sheppard considered that. "Because we don't know the Jaffa like Bra'tac does?"

"Bingo...the skill makes the position, not the other way around. I know that's backward from everything you've experienced on Avalon, but you'll get used to it."

"Why do you always call Earth Avalon?" Sheppard asked. He'd wondered about that for a long time.

"Because that's its real name," Ryan scoffed a bit. "Right now the people on 'Earth' are just posers. Avalon was the center of our civilization for 41 million years. We've still got dibbs on it."

"Really..." Sheppard said, catching his meaning.

"Not any time soon," Ryan assured him. "It's not on the top of the priority list, but it's something we'll get around to eventually."

"Wow...I hadn't thought about that."

Ryan frowned. "You really think we were just going to let the I.O.A. stay in charge."
Sheppard pointed a finger at him. "Good point. I've still got a score to settle with them anyway."

"Yes, well, the fun will have to wait for now. We've got bigger problems to deal with...and the Jaffa can keep Avalon in line until we're ready to go back."

Sheppard nodded. "The Wraith."

"Big fish in the little pond, I'm afraid."

"Meaning what?"

Stevenson sighed. "The Wraith are going to be tough to beat given our low numbers, but in the grand scheme of things they aren't that tough. There are many other enemies in the 22 other galaxies that we're going to have to fight that make the Wraith seem inconsequential."

Sheppard's eyes went wide. "And when were you planning on telling us about them?"

"When you needed to know," Ryan said pithily. "Which in your case is now. I need to bring you up to speed on everything that's going on, which includes meeting our allies in other galaxies."

Sheppard smiled. "Does that include Andara?"

"Yes, but let me warn you up front, the Ferirola are a very tactile race of Humans. Andara not so much, now that she's becoming an Alterra, but her people have a habit of touching you while you talk to them. It's a bit disconcerting at first, but I've gotten used to it. Phil, I imagine, is going to have to establish some boundaries with them, but since I don't see them very often I can tolerate their 'touchiness' on occasion."

"Phil is another of your clones?" Sheppard asked.

"Yes. He's liaison with them and helping Andara combat a disease that renders their population extremely lethargic."

"She a scientist?" Sheppard guessed.

Ryan nodded. "Biologist."

"What about Teyla?"

"Warrior."

"I guess that one should be obvious," Sheppard said. "Are there any others?"

"Not yet, but I have my eye on a few. You're next on the list."

"Right...so, a few treatments in the gene machine, I take it?"

"No, that machine can't advance you to Alterran level, only prerequisite levels of development. Lanteans are a lesser form, so it works for them."

"Why not Alterra?"

"Let's just say our current level of development isn't completely mapped out. We don't fully understand it, so trying to artificially advance someone to our level would be risky."

"Isn't that what the head sucker did to you?" Sheppard argued.

"Not exactly," Stevenson told him. "The technology is different, but the end result is the same. The DNA resequencer can only make changes up to a certain limit of variance from current form, that's why Elizabeth and the others had to have several treatments. It's a stable way to make changes to one's genome."

"I take it the head sucker isn't so stable?"

"No...it transforms you very fast in a state of genetic flux to a predetermined template. My body, as a Human, was a different body than I have now. There were wholesale changes made that incorporated some of my previous genome into the mix, but I'm mostly standard Alterra with a little bit of old Ryan thrown in."

Sheppard frowned. "Did you used to look different?"

"My bone structure changed a little. My form smoothed out and I gained three extra organs, but the most visible change was my hair. I was blonde before the Repository."

"Did you have Teyla use the Repository?"

"No."

"Then how did you change her?"

"The Repository gave me the ability to change the seed species into Alterra by touch."

"Seed species? You mean Humans?"

"And Lanteans," Ryan added. "It takes a bit of effort on my part...I have to actively troubleshoot the differences between your current physiology and mine. The transformation will take about a year to unfold, making it safer than the Repository or the DNA resequencer, but it's a one shot deal. No multiple treatments."

"By touch?" Sheppard asked.

"Think of it like a 20 minute mind meld."

Sheppard raised an eyebrow. "Can you change my hair color too?"

Ryan smiled. "I could give you polka dotted skin if you wanted."

Sheppard glared at him. "You better not."

"Any requests?"

Sheppard thought about it for a moment. "No, let's just stick with the standard package," he said, readying himself. "What do you want me to do?"

"Just stand still," Ryan said, touching his head with his right hand.

"My mind to your mind," Sheppard said sarcastically.

"Shhh...I need to concentrate," Stevenson said smiling.

18 minutes later Sheppard began his long, slow conversion into an Alterra.

After Sheppard got his chip removed and changed into Alterran clothing, the pair walked down to the gateroom and Stevenson began taking him around the galaxies, bringing him up to date with everything that they had going on.

Subterfuge

1

Malek, Delek, Korra, Mingala, Sina, and Per'sus arrived through the stargate onto a stone platform that had been constructed beneath and around the device. The dirt path leading from it to the Jaffa city was gone...in its place was smooth stone the color of aqua outlined with meter and a half tall pillars of what looked like crystal that reflected the overhead sunlight.

The six Tok'ra had arrived beneath dark brown cloaks, of which only Mingala removed, revealing her Scully-esk visage.

"We are the Tok'ra," she said, announcing their identity to the gate guard. *"We have come to speak with Lord Bra'tac."*

"You are expected," the lead Jaffa confirmed, his forehead bearing the mark of Ba'al. Neither he nor the other guards had yet earned their new symbiots. *"Jaffa!"* he ordered.

Four of the guards flanked the Tok'ra and escorted them up the long path into the city, bypassing the nearby ring platform and taking the 'scenic' route between the multiple spires of the sprawling Ancient-inspired city.

"Most impressive," Per'sus commented to his fellow Tok'ra.

"I concur," Delek grudgingly offered. He had been one of the strongest voices against this meeting, but Anise had not heeded his counsel. *"The architecture is far beyond anything the Jaffa would have inherited from the Goa'uld, though I do detect a hint of their influence in the design."*

"High praise," Mingala jibbed.

Delek bristled. *"I only mean to suggest that this is not of their own doing. They have indeed allied with a stronger power...which makes them even more dangerous."*

"Bite your tongue, Delek," Malek whispered to him from behind. *"We are not alone."*

"I was not asked to come only to be silent," Delek argued. *"My voice will be heard."*

"Then at least wait until we arrive," Malek pleaded.

"As you wish," Delek relented.

The party passed between the nearest of the skyscraping spires where the ornate pathway ended and the city streets began. The Jaffa escort did not break pace and continued to lead them along the very wide passages. Sparse, yet frequent Jaffa traffic passed between the buildings, of which there were no above ground connecting conduits, but Per'sus expected at least some sort of subsurface interconnected network. It would only be practical, given Dakara's arid climate...or perhaps the Jaffa saw such things as frivolous and unbecoming of a warrior.

Sina glanced at one of the Jaffa on their left as they crossed paths. She nudged Korra with her elbow through her robe. *"That one has no mark."*

"I believe you are correct," he said, not comprehending. *"Curious. Perhaps he was born free of the Goa'uld and was never branded."*

"He once was," the fore/left guard said, but did not adjust his gaze, *"but his old mark has been replaced with another...one that only Jaffa may see."*

"How interesting," Per'sus offered. *"Thank you for the information."*

"Is there anything else you wish to know?" the Jaffa asked boldly.

"Yes," Mingala spoke up, though she probably shouldn't have based on Delek's disapproving glance. *"Who has built all of this?"*

"The Jaffa have. Who else?" the guard asked as if she were stupid.

"I mean no offense," she placated, *"but the Goa'uld did not allow the Jaffa to learn the science necessary to create such things."*

"Lord Bra'tac knows how. He has provided machine laborers to fill the void until he teaches us the magics of which you speak."

"Magic?" Delek asked irreverently. *"You still believe in such things, even after the Goa'uld are defeated and their lies laid bare for all to see?"*

"I know not how my staff works," the Jaffa said, seeming to take no offense, *"and I need not know. The inner workings of the device are magic to me...the use of the device is not,"* he said with just the barest hint of a threat.

"Even I can feel the magic of this place," Sina offered, half serious. *"It is a truly amazing city."*

"It is one of seven on the planet...with many more being built," the Jaffa said in typical monotone.

"Seven?" Per'sus asked, surprised. *"You build quickly, my friend."*

"The Alterra have been generous," the Jaffa felt obliged to offer. *"We owe them much...and through our service to Lord Bra'tac we will repay them."*

"Your service is not completely voluntary then?" Per'sus asked.

The Jaffa turned to look into Per'sus' hood with the first sign of emotion from his previously blank face. *"We will never again be slaves, Tok'ra. Not to the Goa'uld...and not to you."*

"What of the Alterra?" Delek prodded.

"We are honored to serve...but we do so of our free will. In our service we are united as we have never before been."

"Surely they must have some hold over you?" Delek pressed. *"Do you not require new symbiots...or at least the Tretonin that now sustains most Jaffa."*

"Those with symbols laid bare require your drug...but those with symbiots require nothing. They are truly free, as I shall soon be."

"I see," Delek said patronizingly. *"What is the delay?"*

"The Alterra gifted us with a single symbiot, from which all others will multiply. Only those most worthy have received the first few...the rest of us must wait until our time."

"I am interested in this new symbiot," Sina interrupted. *"Does it mature like a normal symbiot?"*

"It does."

"Must it not then be replaced?"

"No. When it reaches maturity it will split in two, sustaining yet another Jaffa."

"Incredible," Sina all but whispered. *"Is it truly alive?"*

"I have never seen one," the Jaffa admitted. *"You must ask Lord Bra'tac."*

Delek grunted, but said nothing. Malek eyed him and slowly shook his head.

"*This way,*" the Jaffa said as they approached one of the central spires that rose twice as high as the rest. These were golden, as opposed to the silver streaks that rose around them...but here and there one could see traces of red in the design. The door controls, for example, were inlaid in red panels that melded nicely with the design aesthetic. The Tok'ra's intelligence reports indicated little about this new Jaffa nation, but one tidbit that had reached them was that their signature color was indeed red. The subtle markings in the city seemed to confirm this point.

The other three Jaffa remained outside while the one that had spoken to the Tok'ra lead them inside the spire...where the red motif nearly overwhelmed them. Whereas outside the silver and gold ruled supreme, inside was the reversal. Red predominated with golden inlay on the control panels and ornamentation.

They emerged into a large, very high ceilinged atrium surrounding a central pillar that rose up half the distance where it then spat a thin column of white fire straight up, with the flames nearly licking the peaked ceiling. It was a monument of some sort, but its significance escaped the Tok'ra.

"*It seems the Jaffa still require grandiose displays,*" Delek commented disapprovingly.

"*Apparently so,*" Korra agreed dispassionately.

The Jaffa led them off center around the pillar of fire to the other side where they entered a long hallway. A third of the way down they neared an offset alcove into which they stepped.

"*Closer please,*" the Jaffa insisted. Sina glanced down at the floor and the subtle markings. She pulled her body inside the inlaid circle and waited.

Suddenly there was a white flash, but they hadn't moved anywhere. Never the less the Jaffa began walking off.

"*What just happened?*" Malek asked, frowning.

"*We have been transported up many levels,*" he answered, leading them down another hallway back towards the center of the spire.

"*I was expecting rings,*" Sina commented.

"*They are in the walls,*" the Jaffa said as the Tok'ra glanced back. The alcove had indeed been circular in design. Apparently the walls contained the transport pillars...minus the front arc.

"*An improvement on the design,*" Per'sus whispered.

"*I didn't think it was possible without a complete circumference,*" Sina whispered back.

"*Neither did I,*" the lead Tok'ra admitted. "*But the Alterra are ostensibly the originators of the technology. It would seem they know a way around the problem.*"

When they arrived in the center of the building they encountered a large Jaffa guard, numbering 15 in total, though there was enough convoluted design elements in the irregular chamber to have concealed the locations of many more. In the center of the chamber there was a more conventional ring platform imbedded in the floor...or so the aesthetic design on the smooth tile suggested.

"*Security for the throne room?*" Per'sus asked their escort.

"*Though Lord Bra'tac is a formidable warrior, we take no chances with his life,*" the Jaffa said, stepping aside while giving Per'sus an intense glare. The wizened elder took the meaning immediately and stepped inside the circumference back to back with his fellow Tok'ra as one of the other guards subtly pressed a concealed jewel on a nearby pillar.

The rings rose up from the ground and there was a flash of light...then they descended and left them in a very different room.

This chamber was large, but not overly ornate. It was a perfect circle, with the ring platform off center and surrounded by four head high pillars bracketing the circumference of the

rings. A black path took out forward from the cupola across the glossy red floor directly to a bank of seats...in which Bra'tac and other Jaffa were seated.

The Tok'ra slowly walked across the chamber and lowered their hoods. *"I bid you greetings on behalf of our queen, Anise. Which of you is Lord Bra'tac?"*

"I am he," Bra'tac said from the center seat which was identical to the others, yet raised slightly above the rest. Beneath Bra'tac's dark red cloak the chair's ornate design was obscured from view, but when unoccupied it stood out starkly from the other unadorned chairs for future System Lords. Today they were occupied by Bra'tac's command staff.

"I am Per'sus. This is Delek, Sina, Korra, Malek, and Mingala. We are grateful for this audience you have granted us. We have much to discuss."

Bra'tac half smiled. *"We have met before, have we not?"* he asked, addressing Mingala.

"I believe we have," she said, remembering his face. *"On the day Hathor was killed."*

"A glorious day that was..." Bra'tac remembered, *"but to current matters, I know not what you feel is so pressing that we discuss it face to face."*

Per'sus nodded, seeming to have anticipated the question. *"Our queen wishes that we investigate the possibility of a mutually beneficial alliance. We know little of you, and I presume the reverse is the same. We seek the opportunity to exchange knowledge in the hopes of finding common purpose."*

Bra'tac exchanged glances with his subordinates, then slowly returned his gaze to the Tok'ra. *"Proceed,"* he said amicably.

Per'sus deferred to Malek. *"What little we have gathered of your development here on Dakara suggests that your efforts have been on building infrastructure and retraining of the Jaffa, with little time or resources spent on intelligence gathering."*

"Is there something happening within the galaxy that you believe we are currently unaware of?" Bra'tac asked, a bit curious.

"I am uncertain, but there have been some significant changes happening aside from your own. For starters, the Tok'ra have been gathering intelligence on the movements of the remaining Goa'uld throughout the galaxy. We've used our limited resources to track down and eliminate many of them, but some are currently beyond our reach."

"A noble task," Bra'tac commented. *"One which I am indebted to you. We have not had the time for such things."*

"As we suspected," Malek said, pleased that the Tok'ra still had cards to play. *"Several of the Goa'uld under our surveillance fell in with marginally advanced Human worlds throughout the galaxy, trading their technical knowledge in exchange for position and power...others simply for amnesty. Within the last year, two of these worlds have become dark to us. Our operatives are no longer able to infiltrate them...and those that were on world at the time never reported back to us. We believe they were captured or killed."*

"Did you not investigate?" Bra'tac said, displeased with the idea that they would abandon their people.

Malek nodded. *"We sent a cloaked vessel to investigate each. Upon arriving in the first system, our ship was destroyed before it could report in. Forewarned, the second managed to relay a few images before we lost contact. Before this, neither system's indigenous population could have penetrated our cloaking devices, let alone muster the firepower to destroy them. We believe both of our ships were taken by surprise while under cloak. A follow up, more distant recon from the planet confirmed debris from our vessels. The little data we received from the brief transmission from the second craft detailed the attacking vessels."*

Bra'tac frowned. *"Were they familiar to you?"*

"They were not, but we have begun to accumulate a great deal of data on them. We believe they have been putting feelers out to a number of midlevel cultures across the galaxy...all Human. After some digging on related worlds, we discovered this unknown race of Humans, known as the Aschen, were soliciting worlds to join their confederation with promises of material, medical, and technological relief for their populations, including a guarantee of defense against any foe."

Bra'tac shook his head and glanced to his associates. None of them had an answer for him. *"I know nothing of these Aschen, but I am pleased you have brought this to my attention."*

"Also, there is another...matter which you need to be informed," Malek offered, a bit more boldly. *"There is another world seeking expansion into the galaxy, though their methods are less enticement and more...conscription."*

Bra'tac's eyes narrowed. He could feel Malek's squeamishness. There was something he was hesitant to say. *"You know this world, unlike the other."*

"As do you," Delek interrupted. *"The Tauri seem to be taking your example and grabbing other worlds for their own purposes."*

Per'sus glanced warningly at Delek but did not say anything that would have been awkward, though Bra'tac could sense his emotions and got the gist of their internal strife.

"Speak your mind, Delek," Bra'tac urged. *"I care not for verbal deceptions. What is it the Tauri have done, and why do you lay blame on us?"*

Delek stepped forward to the head of the group. *"Let's start with you, shall we? You've already seized three systems aside from Dakara. Up until such time I believed you might have been content with rebuilding Dakara and inviting other Jaffa to join you, but now you have taken after the Goa'uld and begun building your own empire."*

"Yes, I have," Bra'tac said, saying exactly the opposite that Delek expected.

The Tok'ra's eyes widened. *"You admit as much?"*

"I admit we are expanding into an empire," Bra'tac said slowly, *"but you are incorrect in assuming that we are taking after the Goa'uld. The worlds we have taken wished to join us."*

"As we have confirmed," Malek interrupted. *"My friend and others are concerned that your actions, while in the moment seem benevolent enough, could be a stepping stone to more unsavory developments."*

"You believe we are becoming the enemy that we previously sought to defeat?" Bra'tac summed up.

"Our queen does not," Per'sus interjected. *"But she has asked that we voice many questions. We mean no disrespect."*

Bra'tac leaned back in his seat. *"Any true friendship cannot hide behind lies. Differences of opinion must be voiced so that the truth of one's character may be assessed. As for my seizing other worlds, it is only right that I inform you that I now possess seven more in addition to Dakara, four of which are inhabited."*

"We thank you for that revelation," Per'sus offered. *"What, if we may, is the purpose of your expansion?"*

"I would have thought that answer obvious enough," Bra'tac chastised. *"Why does any civilization expand?"*

"There are many reasons," Malek offered. *"Some benevolent, some benign..."*

"and some malevolent," Delek finished for him.

"What is it you wish of me," Bra'tac asked Delek. *"I do not believe my mere assurance of good will is sufficient to placate your concerns?"*

"Why did you reinstate the structure of the System Lords?" Delek demanded. *"Surely you could have chosen another form?"*

"I would remind you, Tok'ra, that that system also belongs to the Jaffa. It is the societal structure which we have lived under for years. We and you have repurposed Goa'uld ships and technology, would you cede that we have the right to do the same with their command structure."

"A fair point," Delek relented. *"But one wonders if the old structure has been repurposed or simply emulated?"*

Raknor leaned forward in his chair. *"I could ask the same of you, Tok'ra. You take hosts, as did the Goa'uld. Is not the situation the same?"*

"Of course not," Delek scoffed. *"We are not the Goa'uld. We take willing hosts and share their lives. They are not our slaves."*

"You may say the same of the worlds we have taken and will take in the future," Bra'tac argued. *"They join us freely, and we do not enslave them."*

"As you said, words are insufficient guarantee," Delek said, stuck by his own statement. *"We ask what you plan to do with the Tauri. Are we free to act against them if we so choose? Or are they under your protection?"*

Bra'tac's eyes narrowed. *"I know nothing of which you speak. What exactly have they done?"*

Korra interrupted, having done some of the reconnaissance himself. *"They have taken up stewardship over several primitive worlds and have begun reshaping them to their own uses."*

"Such as what?" Bra'tac asked. *"I know they have had a number of offworld bases and mining sites, but I have not known them to take an inhabited world."*

"They have done so now," Korra continued, *"and have begun building a number of factories and agricultural facilities that the locals help operate. We don't know the particulars of the arrangement between these two parties, but the fact that the Tauri are not treating these worlds as sovereign entities is disturbing. They have made them into Tauri colonies, for what purpose we do not know."*

"That is not all," Delek interrupted. *"These worlds all possess stargates, but the Tauri never use them. They always arrive and depart via ship, usually replica Goa'uld cargo ships of their own construction, based on the design variants. These actions suggest less than noble intentions."*

"Interesting," Bra'tac mused, his thoughts suddenly elsewhere.

"Will you shield them?" Delek demanded.

"We shall investigate," Bra'tac declared, glancing at his subordinates. Two of them stood up and left on assignments, knowing by intuition rather than telepathy what the Alterra wanted.

"Investigate," Delek repeated.

"Any intelligence you have gathered would be useful," Bra'tac prompted, *"including anything you have on the Aschen."*

Sina stepped forward and pulled a small crystal out of a hidden pocket. *"We anticipated your request."*

Bra'tac snapped his fingers and another Jaffa in the room brought a small reading tablet to him. He inserted the crystal and a hologram deployed above it.

"If what you say is true about the Tauri, then I share your concerns. While I have great faith in the people in what the Tauri call the SGC, I am also aware of less trustworthy elements

on their world. I believe I recall a friend of mine telling me that the Tauri had differing priorities and that this split had resulted in an offworld base being established without using the stargates and without their knowledge. I believe they eventually shut it down."

Malek nodded. *"That would explain a lot. We recently signed a new treaty with the Tauri strictly forbidding this kind of interference. We couldn't account for their duplicity, but if there are multiple factions in play then that changes things."*

"I fail to see how," Delek argued. "The Tauri are responsible for the actions of their people, just as we are ours. You do not mean to excuse them on the basis of ignorance."

"Not completely," Malek argued. "But it does compliment matters."

"The Tauri are still in violation of the treaty and should be held accountable," Delak argued with his fellow Tok'ra as Bra'tac skimmed through the intelligence data as he listened. Suddenly the System Lord's eyes went wide.

"What is it?" Per'sus asked when he saw his expression.

"I am afraid I misspoke earlier," Bra'tac said, enlarging the hologram of the small ships that had destroyed the Tok'ra's second scout ship. "We have encountered them before, but we did not know their name. They attempted an invasion of Avalon, which we repelled using an Alterran ship."

"Avalon?" Per'sus asked.

"Otherwise known as Earth...the first world...home of the Tauri. My friend, be wary and forewarned...these Aschen are far more dangerous than you realize."

2

"*There are no ships in orbit,*" the Jaffa helmsmen of the cloaked Alket reported.

"*That we can see,*" Raknor added. "*The Tauri also possess cloaking technology. Can you locate the chappa'ai?*"

The Jaffa worked through the passive sensor data. "*It must be on the other side of the planet,*" he said, glancing up at Raknor.

"*Proceed,*" the commander of this mission ordered. Bra'tac had entrusted him with a ship and eight Jaffa to covertly verify the Tok'ra's reports. Raknor had had previous contact with the Tauri and knew something of what to expect, which was part of the reason why he'd been chosen for this mission. The other part was that in lieu of a true First Prime, Raknor had taken over the default duties of being Bra'tac's go to man.

The Alterra had instructed him to tread lightly with the Tauri, but to do what he needed to discover what they were up to. Bra'tac wanted more information before he contacted the SGC.

"*There it is,*" the helmsman reported as the Alket swung around to the other side of the planet.

"*Hold position,*" Raknor ordered. "*Bring up all surface scans of the area around the chappa'ai.*"

A hologram materialized behind the pilot and copilot's seats. The surface scans weren't overly detailed as a result of the active cloaking device, but they gave sufficient detail to mark seven distinct settlements.

"*Enlarge,*" Raknor said. This planet was supposed to have a population between 5,000 and 10,000 Humans.

The hologram expanded and more settlements appeared, though much smaller in size. The geographical map continued to expand out to a thousand kilometer radius.

"*Tag all the habitations, then focus back on the ones nearest the gate.*"

A few moments later nine settlements appeared, all in close proximity to the gate and by far the largest on the planet. The smallest of the nine was ten times larger than the next smallest settlement, and it appeared to Raknor that these sites had to have been expanded with help from the Tauri. The basic readings that they were getting indicated multiple level buildings...and that was something that the local population of Osseer wasn't capable of building on their own.

"*Enlarge 30%.*"

The map expanded and several smaller dots appeared around the circumference.

There was a small ridgeline separating the main settlements from the others on the north side of the stargate. One small settlement was sitting in the middle of a large open area several kilometers square. The right angles of the clearing suggested it wasn't naturally occurring.

Raknor toggled the map controls and checked several other breaks in the forest. They were all clearings bordered by precise lines, but only two of them had settlements inside the boundaries. Raknor continued to inspect the hologram while the other Jaffa on the bridge waited silently.

Off to the east Raknor found one clearing irregularly shaped...and it was within range of one of the larger settlements.

"Take us here, here, and here," he ordered, pointing to three distant positions on the map.

The cloaked Alket lowered its boarding ramp as it hovered a few meters above a dirt road in the middle of a plowed field. Raknor and Hret stepped out from the cloaking field of the ship but didn't appear. They were wearing personal cloaking devices of their own, ones capable of seeing each other and the Alket behind them...though it only appeared as glowing grid lines to Raknor's ocular device as it lifted up above the nearby treetops and moved off to the second position to deposit another infiltration team.

It was midday with a cloudless sky and overbearing sun. Off to their left there was a large machine cutting down more trees along the edge of the clearing and a small workforce cutting apart and disposing of the lumber. Another group used smaller, handheld machines to cut up the ground where the trees had been and convert it into tilled soil.

Raknor and Hret walked together silently under cloak down the small dirt road toward three small white domes in the center of the growing field.

The domes weren't fully sealed. Near the ground they didn't touch, but instead were latched to several metal poles imbedded into the soil. The domes were made of some type of taught cloth stretched over the metal framework. Inside a plethora of different sized crates were visible, some of which were open.

Raknor carefully rummaged through the open crates. Most were bags of grain, but there were also some more of the handheld machines that they'd seen used in the fields. They definitely looked like Tauri technology...Raknor used his ocular device to capture several photos of the crates' contents.

After he finished he motioned for Hret to follow him outside. Once in the clear they ran off down another dirt road in the direction of the nearest settlement. They had six hours to scout the colony before they were due for pickup...though Raknor could contact the ship and reschedule if needed.

The dirt trail led into the woods and meandered through some low hills until it abruptly stopped and a hard, black surface replaced it with white lines down the center and along the edges. On either side of the black material that stunk of chemicals, crushed white rock an arm's length wide outlined either side before transitioning into low cut green plants, so thick you couldn't see the dirt beneath them.

Raknor and Hret hesitated at the sight of the alien landscape, then cautiously moved forward down the road.

On either side of them there stood squarish buildings, most three levels high with many windows. Behind them, in the distance, two much larger buildings dominated the horizon, easily three times as high and a kilometer long. The roofs were angled up to a peak, but otherwise they were little more than large rectangles.

Raknor and Hret moved off the road and onto a smaller, lighter path that led across the greenery to the individual buildings. They chose one of the smaller, three level structures and approached the entrance, taking surveillance photos periodically.

They stopped just outside and waited for several minutes, but no one seemed to be around. There was, however, a surveillance camera covering the door.

Raknor consider for a moment. The device probably couldn't see through their cloak, but it would detect when the door opened.

He shook his head. This needed to be a zero impact operation. They couldn't leave any hints behind of a cloaked operative. They'd try another route.

Raknor pointed Hret off along the side of the building onto the green plants. They checked each window they passed by, trying to observe any activity inside. They went all the way around the perimeter but none of the windows were open, nor did they look to be capable of such a function. Also, no one could be seen inside.

Raknor waved Hret on and they made their way back to the road. There were other buildings toward the settlements' center, more square in design and higher than they were wide. They'd check those out next.

When they were halfway there they noticed a group of twelve people walking down the road back to one of the three story buildings in front of a small ground transport meant for two passengers, but only one seat was occupied. The woman driving the four wheeled transport looked to be an offworlder, based on her clothing. She wore a trim uniform of high quality as opposed to the baggy, blue full body suits that the twelve walking men wore. She also had a small, flat information device in her hand.

When they arrived in front of one of the particular buildings the group stopped in formation...two by two...and seemed to wait on the woman to proceed.

She checked off some information on her device and said something to the workers in the common tongue. They broke ranks and shuffled into the building while she casually drove off.

Raknor ran after the woman with Hret following a step behind. The small transport wasn't very fast, and they could nearly keep pace with it as they ran. The woman gained ground slowly, but the wide open arrangement of the settlement made it difficult for her to get out of sight of the cloaked Jaffa.

The woman eventually led them to one of the larger buildings on the outskirts of the settlement. This one the Jaffa could enter without trouble...the bay doors were open, and they simply followed the woman inside.

The facility was quite large, but little more than a basic framework with an open aired interior. Many large farming machines were docked here, with maintenance workers scattered among them. Raknor saw one moving out three bays down and wondered what its purpose was. It had a long, wide comb with pointed teeth on the front attached to a thick body suspended on two large wheels up front and two smaller ones in the rear, on top of which stood a clear glass cockpit.

Raknor took several seconds of video then let it pass. He'd follow it up later.

The woman they'd followed had rendezvoused with another two identically dressed men. They conversed with each other briefly before another set of a dozen blue-clad workers emerged from some sort of processing area and one of the well dressed men took a transport of his own and led them out of the building.

The woman and the other man continued their conversation and Raknor moved closer, recording what he could of it. They were not speaking the common tongue, as most Humans in this galaxy did. Bra'tac had explained to Raknor and several other high level Jaffa that the common tongue had originally come from the Pegasus galaxy and was brought to Avalona by a Lantean named Merlin, who then spread it to several worlds during the reign of the original System Lords. Upon discovering a common language between several of the worlds they eventually conquered, they decided to use the language for their Humans slaves and thus spread it throughout their domain.

What Bra'tac didn't know was that the common tongue of the people in Pegasus had actually originated from before the Ori/Alterra split. It was the common trade language in Destra,

while Lingara was a more advanced, more technical language specifically created to allow for a plethora of terminology and intricacy that the sciences required.

Over time, the zealotry of the Ori deemed Lingara as the Holy language and pushed to abolish all others. In time they succeeded, and Lingara became the standard. When the Alterra left Destra several thousands of years later the trade language went with them in their linguistic database...though it was never used again.

When the Lanteans saw that the more primitive seed species in Pegasus had advanced far enough to comprehend basic languages they intentionally taught them the old trade language, partly in defiance of the Ori's original edict banishing the language, but also because the Pegasus natives weren't advanced enough to comprehend the intricacies of Lingara...the language of the Ancients. Thus the common tongue reappeared in Pegasus...and it was that language that the Lanteans used to communicate with their less advanced brethren.

Subsequently, the Ori resurrected the old trade language when they too created a primitive version of themselves. The idea of their subjects speaking the Holy language for their pathetic, day to day lives was offensive, to say the least. It was decided that they should use the old language for their meaningless existence while learning the Holy language through patient and diligent study...further ingraining them on the path to 'enlightenment.'

Most front line Jaffa had been required to learn the common tongue in order to deal with the slaves, and Raknor had been among them. Others had not, and those were primarily the priests and other temple workers who saw such knowledge as an affront to the language of the gods.

Those gods, in turn, had spread the common language as a way to further deitize themselves. The language of the Goa'uld became the Holy language, and not knowing it further degraded the slaves and set them apart from the Jaffa who oversaw them.

Raknor, however, had also been taught a third language...Batu. It had originally been implemented by the System Lord Hera as a 'battle language' for her Jaffa that could be used for secret communication during combat. Orders could be yelled out in the heat of battle and the enemy would be unaware of what was being said. It had proved so useful that several other System Lords sought out the language and taught it to their own Jaffa...thus ending Hera's advantage.

Raknor had also heard several other languages spoken, but the one these Humans were using was totally unfamiliar to him...but even more bizarre was the fact that when these white clothed leaders spoke to the blue clothed workers they did so in the common tongue.

After recording a sample of the language Raknor and Hret slipped into the processing area that the workers were coming from in an attempt to backtrack them to whatever they were working on.

The bit about the language bothered Raknor. It seemed to confirm Tok'ra suspicions that the local inhabitants were not equal partners in this endeavor...that is, if the blue clothed persons were in fact the local inhabitants. Their general appearance supported this, but Raknor couldn't be for sure.

No closed doors stood in the Jaffas' way, only a labyrinth of corridors that led into the enclosed section of the building. Hret was nearly run over by a group of workers as they passed by, but he eluded detection by cramming himself into a wall niche.

Raknor nodded his approval and the two moved on. They eventually emerged into a large, open aired factory on the opposite end of the rectangular building from the vehicle bays. Hundreds of blue clad workers swarmed over the machinery, most of which looked primitive to

the Jaffa's eye. Interspersed among them were yellow clad individuals...but they didn't look any different from the blues. Only the white clad leaders appeared to be offworlders, and there were only a handful of them visible.

Upon further exploration, the Jaffa discovered the factory was not a single unit. There were three different sections processing different materials. One appeared to be some type of ore refinery...the second was a forge for the metals...and the third was a packaging plant for the crops coming in from the fields.

The Jaffa worked their way through the third section and found a link to a separate loading bay with transports taking on the grain. One of the open topped long-bed transports was nearly full.

Hret pointed towards it and motioned that they should get on. Raknor nodded and they weaved their way across the loading dock and climbed up opposite sides of the transport. They sat down on top of the grain bags, still obscured beneath their cloaking devices and waited for departure.

Ten minutes later the transport pulled out and headed down the black road toward another settlement.

3

Eneset looked at the tiny pinprick of a planet that supposedly housed the Aschen colony with a stern look on his face. The Jaffa was not the most conversational warrior amongst Bra'tac's legions, but he was one of the most dependable and, more importantly, cautious.

He'd been selected to lead the second scouting mission to verify the Tok'ra's intelligence. His mission, however, was different than that of Raknor's. The previous Tok'ra scouting missions had ended with the destruction of their ships in orbit, which required Eneset to be even more cautious than usual.

Bra'tac had assured him that the Alket's cloaking device would be sufficient to fool the Aschen's sensors, unlike those of the Tok'ra, but the System Lord had still insisted on a bit of prudence in their approach to the mission. Hence the long, slow advance from halfway across the star system.

Distant as they were, two larger ships were detectable in orbit around the planet with many more intermittent contacts. Eneset had seen the telemetry from Bra'tac's battle over Earth and wondered if these blips weren't a cluster of the block craft that the Aschen had used to attack the Human world.

Prior to the launch of this mission, the Jaffa had sought out word of mouth intelligence amongst the trading partners of Illicia...the world Eneset was now approaching. Like the Tok'ra had also told them, Illicia had been invited to join what was called the Aschen Confederation, though how much of an 'invitation' it had been remained to be seen. Regardless, Illicia's trading partners had seen a boon of exports coming from the planet, both in volume and quality.

On a lesser level, several other planets had reported a small number of individuals emigrating to Illicia with the Aschen's blessing. It seemed the Tok'ra had tried to infiltrate the planet through this means, but were discovered. This suggested the Aschen's ability to detect the presence of a symbiot within a host.

Eneset had mixed feelings about that...on one level he appreciated the irony of the Tok'ra losing their ability to hide within Humans...but on another level he worried about what other technology these Aschen might have if they could thwart the esteemed intelligence gathering capabilities of the Tok'ra.

The Jaffa knew better than to try and emulate the Goa'uld, and with the Alterran technology granted them they fortunately had another option...

As the planet of Illicia grew larger on the viewscreen the sensor images refined themselves into a number of smaller vessels, some of which were the block craft...but others were new ships that had not been included in the information packet from the System Lord.

"Tag the smaller ships and begin collecting data," Eneset ordered.

The Jaffa in the copilot's seat nodded and pulled up a sensor protocol and tied it into the ship's memory bank where a profile composite began to form...such skills had long been denied, even forbidden, to the Jaffa during the reign of the original System Lords, but now that a Jaffa had ascended to that rank things had changed, and changed greatly. Lord Bra'tac had not only allowed technical knowledge to the Jaffa, he had insisted on their training in it. As it was,

Eneset and his crew knew far more about the 'magics' of the Goa'uld than their ancestors ever had.

One of the smaller ships began to break orbit, leaving the protective halo of the block ships. After half a minute the ship jumped into hyperspeed en route to who knew where.

"Plot the trajectory," Eneset ordered.

The copilot did as bidden then located a system along the path. He brought up the location on the central hologram.

"The second Aschen planet," Eneset mumbled as his attention was drawn to the two large ships. They were close enough now for the passive sensors to identify their designs.

The first was a control ship, identical to the one used in the battle at the Tauri homeworld. The second was a cube of block ships, all undeployed. It just hung in space alongside the curved command ship in a stark contrast of aesthetics.

"Take us into the atmosphere...slowly," he urged.

Thus far their cloak had held up against detection...but entering the atmosphere was another matter altogether. The disruption of the air on entry could be tracked unless they were very careful about it.

The pilot knew what he was doing, however, and slowed the ship to a stop above one of the larger cities, completely negating orbital velocity. The parked Aschen ships drifted off along their orbits while the Alket descended on its anti-grav repulsors.

Eneset kept a close eye on the enemy ships as the atmosphere began to lick at their craft, but neither moved. The Jaffa at the helm kept them steady all the way down to the surface where they bottomed out a mile above a large primitive city.

"Make sure all recorders are on," Eneset reminded the crew. *"Zero presence survey protocols...let's get to work."*

Raknor and Hret slipped off the sides of the cargo transport when it left the road onto a larger square pad made of the same substance. When the Jaffa dropped to the ground they instinctively touched their hands to the surface as their legs absorbed the drop. Raknor glanced at the black residue on his fingers, glanced at Hret who had the same on his hand, then wiped the grime off on his pant leg.

They fell into step with each other and followed the transport across the expanse toward six parked cargo ships...each a knockoff of the Goa'uld version, but with the round edges blocked off in typical Tauri fashion. Raknor also noticed armed guards for the first time...they too carried typical Tauri weapons.

Behind the cargo ships was a slow, wide building that was little more than a thin cover over a dozen Human fighters.

When the Jaffa got closer they noticed subtle symbols on the cargo ships. Raknor couldn't make out the symbols, but he made sure to record the images. The fighters too, they found out as they circled past the cargo ships, had identical symbols at the top of the markings, then similar, but different markings below.

Hret touched his shoulder to get his attention then pointed off to their right. Raknor glanced in that direction and frowned. Beyond a row of thin trees there were a cluster of small boxes sitting in the sun next to another squarish building...but this building had the look of a prison about it. The windows all had reinforcing bars in the transparent material, multiple security recorders on short poles around the perimeter, an armed checkpoint at the only entrance, and a wire fence surrounding the perimeter.

The two Jaffa moved across the paved surface, through the trees, and in between the boxes toward the checkpoint when they heard a soft groan.

Raknor stopped and listened. The groan didn't repeat, but he was fairly sure it had come from one of the boxes. Hret pointed to the third closest one and Raknor nodded his agreement. They both crept up on it and bent down to look through two tiny slits in the metal.

Both Jaffa exchanged glances. There was someone inside...and given the metal construction and the sun beating down on it there was little doubt that this was anything other than some sort of punishment device. Raknor's first instinct was to free the person inside, but that wasn't an option...or was it.

Raknor waved to Hret and they jogged off into the middle of nowhere.

"Jorro," Raknor whispered into his communicator.

"*I am here,*" the Jaffa in the ship answered through Raknor's earpiece, which also transmitted to all the other scouts on the planet, including Hret.

"*Change of plans,*" he continued to whisper. He was cloaked, but it would do nothing to hide his voice. "*I'm sending Hret back to the ship. He needs another gauntlet and a fast-acting sedative.*"

Hret nodded, suddenly understanding, and took off at a run back to their extraction point.

"*It will take a few minutes to synthesize the sedative...*" Jorro said, unsure what was going on. "*Who is it for?*"

"*One of the natives...I think,*" Raknor said, not quite sure of who he was looking at through the tiny cuts in the box, but his instincts said this was one of the original inhabitants that hadn't wanted to do things the Tauri way.

He'd find out in a few hours, assuming the individual lived that long.

"*You think?*" Jorro asked, more confused than before.

"*We found a prison,*" Raknor said quickly and quietly. "*He might be able to provide us with some information.*"

"*Understood. But won't that violate operational orders?*"

"*Indeed it will. I'll take responsibility.*"

"*Your call,*" Jorro relented. "*You going to drag him back, or do you want a pickup?*"

"*I'll let you know,*" Raknor said, ending communications. It would take a while for Hret to get back with the equipment, but there was a large field nearby with several auxiliary buildings that Raknor wanted to check out in the meantime.

"*This is the one you spoke of?*" Bra'tac asked as a withered Human was escorted up toward the head of the 'throne room.'

"*She is,*" Raknor confirmed, bowing his head slightly upon arrival at the foot of the dais where Bra'tac stood.

"*She is weak,*" Bra'tac said, glancing over her. The woman could barely stand, and would have fallen over if two Jaffa hadn't held either arm firmly. "*You said she was in some form of torture device, yes?*"

Raknor nodded. "*Confined space, seated with knees to the chest and extreme heat, very little ventilation.*"

Bra'tac nodded. "*I've seen such methods used before,*" he said, reaching out and putting a hand on her thin neck. He closed his eyes and concentrated.

For a moment nothing happened, then the woman sucked in a quick, noisy breath as if she was waking from a trance.

"Be still..." Bra'tac said, firmly but warmly. "You are among friends."

The woman glanced at the larger Jaffa holding her in place. "Where am I?"

"On a world called Dakara," the Alterra answered kindly. "My name is Bra'tac."

"Selena," she offered timidly.

Bra'tac nodded his head in greeting. "My Jaffa rescued you from your confinement and brought you here. They had hoped you could provide us with some information."

Selena's brow furrowed. "I don't remember any of that."

"You were delirious," Bra'tac told her. "Only now have I healed your wounds and cleared your mind."

She shook her arms loose and looked for the burn marks on them, then felt for the ones on the back of her neck. "How?"

"With a touch," he said simply. "I am an Alterra. These are Jaffa," he said, extending his hand toward his companions.

"I've heard of Jaffa," Selena admitted, "but not Alterra."

"That's not surprising," Bra'tac said dismissively. "Why were you tortured, Selena?"

She shrugged. "I woke up one morning and didn't feel like working, so they put me in the box."

"How long were you in the box?"

"Ten days...they took me out each night and said I could go back to work in the morning...but I wouldn't, so they kept putting me back in the box."

"Who are they?" Bra'tac asked, curious.

"The overseers," she answered, stretching her back.

"They are offworlders, are they not?"

"Yeah...they came to our world three years ago and offered our people a deal...and our stupid leaders fell for it."

"What kind of deal?" Bra'tac asked.

"They offered protection, food, technology, and a bunch of other junk that made the idiots drool with greed. All we had to do was join them and they'd make our lives easier," she said, ending with a sarcastic grunt.

"They did not live up to the bargain?" Bra'tac asked.

"I suppose they did," Selena said, clearly not agreeing with her own comment. "We don't have to worry about running out of food in the winter, our homes are cooled in the summer and heated in the winter, our water is crisp and clear, and we get a fresh set of clothes each day...but I'd hardly call that a fair trade for our freedom. They decide everything...where we work, when we work, where we live, what we eat, how we walk, what we can and can't say." She shook her head in disgust. "I hated the bastards even before they put me in the box."

"You cannot leave your world?"

"No...they have the ring of the gods guarded. Only those with permission can pass through...no one has that I know of in the last year. The overseers don't even use it. They travel by ship."

Bra'tac nodded gravely. "Tell me more of what they have done."

After they'd finished debriefing the prisoner, Bra'tac had her given quarters and provisions on Dakara with the option of travel to any world of her choice if she did not want to remain with the Jaffa. She'd said something about tracking down her relatives on Ido, but was more than happy to remain on Dakara for a while and do nothing but eat and sleep.

Meanwhile, Bra'tac reviewed the intelligence data that Raknor had brought back with him, as well as the data from Eneset on the Aschen. After several hours of analysis Bra'tac contacted Earth and requested SG-1 be sent to Dakara to meet with him as soon as possible.

4

"General Landry," Teal'c said, standing just outside his office.

"Teal'c...come in," he said, emphasized by a wave of his hand.

The Jaffa walked in with his hands clasped behind his back and stood flush with the front of the General's desk.

"I respectfully request not to be included in SG-1's mission to Dakara."

Landry raised an eyebrow. "This have something to do with you and Bra'tac?"

"It does."

Landry sighed and leaned back in his chair. "What is it with the two of you anyway?"

"It is not something easily explained," Teal'c said monotone.

"Try me."

Teal'c nodded slowly. "Very well. Bra'tac believes he is ushering in a new era of respect, power, and freedom for all Jaffa. I believe he is a shol'va."

Landry seemed taken aback for a moment. "Harsh words...especially coming from you. I thought the two of you were close friends."

"We were...but Bra'tac is not the Jaffa he once was."

"Do you have any idea why he requested SG-1 come to Dakara?"

"I do not."

"Do you believe you will be a hindrance to the mission in some way?"

Teal'c hesitated. "No good will come from my presence there."

"I see," Landry said, considering. "Permission to stay behind, granted."

"Thank you, General," Teal'c said, nodding and walking around the corner of the General's desk.

"Hold up, Teal'c. If you won't be going to Dakara with SG-1, then I have another assignment for you."

Teal'c stood to. "Yes?"

"I'd like you to visit the offworld training center for a few days. Rough 'em up a bit in the simulations. Give the trainees a taste of real combat."

Teal'c nodded curtly. "It will be my pleasure, General Landry," he said with the barest hint of a smile.

Mitchell, Carter, Vala, and Hailey ringed up into the Dakara thrown room, escorted by a pair of Jaffa guards. The foursome glanced around the large chamber, noticing the raised seats at the far end with Bra'tac and company assembled. Cam led the way up the path on the floor with Sam a step behind off his right shoulder.

"Thank you for coming," Bra'tac offered as he stood up and walked down the tiered steps to meet them on an equal level.

"No problem," Cam commented. "Nice place you got here."

"Very impressive," Sam added.

Bra'tac nodded dismissively. He was obviously preoccupied. "Where is Teal'c?"

Mitchell half cringed. "Yeah, Teal'c is on another assignment at the moment."

Bra'tac stood impassive. "I see. I had wished to speak with him."

Vala shrugged innocently. "I think he's still a little mad at you," she said, drawing a glare from Mitchell.

Bra'tac nodded. "I got that sense from him the last time we spoke. I had hoped he'd taken a new perspective by now, but no matter. His presence at this time isn't necessary."

"What's going on, Bra'tac?" Carter asked.

"I wish this meeting were under better circumstances...I have asked you here to discuss a matter concerning the Tauri."

"Oh?" Cam asked.

Bra'tac hesitated again. "It has come to my attention that you have established a number of offworld bases."

Cam and Carter exchanged glances. "We've had several for some time," Sam admitted.

"But to our knowledge," Bra'tac countered, "you have never taken a world with an existing population on it."

"Well," Cam wavered, "there was one that had a bunch of Unas on it, but we eventually worked out an agreement with them to set up a mining operation."

"I was not aware of that," Bra'tac told him, "but I was actually referring to Human populations."

Cam frowned. "Carter?"

She shook her head. "All of our bases are on uninhabited worlds."

"I have been told," Bra'tac continued, "that your recently revised treaty with the Tok'ra expressly forbid either party to take control of planets with existing populations."

"Yes it does," Carter said, sensing a problem. "What are you getting at?"

Bra'tac sighed/growled. "We received intelligence from the Tok'ra that you were in violation of your treaty with them. I sent Raknor to investigate," he said, gesturing to the man seated behind them.

"What they said is true," Raknor confirmed. "I saw your people and equipment myself."

"What world was this?" Vala interrupted, sensing some hanky panky going on.

"Osser," Raknor said accusingly.

Cam and Carter exchanged looks again. "Never heard of it," he said.

"I have," Hailey said meekly from behind him.

Cam and Carter parted, looking back at her. "Where?" Sam asked.

"It's a world SG-16 explored four or five years ago. Medium sized population, decent climate, poor, no technology to speak of."

"Then you admit you've been there?" Raknor asked.

"Yeah...I guess so," Cam said. "We don't have a base there that I know of," he said, glancing back at Hailey. She shook her head 'no.'

"Perhaps this will help jog your memory," Raknor said, activating a holographic projector in the floor. It began going through a slide show of the stills he and the other Jaffa had taken during their reconnaissance mission.

"What the hell?" Sam whispered as a shot of a combine in a corn field appeared.

"I could swear those were pictures from back home," Cam said offhand.

"I can assure you," Raknor said, his voice teetering between friendly and hostile, "they are not."

SG-1 continued to watch the pictures, their confusion growing.

"That's Earth technology," Vala vouched.

"And you have no knowledge of this world?" Bra'tac asked.

"No," Carter said, still surprised at what they were being shown.

Bra'tac nodded, having searched their minds to see if they were lying or not. "I had thought not. I knew it was not something typical of your actions...but could it not be another faction of your people?"

"I don't see how," Carter testified. "They couldn't set up something like that without us knowing...unless they didn't use the stargate."

"Oh...I do *not* like where this is going, Sam" Mitchell said, glancing at the floor.

"We have recovered one of the natives from the planet," Bra'tac told them. "She told us many things...one of which was the fact that ships come and go from the planet on a daily basis."

"What kind of ships?" Hailey asked.

"Copies of Goa'uld cargo ships," Raknor said, stepping forward and altering the holographic display by way of a small handheld device. Photos of the grounded ships appeared.

"These were the ships we encountered on the surface. The Humans were loading grain onboard in large quantities...the one ship that we observed arriving carried Tauri-style crates," the Jaffa said, showing them another photo.

"What's that symbol?" Vala asked, pointing to the top of one sideways stacked crate.

Raknor enlarged the photo until the small symbol became easily visible.

"Good catch," Cam offered. "Anyone recognize it?"

"It's the I.O.A." Hailey said immediately.

Sam nodded. "She's right. I've seen it on some of their recent letterhead."

"Why haven't I seen it then?" Cam asked, not liking the implications of this.

"They have four different symbols," Hailey explained. "They use them almost at random. This one I haven't seen very often, but it is theirs. I guarantee it."

"What are they thinking setting up a base without telling the SGC?" Vala asked, not entirely surprised. "And where did they get those cargo ships? They're obviously a different variant from what the Goa'uld use, so they couldn't have stolen them."

"Maybe they built them," Hailey offered.

"Hold on a minute," Cam interrupted. "Let's go back to part about them shipping grain offworld."

"What kind of grain was it?" Sam asked, tracking Cam's thoughts.

"We never saw the contents," Raknor told them, "but there were a large number of corn fields on the planet. We guessed they were shipping grain back to Earth to help offset the damage done to your world by the Aschen bioweapon."

"We took a hit," Sam admitted, "and some of the countries involved still haven't fully recovered, but a few cargo ships of grain a day would hardly make any difference."

"Kassa?" Vala asked.

"I hope not," Cam said, "but why else would they be shipping it offworld?"

"What is Kassa?" Bra'tac asked.

"It's a type of narcotic that the Lucian Alliance grew in the form of corn. They sold it across the galaxy for a substantial profit before we started interfering in their operations," Carter explained.

"Corn?" Raknor asked.

"More like evil space corn, but yeah," Cam confirmed.

"And your people are growing this to sell to the galaxy?" the Jaffa asked.

"Or to sell on Earth," Hailey offered.

"Oh boy," Sam said, not even having considered that possibility.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Cam said, glancing at the backdrop of the current picture in the hologram, "but that doesn't look like some fly by night operation. It looks like they've been there a while."

"Yes, it does," Sam agreed. She glanced at Bra'tac. "You said you had a witness?"

"Indeed," he confirmed. "She had been imprisoned and tortured for refusing to work. Yet another reason why I didn't believe this was your doing...but it's also something we can't allow to continue."

"If it's our people, we'll put a stop to it," Carter assured him.

"How?" Cam asked her.

"We'll find a way," she said resolutely.

"If they've been going behind our back for years what makes you think they'll stop now?"

"This isn't the first time we've discovered one of their unsanctioned projects," Sam reminded him, harshening her voice to suggest that this wasn't the time or place to discuss these things.

"Do you have a full sized map?" Cam asked Bra'tac.

The Alterra nodded to Raknor and he adjusted the hologram to show an aerial schematic of the colony.

Vala whistled appreciatively when it dawned on them just how big it was.

Cam pointed to it. "You really think they're going to shut down something that big?"

"They'll have to," Carter insisted, though she didn't feel as confident as she sounded.

"There was something else that my Jaffa found odd," Bra'tac said, again glancing at Raknor. "The Tauri on this world spoke two languages. One to the indigenous workers, and another amongst themselves that we couldn't identify."

The hologram shifted from stills to video with sound. They listened to a brief conversation in an alien tongue, then a still of some markings appeared.

"And these were also discovered on the hull of the cargo ships," Bra'tac continued.

The top symbol was again the crest of the I.O.A....but the symbols beneath matched the spoken language they'd just heard.

Cam's eyes narrowed dangerously. "That's Chinese..."

5

Ian Victor was having a meeting in his office with his American counterpart in the SGC, Kelly VanMeter, when Landry burst through the door.

"What's the meaning of this?" the I.O.A. lead representative on permanent station in Cheyenne Mountain demanded.

"You slick son of a bitch," Landry bit out. "Did you really think we wouldn't find out?"

"I don't know what you think you're doing," Victor angrily objected, "but I will not be addressed in such a tone."

"Osser!" Landry yelled, clearly unintimidated by the suit and tie wearing Brit.

For the barest of seconds there was recognition on Victor's face, then it disappeared behind a diplomatic mask.

"What's Osser?" he asked innocently. "And what about it gives you the right to barge into my office?"

"General, what's going on?" VanMeter asked.

Landry looked down at where she sat. "I hope to god you didn't have any part in this."

"Part in what?" she demanded.

Landry looked back at Victor. "Ask your boss. He knows."

Kelly looked at the senior I.O.A. representative. "What's Osser?"

Victor shook his head innocently. "I have no idea."

"Cut the bull," Landry said, leaning his fists on the edge of his desk. "The Jaffa ratted you out. We've got a copy of their intelligence data...including some damning pictures of Human infrastructure and half a dozen 302s. Not to mention an eye witness that the Jaffa rescued from their imprisonment."

Victor's demeanor changed, but he didn't say anything. Even Kelly saw it.

"What is he talking about?" she demanded again.

"The SGC answers to the I.O.A., not the other way around," Victor responded icily.

"All offworld bases fall under the supervision of Homeworld Security," Landry shouted. "I just got off the phone with General O'Neill five minutes ago. They know nothing about this."

"Osser's a planet," VanMeter guessed.

"Yes...one with a joint I.O.A./Chinese colony running roughshod over the locals," Landry told her while watching Victor's eyes. They widened just a bit.

The US representative to the I.O.A. turned on her boss. "That's in violation of the Gate Alliance Treaty, the I.O.A. charter, and the treaty we have with the Tok'ra!"

"Apparently this colony has been around for a few years..." Landry added, letting Kelly take the lead.

"Which means you willfully signed onto a treaty that you had no intention of following!" she accused Victor, and by extension the rest of the I.O.A. leading counsel.

"The Tok'ra are irrelevant," Victor said slowly. "As is this conversation. What's done is done."

Landry eyed the man for a moment. "And it will be undone."

Victor snickered. "You can't blackmail us with possession of the stargate anymore. We no longer need it."

"Who's we?" Kelly demanded.

Victor smiled. "If you don't already know, then I'm certainly not going to fill in the blanks for you."

"Try filling in this blank..." Landry said coldly. "What happens when the Jaffa take Osser away from you, because, if you didn't already know, that's exactly what they're threatening to do if Earth doesn't take care of this itself."

Victor's eyes narrowed. "They wouldn't dare. We'd cut off their supply of Tretonin."

"I'm not talking about those Jaffa...I'm talking about Dakara."

"They're threatening us?" Victor asked, disbelievingly.

"Warning us," Landry corrected. "And they did us a favor by talking to us first, because even they thought forced labor was a bit out of our character."

"Forced labor?!" VanMeter exclaimed.

"Communism 101," Landry remarked. "Now being exported to the stars."

"That CANNOT be allowed to happen," she angrily yelled at Victor as she stood up.

"It's already begun," the smug Brit reminded her as he too stood. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I assume your government will be demanding a meeting with the full I.O.A. council. Seeing as how I'm on that council, I best be departing immediately."

Victor tried to walk out from behind his desk and pass by Landry but the General had other plans.

"Sergeant!"

Three uniformed guards stepped into view from the hallway. Upon seeing them Victor spun around. "You have no right to hold me in confinement. I have to get to Paris to meet with the rest of the council."

"Oh, we're not confining you," Landry assured him as the guards firmly grasped the man's arms. "But you will be riding to Paris with us," he said without any trace of humor. "Until then you'll have plenty of time to pack," he said, motioning for the guards to take him back to his quarters, where he was going to be put under house arrest.

"General," Kelly pleaded with him, "I had no idea any of this was going on."

"I believe you, for no other fact than I'd doubt the I.O.A. would try circumventing the US and informing us of it at the same time...but then again, I'm not the one that needs convincing. You'll have to explain yourself to General O'Neill when he arrives."

"Why is he coming here?" she asked, assuming he'd be headed to Paris as well.

"He wants to talk to SG-1 first, so you'll have a brief opportunity to plead your case to him. In the mean time, you're confined to the base."

"I object to being treated like a traitor...but I understand your need for security. I won't cause a problem."

"Good," Landry said, leaving Victor's office more mad than he had been upon entering.

Two days later the I.O.A. leading council convened in their headquarters in Paris at the request of the United States government. Cleared of any wrongdoing, VanMeter and a handful of other American I.O.A. personnel had accompanied General O'Neill to the meeting, as had the US Secretary of State, but it was Jack that stood before the I.O.A. to hold their feet to the fire.

"Miss Shen," he began, his tone appropriately irreverent, "is there something your government would like to tell us...or do I have to start dragging out the line of witnesses?"

The lead Chinese representative on the I.O.A. let his words hang in the air for a moment. "I don't believe that will be necessary, though I wonder what witnesses you're referring to. I believe every member of this council, including Mr. Coolidge, is already aware of our offworld operations on the planet Osser. I am surprised that he didn't inform your government of the situation."

"Funny, him not being here," O'Neill said in response to her backhanded admission. "Seems he's dropped off the face of the planet."

"We are hardly responsible if you can't keep track of your own people, General," Shen replied.

O'Neill dropped the sarcasm...for once. "All offworld operations are supposed to be under the supervision of Homeworld Security, for the explicit reason that we can't have one nation starting a war that this whole planet will be forced to fight...which is exactly what you have done. The Jaffa are fit to be tied that we're taking up where the Goa'uld left off, and the Tok'ra can't be too happy that we knowingly entered into a treaty that we were in violation of the moment we signed."

"The I.O.A.," Victor stated smoothly, "will defend its assets against alien incursion without relying on the US military. We are not, therefore, drawing you into a confrontation. If the Jaffa, Tok'ra, or others do not recognize the legitimacy of our offworld expansion, then that is unfortunate, but given our level of available technology it would be foolish for them to challenge us."

"I don't think you're hearing what I'm saying," O'Neill said, his sarcasm back. "We don't care. You broke god knows how many treaties *and* you stabbed us in the back. And you're nuts if you think we're just going to sit back and take it."

"Short of going to war, what are you inferring?" Shen asked.

"That one's not off the table..." O'Neill threatened.

The Secretary of State walked up to the dais next to Jack. "If you do not immediately cease all unsanctioned offworld activities, the United States of America will enact a form of economic warfare that will be just as devastating, if not more so than a military engagement."

All the I.O.A. representatives seemed a bit shaken at that possibility...except Shen.

"Furthermore," the Secretary of State added. "The I.O.A. must disband immediately, given that it clearly can't obey the tenets of international law, nor recognize the sanctity of treaties."

"That is not going to happen," the Russian representative, Dr. Harkovli, declared firmly. "The time of the United States' government dictating to us what we can and cannot do offworld is past. The organizational structure of the I.O.A. is necessary to ensure equity in Earth's relations with other worlds. We admit that what the Chinese government has done on Osser steps over the line, and they should be held accountable, but the I.O.A. will not be disbanded."

Shen turned to her right and glared at the Russian. "Easy for you to say, when it wasn't your colony that was discovered. I think it is time we revealed all of our involvement in offworld activities before this meeting goes any further."

She turned back to address O'Neill while the other representatives squirmed in their seats. "Every nation represented here has established offworld colonies under the supervision of the I.O.A. The Jaffa only discovered one of many worlds which have been added to Earth's collective holdings...including your few worlds, which I believe you refer to as the Alpha, Beta, Gamma sites, etc."

O'Neill exchanged glances with the US delegation. None of them had expected this.

"Group conspiracies don't legitimize what you've done, and our position stands," O'Neill said firmly. "You will evacuate your unsanctioned, undeclared colonies at once or we will begin making your lives hell down here on Earth."

The Secretary of State cringed at that last remark, but didn't interfere.

"We only excluded the United States from our plans on the recommendation of Mr. Coolidge, who believed that your country wasn't ready to fully commit to an international colonization program," the French representative, Mr. Louvere, said almost pleadingly. "Now that the program has already established itself, I see no reason why the United States cannot join us and expand on your current holdings."

"I agree," Victor chimed in. "The rest of us shouldn't be held responsible for China's misdeeds. They're the only nation that established colonies on inhabited worlds, which makes them the only one in violation of our treaty with the Tok'ra."

"So what?" O'Neill asked, clearly not caring for diplomatic protocol. "You want us to just forgive and forget? Are you nuts?!"

"Perhaps we did act inappropriately," Louvere admitted, "but so has the United States in the past, and you were not forced to cede possession of the stargate. France is willing to make concessions, and if necessary abandon some of our offworld holdings in penance for the agreements which we freely signed into and then broke...but I would argue that banning us from offworld expansion is a punishment not fitting the crime."

"You admit to crime as if the United States is judge and jury," Shen spat. "We have no need to answer to them."

"We did break several treaties," Harkovli added. "In that much, they are correct."

"Treaties that all the nations here were leveraged into signing," Shen argued, "by the American's possession of the stargate. Now that we no longer require the gate, I see no reason why we should be held to such treaties."

"General O'Neill is correct," Mrs. Neville, the Canadian representative said, "that the actions of one nation can put the rest in jeopardy. I move that the government of China cede all worlds with an indigenous population back to those populations. We cannot afford to turn our offworld allies into offworld enemies."

"France concurs," Louvere agreed.

The other representatives nodded their agreement, all looking at Shen, but she held her head high in defiance.

"Well?" O'Neill asked her.

"My government expected such spineless supplication to the United States," she said vehemently, "and we're prepared to go it alone if necessary."

"Your actions will put the entire planet at risk!" Louvere argued.

"That would not be a first," Shen said, looking directly at O'Neill.

"Miss Shen," Harkovli said evenly. "It is a safe bet to say, that if China does not cede the worlds in question, then Russia will join the Americans in economic sanctions against your country."

"Do what you will," Shen said dismissively, "but the decision has already been made at the highest level. The answer is NO."

Master and Apprentice

1

The last of the cloned bodies was beamed into its niche in the floating hoversled from the growth chamber in one of the many secure Alterran labs inside Atlantis. Ryan checked to insure the life support systems were functioning properly, then telekinetically pulled the cylindrical container behind him as he headed out the lab's door.

Taking the long route to the gateroom, due to the fact that the hoversled was too long to fit inside one of the transporters, Stevenson drew several alarming looks from the Human population inside the city. Even the Lanteans seemed surprised, evidenced by the blank look of shock on Lorne's face as he saw the six alien bodies inside the clear bubble.

Not caring to explain to every passerby what he was doing, he silently made his way up to the gateroom where he felt obliged to say something to Elizabeth when her jaw dropped.

"*What's going on?*" she asked a moment later as Ryan stepped up onto the control platform and began dialing the gate. "*If I didn't know better I'd say those were Asgard bodies.*"

"*Adept observation,*" Ryan said sarcastically as the gate activated.

Elizabeth's eyes narrowed. "*Were we invaded again, or is this your doing?*"

Ryan frowned for a moment, then took her meaning, literally, from her mind. "*These aren't Pegasus Asgard...you should be able to tell that from the physique.*"

"*They are a bit larger than I remember,*" Elizabeth noted, "*but who are they? Are they even alive, or just corpses?*"

"*Neither,*" Ryan said, finally pausing long enough to look her in the eye. "*They're empty, cloned bodies.*"

"*Clones?!'*" Elizabeth gasped, grasping the implications. "*You're trying to rebuild their race, aren't you?*"

"*You'll note I said 'empty' cloned bodies,*" Ryan corrected her. "*You of all people should know what that means.*"

Elizabeth thought about that for a moment. "*Are these some sort of peace offering for the Asgard? To replace they're degenerate bodies?*"

Ryan raised a sarcastic eyebrow. "*I don't care about the renegades in Pegasus. Their brethren will deal with them when the time comes.*"

Now Elizabeth frowned. "*What brethren?*"

"*The Asgard didn't commit suicide,*" he finally said, throwing her a bone. "*It was just a show to mask their escape and keep their technology out of enemy hands.*"

The Lantean's eyes went wide. "*They downloaded their consciousnesses into the Odyssey's data core, didn't they?*"

"*Nope,*" Ryan said, turning around and walking down the steps to where the hoversled was floating.

"*Then where are they?*" Elizabeth yelled after him.

"*Ida...I think.*"

"*You don't know?*"

"*I know where to look,*" he said as the hoversled began to follow him.

"*Don't suppose I could tag along?*" Elizabeth asked hopefully.

Ryan stopped just in front of the event horizon and turned around. "*Sorry, Liz. This is something I HAVE to do alone.*"

She nodded, but sensed something more than his usual secrecy. "*That why Sheppard's not going with you?*"

"*He's busy on Yavin anyway.*"

Elizabeth sighed. "*Well, whatever you're up to...good luck.*"

Ryan threw her a friendly wink and pushed the hoversled through the wormhole ahead of him.

The Alterran emerged from the stargate onto a very flat plain covered with small blue plants as far as the eye could see...save for the massive pyramid at the end of the long stone path leading from the gate.

Ryan walked ahead of the hoversled and pulled it behind him as he patiently hiked the half mile distance to the massive structure.

The Asgard datacore on the *Odyssey* had hinted that they'd taken refuge in Jotunheim, which to the Tauri or anyone else wouldn't have meant anything...but to the Alterra that meant only one thing...they'd taken refuge with another ally of the Alterra, one which, ironically, the Asgard had never been on good terms with. They were called the Tuohocan, the Omeyocan, and the Nethocotz by the few species they had come in contact with over their long history, but to the Alterra they had always been the *Aetheria*.

The Aetheria had never given themselves a name, due to the fact that they were essentially alone in Jotunheim, and had not needed vocabulary to differentiate themselves from others. They dominated their realm without challenge...the only companions they had were a variety of lesser lifeforms, of which they could communicate with only a few, and even then that communication was base and of little interest to them.

Thus the Aetheria had taken an observational interest in Midgar and eventually made direct contact with the Alterra when their scientists began to probe into Jotunheim. It was a peaceful encounter, and the two races had been distant, but close friends ever since...despite the fact that they existed in different dimensions.

Jotunheim was the dimension the Aetheria existed within and dominated. They also had the ability to manifest themselves in Midgar, the Alterra's dimension, though it took an amount of effort and energy expenditure on their part to do so.

In order to diminish this expenditure and facilitate easier communications between the realms, the Aetheria built a number of nexuses that would bring the two dimensions together technologically. The pyramid that Ryan was approaching was the Aetheria's equivalent of an embassy in Ida and allowed lifeforms in Midgar to initiate communication across the dimensional gap.

After Ryan entered the pyramid he emerged into the vast interior that extended deep underground, so far down that even Ryan's enhanced eyesight couldn't see the bottom. A narrow path led across the chasm to a small platform in the center. He took to it without hesitation, mentally dragging the oversized stasis pod behind him.

The stone path was just wider than his shoulders and easy enough to walk across, but the sheer drop off of either side made the approach intimidating...at least to someone who wasn't familiar with the temples. If one fell off the side they'd be caught partway down by a reversed gravity field that would cycle them around the chamber and deposit them back on the entry platform.

Not only did it act as a safety feature, but the narrow approach made it abundantly clear that you were at the Aetheria's mercy when you entered their temple...and if you proved yourself to be an enemy they would have little trouble killing you, either by deactivating the safety protocols and knocking you off the edge, or taking the effort to cross the dimensional gap and do so in a more personal way.

Their power made the narrow walkway almost immaterial to the defense of the pyramid, but the Aetheria had built it for a more...comical purpose. Fear of death and how corporeals reacted to such had taken on a perverse pleasure for the other-dimensional beings and they'd been known to play the occasional prank regarding such 'fates.'

Such an instance had started the bad blood with the Asgard when one of their envoy had slipped and fell off the narrow path in sheer horror, knowing exactly how he would die in the precise way that the Asgard mind evaluated everything. Even as the shock of his impending death wracked his body with fear, he anticipated seventeen possible outcomes of a fall from such a height in combination with his weak, cartilage-framed body.

By the time the safeties had kicked in both he and the rest of the Asgard contingent were considerably distraught...made all the worse by the Aetheria having quite a laugh about it once the Asgard finished their journey up the path and used the crystal skull to make contact.

Had that been the only incident, Ryan was sure that the bad feelings would have passed with time, but having sensed the Asgard's inherent fear and sense of helplessness due to their physical limitations, the Aetheria had made a point of 'scaring' the Asgard from time to time when the opportunity presented itself...though they never put their small friends in any real jeopardy.

When Ryan reached the end of the path he pulled the hoversled off to the right side of the central platform while he approached the crystal skull on top of the short podium. It was similar to those used in Avalona, but this one had been patterned after the Asgard cranium. It didn't precisely match that of the clone bodies he'd brought with him, but then again the Asgard had gone through many physiological changes over the eons in the Alterra's absence. Ryan had restored much of their former 'strength,' but he couldn't undo all the physical losses and maintain their mental gains at the same time.

Stevenson knelt down and stared into the eyes of the old-style Asgard skull...though it was obvious that the Aetheria had lowered the height of the pedestal in recent millennia to accommodate the Asgard's loss of height.

For a moment nothing happened, but as Ryan kept his eye line straight ahead small amounts of light began swirling around his peripheral vision in a wash of mixing colors that a poetic Asgard had once referred to as 'the rainbow bridge.'

As quickly as the process had begun the lights vanished and Ryan stood up.

Opposite the skull a large misty mass billowed up into a crude approximation of an Alterran form.

"*At long last the Alterra return to us,*" the Aetheria said in Lingara as two more forms appeared flanking the one who spoke.

"*As was foretold,*" the left one said.

"*What is your name, young one?*" the other of the three asked.

"*I am Ryan Stevenson,*" he said, smiling slightly. "*Good to see you again...Nidhogg.*"

2

The giant alien stared at him for a moment then laughed...a sound which echoed like cannon fire throughout the chamber. *"Your memories are intact, yes?"*

"They are," Ryan confirmed.

"Many of us feared your plans would not succeed," the centermost alien said as even more began to appear within the massive chamber. Ryan recognized his peculiar shaped avatar. *"We are pleased to be proven wrong."*

"It's not over yet," Ryan cautioned Hrungnir. *"That's one thing I need to talk to you about."*

"You fear a resurgence of the plague that destroyed your ilk?" Nidhogg asked.

"No," Ryan said resolutely. *"Since my conversion I have created a cure for the plague by studying the natural healing ability of a species native to Avalona called the Goa'uld."*

The Aetheria visibly stirred.

"We know of the Goa'uld," Nidhogg said angrily. *"Quetzalcoatl has spoken of them often. He was unable to prevent the enslavement of your seed species on all but a handful of worlds in Avalona."*

"What world did you originate from?" Hrungnir asked.

"Avalon," Ryan told them.

"Perhaps Quetzalcoatl was more successful than we believed," Nidhogg suggested. *"Your seed species survived where many others did not, despite our efforts."*

"What happened to Vela and Orona?" Ryan asked, referring to the seed species that had disappeared in those galaxies.

"Assassins..." Hrungnir hissed. *"The Detru took vengeance on Orona when they discovered your primitive descendants. They moved with such great numbers that we could not stop them. They eradicated all from the galaxy before they too were wiped from existence by the Furlings."*

Ryan nodded. *"And Vela?"*

"They progressed more rapidly than the others," Nidhogg said warily. *"They merged with another species, gaining great power and knowledge, but the combination of their genomes degenerated them into nefas, and we were forced to purge them as well, with the assistance of the Asgard."*

Ryan frowned. *"What kind of nefas?"*

"Those they conquered," Nidhogg said with disgust, *"they mutilated and devoured while still alive."*

"Did you purge the other species?"

"Neither existed after the merger...remnants of the former species were also devoured by the nefas."

Ryan dipped his head and sighed. *"Thank you for your vigilance. We are in your debt."*

"There are no debts between us," Nidhogg declared. *"What is this other worry you spoke of?"*

"*Before I speak of it,*" Ryan cautioned, "*will you transition myself and this module fully into Jotunheim?*"

Without even a word of discussion, the crystal skull burst forth with another swell of radiation and the chamber around Ryan shifted into a kaleidoscope of color. The walls and floor lost their material substance and transitioned into the material of Jotunheim that was neither matter nor energy...and yet somehow both.

The air had transitioned with him, however, allowing the Alterra to breathe in the other dimension. However, the gravity did not and he felt his stomach rise...as did the hoversled behind him.

"*Are you aware,*" Ryan began, addressing the more solid Aetheria that filled the chamber, dozens in total...far more than had shown themselves in the hybrid dimension, "*that during the last days of the Alterra, some of them managed to escape their deaths by transitioning into energy based lifeforms?*"

"Yes," Nidhogg said, his voice altered into a wavering, almost watery resonance.

"*Have you had any contact with them since?*"

Nidhogg seemed to confer with the others during a long pause.

"No Aetheria has," he finally answered. "*We assumed they had been unable to maintain the necessary matrix after transference.*"

"*Most of them are still alive...in Alfleheim.*"

Another long pause.

"*We cannot cross into that realm,*" Hrungrir answered.

"*Can they?*" Ryan asked, laced with importance. "*Have you ever seen evidence of them or any others affecting or viewing Jotunheim from Alfleheim or any other dimension?*"

"Only Midgar," Nidhogg answered without hesitation. "*But never the brethren you speak of.*"

"Good," Ryan said, still taking a chance. "*For if they could hear me now, I would be dead moments after I returned to Midgar.*"

Another pause and conference between the Aetheria.

"*Explain,*" another Aetheria demanded...this one Ryan didn't recognize.

"*My transformed brothers have betrayed us,*" Ryan began. "*All but a few have forsaken me and my mission...but those few that remain loyal imparted to me some critical knowledge during a brief moment of opportunity just after my transformation.*"

"*Upon 'ascending' to their energy based physiology, they were immediately conscripted into something they call the Ascended Empire. My former brothers weren't the first to attain this transformation...many, many others had achieved this before them, but even they weren't the first.*"

"*There are those within Alfleheim that appear to have originated there. They did not begin in Midgar, and they have a dislike for corporeals. These 'Originals' rule the Empire, and from the context of the brief conversation, I assume they are far more powerful than those who originated within Midgar.*"

The image of Nidhogg, resplendent in swirling blues and reds that made up his 'body' leaned toward Ryan. "*They have enslaved your kin?*"

"*They compel membership in the Empire...those that refuse to join are killed. I know not of the activities within the Empire, but most of the former Alterra now serve the Originals willingly. They have ceased to be my kin.*"

"*Why would they do this?*" Nidhogg asked.

"I know not, but there is more you must know," Ryan continued. "Those still loyal to us learned the truth of the origins of the plague. The Ascended Empire created it as a weapon meant to destroy us before we could become a threat to them."

This time there was considerable movement from the Aetheria. Several of them disappeared, leaving the 'embassy' for elsewhere in Jotunheim.

"They fear your technology?" Nidhogg asked.

Ryan nodded. *"And our biology. It appears that any species that advances to a point of contention with them is wiped out through some means. In an effort to combat this foe, those loyal kin altered the programming in the repositories. My development has been dangerously accelerated so that I may become the threat they fear."*

Nidhogg seemed to take a second look at him. *"Even now you are in flux. You take great risk on this path. Can you not slow the alterations?"*

"I can stop it if need be, but I cannot slow it. I don't fully understand how the others have accomplished the changes made to me, but it is a moot point. I need the power to defend myself and others."

"What powers do you believe you will gain?" Hrungrir asked.

"I am told by another Alterra, one who has journeyed between the branches of time, that from an alternate version of myself, I will develop the ability to peer into Alfleheim, sometime later I will be able to affect their dimension, and a great amount of time later I will gain the ability to kill them from across the divide."

"Then they are right to fear you," Nidhogg said reverently. "Will they not detect your advancement and stop you before you attain this power?"

"Possibly," Ryan admitted, "but the original programming of the repositories called for a lesser forced advancement. Hopefully they won't notice the difference."

"And if they do?" Nidhogg pressed.

"I'm dead," Ryan said candidly.

Another long pause.

"Why have they not yet done this?" Hrungrir wondered aloud. "Surely they must know of your existence?"

"They do...and they have acted counter to my efforts once already, but they have not struck at me. I do not know why they have chosen this path, perhaps those that were once my kin have not reported all to them...or perhaps they do not yet see me as a threat. I do know, however, that the Empire has rules about not interfering with events in Midgar."

"Did they not already do so?" Nidhogg asked. "We watched from afar as they sent their slaves to battle against Avalona."

"Those who sent them were called the Ori," Ryan explained. "They come from the galaxy of Destra, of which I am told is beyond the territory of the Ascended Empire. They were not bound by their rules."

"Perplexing these Originals are," Nidhogg mused. "They do not behave as they should."

Ryan raised an eyebrow. *"How so?"*

"They are not Masters of Alfleheim, yet they seek to dominate those outside their realm. Should we have opposition within Jotunheim, we would not care to deign in the events of Midgar until such a time as the threat had been removed."

"They fear you," Hrungrir added, "but they do not destroy you when you are weak. Either this is great arrogance, or they are at some disadvantage."

"I have wondered about that," Ryan said. "The Ori were killed by a single device built in Midgar under the direction of one of the Empire's former members who retook corporeal form. Such a device would have not been allowed to be constructed, yet this one was and with the help of the Humans on Avalon they sent it to Destra where it eliminated the Ori."

"They can retake corporeal form?" Nidhogg asked, surprised.

"Yes."

"What happened to this device?" Hrungrir asked suspiciously.

"I am told by the Ori's servants that it soon disappeared after the Ori were killed. I believe agents of the Empire were responsible for its destruction."

"They feared the power of the Ori," Nidhogg suggested. "Why not face them in battle in Alfleheim? Were the Ori stronger than they?"

"I don't believe so...but the Ori had a source of power the Empire did not. They found some way to drain small amounts of power from their servants in Midgar."

Hrungrir moved closer. "And the Empire did not?"

"I am told they were forbidden to do so."

The Aetheria consulted amongst themselves for a moment then seemed to reach a consensus.

"Then it is most likely that the leaders of the Empire cannot draw energy from Midgar in the same way as their servants can...thus they deny them the strength so they cannot use it against them in possible rebellion."

Ryan blinked. That thought had never occurred to him.

"They want attention turned away from Midgar," Ryan said. "So much so that they punish any of the ascended who interfere. They have made their source of power taboo to them."

"If so," Hrungrir wisely added, "that may explain their reluctance to take action against you. Watch you they may, but they will not break their taboo unless they are presented with no other choice."

"You said they acted against you already," Nidhogg remembered. "What transpired?"

"I found one of the original Alterra. She was ill with the disease and had stored herself in a stasis pod entrusted to the Nox. I revived her and was able to cure her of the plague, but moments after she pulled away from the precipice of death the others ascended her, thus denying her to me."

"They can force the transformation on others?" Nidhogg asked in scorn.

"I don't believe so," Ryan clarified. "I think she willfully accepted their help, not knowing the full circumstances of who and what they are. Neither she nor any of the others have spoken with me, so I'm assuming that even simple communication is taboo as well."

Another Aetheria emerged from the edges of the temple interior and made its way forward. The others gave way at its approach.

"There is a story," it began in slow speech, "from long before the Alterra of a purging of three galaxies unknown to you. We do not know the source of the attackers, but they were clearly not of Midgar."

"One species, or all life in the galaxy?" Ryan asked.

"Seven species," the unidentified Aetheria reported. "Those more primitive were spared."

"Did you know them?"

The giant head shook. *"We did not. You were the first,"* it said, pointing a finger at Ryan.

"Do you have contacts in dimensions other than Midgar?"

The same Aetheria shook its head again. *"We can cross the divide to three...Midgar, Muspleheym, and Nifleheim. With augmentation we can perceive Svartalheim, as well as four others that you are unaware of."*

Svartalheim was a dimension similar to Midgar, except that all 'matter' in that realm reacted destructively with its counterpart from Midgar. This 'anti-matter' in Svartalheim made it inaccessible to the Alterra in any meaningful way, though some experimentation had been proposed to create energy-based dampeners which would insulate the two, potentially creating a foothold in the other dimension mediums...and the potential to create an alternative power source by capturing and containing the 'anti-matter' to use in specially constructed reactors.

That project had been in the planning stage when the plague first appeared.

Muspleheim was a dimension like Jotunheim in that it existed as one gigantic medium. There were no gravity wells or anything resembling planets...it more resembled an ocean in which the inhabitants 'swam' about. However, the medium of Muspleheim was dangerously active, making it an inhospitable environment to the Alterran research probes...the longest of which lasted just over two hours before it was destroyed by, for lack of a better term...*fire*.

Nifleheim, however, was a dimension in which matter, of any type, could not exist. It would instantaneously revert back to the dimension from which it had entered. That was, until a protective 'bubble' was established around the matter to artificially keep it within Nifleheim. So long as the bubble existed, the Alterra could exist in Nifleheim...albeit within a controlled environment. No matter meant no air to breathe.

No matter also meant no friction...or possible catastrophic impact. As such, the Alterra and many other races used the alternate dimension to their advantage on a day to day basis. Nifleheim was more commonly referred to as 'hyperspace.'

Ryan nodded, noting the 'four others' that the Alterra were supposedly not aware of.

"Do you know of other races from those dimensions that can cross the divides?"

"Only two naturally...several more technologically. None are a threat to either of us."

"Are there any other instances in your history where there have been mysterious disappearances or events that couldn't be traced to Midgar?"

"What you ask is not easy," the 'leader' Aetheria said. *"We have a very long history."*

"I understand," Ryan said agreeably. *"If you ever come across any more information..."*

"...it could be of use to you," the Aetheria finished. *"We will pass on to you any information we have."*

Ryan nodded his thanks. *"What is your name?"*

"I am Rama."

"Rama, there was one other victim of the Ascended Empire that I have yet to inform you of. My contact in Alfleheim told me they were also the source of the Asgard's demise...which is why I'm here."

"How is that possible?" Nidhogg interrupted. *"They suffer from genetic deterioration."*

"Which has been caused by continual tampering by the Ascended Empire," Ryan answered. *"The Asgard left behind their own repository of knowledge with the Humans on Avalon. Within it they left clues to their fate, indicating that they had come to Jotunheim."*

Rama receded, leaving matters within this region to their overseers.

"We took them to Ginnungagap not long ago," Hrungrir answered. *"There they await your return."*

"Are they near?"

"No," Nidhogg told him as he enveloped the hoversled in his giant hand. "*But we can take you to them without delay.*"

"*Thank you,*" Ryan said, nodding in gratitude as he too was smothered in Nidhogg's other hand. A small capsule of air was preserved around him as the Aetheria's color shifted from red/blue to yellow/green...an indication of movement, or so he guessed.

3

The yellow/green colors around Ryan suddenly shifted back to red/blue a moment before a white light encompassed him...then he found himself standing on the deck of an Asgard ship.

"Greetings," an Asgard voice said through the ship's intercom. *"I am Odin."*

"Hello Odin," Ryan said in decent Asgard tongue, though the fast sounds required strained his vocal chords a bit. *"Where am I?"*

"You are onboard the Asgard colony ship Aesir. The Aetheria have informed us that you have come into contact with the Ancient Repository of knowledge, and that you have succeeded where O'Neill failed?"

"Barely...but yes," Ryan said, getting straight to the point, *"and I have discovered the cause of your genetic deterioration. I brought with me six new bodies that you may transfer into at your leisure."*

"We are grateful indeed," Odin said, pleased. *"If I might ask, what is your name?"*

"Stevenson...Ryan Stevenson."

"If you will permit a moment's delay, I will be happy to speak with you in person, Ryan Stevenson?"

"Take your time."

The distinctive sound of an Asgard transport beam accompanied the disappearance of the Asgard bodies in the hoversled behind Ryan. For several minutes afterward he stood passive, waiting for their return, until six live Asgard beamed back into the large chamber in which Ryan now stood.

"You have managed to restore much of our former function," Odin said as he stood shoulder high before Stevenson, *"without diminishing our mental capacity. Very impressive. What did you uncover concerning our genetic deterioration?"*

"A bio weapon," Ryan said plainly. *"Of the same origin as the plague that destroyed my brothers and sisters."*

"The Aetheria spoke of this," Odin relayed. *"But they would not say who the attacker was."*

"That knowledge is not safe outside of Jotunheim," Ryan warned. *"My mind is shielded against detection, yours is not. If I told you, you would have to purge such memories before you could return to Midgar."*

Odin glanced to the other Asgard then nodded to Ryan. *"Your terms are accepted. What has transpired?"*

"They're called the Ascended Empire..."

"This bio weapon existed primarily in Alfleheim," Thor repeated, *"thus there was no trace of their attack within our genetic code to discover?"*

"And such genetic degradation prevented any chance of ascension," Ryan added. *"I don't think they wanted to take the chance of your alliance with us affecting the balance of power within the Empire...or perhaps they didn't expect the Alterra to be able to ascend and made sure to prevent that possibility with our allies."*

"Still," Thor argued, *"in order to interact with our physiology the weapon must have been present in Midgar at some point?"*

"Briefly," Ryan agreed. *"It maintained the faintest connection to Midgar in order to latch onto our matter, but otherwise it wasn't in Midgar except for when it made subtle and precise alterations. When I learned that the Ascended Empire was the source, my first avenue of research was to search for a connection to Alfleheim. I was able to create a sensor to detect the bio weapon even in its stealthed state. After running tests on samples of cloned tissue, I discovered that the interaction rate between the weapon and your genetic code occurred on an average of once every 7,359 days, based upon a preprogrammed random timetable. Such interaction lasted no longer than 1.6 seconds."*

"Making the weapon virtually impossible to detect," Thor agreed. *"And the slow decay rate suggested natural causes rather than an artificial one. The Ascended Empire's skill and cunning is undeniable. Coupled with their known powers and their ability to retreat to Alfleheim at will, I do not know how we can combat such a threat, though the success of Merlin's device against the Ori may offer some hope."*

"We already have a few ideas," Ryan revealed, *"but that tactic isn't one of them. First off, I don't know how to construct such a device...and even if I did, we would never use it. It not only killed the Ori, but every other living being within Destra's portion of Alfleheim. We will not commit genocide against innocent species in order to deliver a death blow to our target. If Merlin had been Alterra he would have understood that."*

"But did you not also say that most of the ascended Alterra have willingly joined with the Empire," Odin asked, standing beside Thor. The other four Asgard had since departed to begin making clones of their cloned bodies, *"and that the use of Merlin's device may have been permitted by both the Empire and their Alterran members?"*

Ryan hung his head. *"You're right. Despite what they've done I still have trouble thinking of them as enemies. If they have truly converted, there's no telling how low they are willing to sink."*

"It pains us as well," Odin admitted. *"We have long drawn example from the Alterra with which to structure our own civilization. What they have done to us, or at least allowed to transpire, is unforgiveable. We are, however, fortunate that their discarded plans have come to completion. The Asgard are willing and eager to assist you in any way possible."*

Ryan smiled. *"You have always been a loyal friend. First servant, then apprentice, then a lesser peer...but now it is to you that we must turn. We badly need your assistance."*

"In what way?" Thor asked, both eager and concerned.

"I cannot increase our population in the numbers I wish. I must do so by selecting worthy individuals to convert until I reach a critical number. Even then we cannot grow our civilization in the numbers required to quickly restore our population."

"You risk becoming overwhelmed by successive generations?" Odin surmised.

"Yes," Ryan admitted. *"We cannot risk a schism developing. I took a calculated risk when I cloned myself, and thus far it seems to have had no ill side effects, but I dare not risk any further artificial advancements. Successive generations must be trained in maturia...and we will not have the numbers for that type of infrastructure any time soon."*

"But we are in far greater number," Odin pointed out. *"We can advance our population exponentially whereas you cannot."*

"And," Thor added, *"we have the Alterra to guard against such a schism developing within the Asgard. You have no one capable of watching over you."*

"That's one of the unfortunate realities of leadership," Ryan said with a sigh.

"With the replicators and Ori gone, there should be little to prevent the rapid regrowth of our empire," Thor commented. "Unless the Ascended Empire should take action against us again."

"Hopefully we will be their main source of worry," Ryan argued, "however, I wish to stack our odds. As I told you earlier, Destra is outside of the Ascended Empire's territory. What has transpired since the demise of the Ori I do not know, and it could very well mean their incursions into that region have increased, but my contact said nothing of the Empire expanding into that region. I have ordered the Priors to build a colony on an uninhabited world rich with untouched resources so that it might hasten your return. It was completed three days ago."

Odin and Thor exchanged glances. "You want us to abandon Ida?"

"Temporarily," Ryan answered Odin. "Given the situation, it would seem to be the prudent course of action."

"Perhaps," Thor said, wavering, "but we have many responsibilities within Ida and other galaxies that we cannot abandon."

"Did you not already do so?" Ryan asked.

"Because we had no choice," Odin countered. "Now that we are once again on the rise..."

"I appreciate your sense of duty, but it will be for naught if the Ascended Empire moves against us. I don't know what it will take on our part to precipitate direct action against us, but the less we do in their view the greater our chances of survival."

"Can you see to our wards?" Thor asked.

"Those within Avalona will come under the care of the reborn System Lords. I have co-opted the Jaffa under their former structural system as a servant race, with the System Lords to be none other than Alterra. Bra'tac, a former Jaffa First Prime, is now an Alterra and has been tasked with the stewardship of the galaxy."

"Even if they can see to the protected planets in Avalona," Thor said, "we have apprentice races in Vela and Syrex."

"As well as four other galaxies outside of the gate network," Odin added. "Some of them may not survive without our assistance."

Ryan covered his mouth with his hand as he thought hard.

"How big is this ship?" he asked after thirty four seconds of silence.

Thor walked over to a nearby pedestal and produced a holographic diagram of the massive vessel. Several smaller ships familiar to Ryan from his search through the Asgard datacore appeared around it, tiny in comparison.

"These are our remaining assets," Thor said from a few feet away with the diagram in between them.

Seven warships plus four science vessels held position near the colony ship, but even side by side the vessels couldn't equal the length of the larger vessel.

"It can't go to Destra anyway," he said after a moment of analysis.

"No," Thor echoed.

"Then I recommend you split your forces," Ryan said, dropping his hand to his chest, where he crossed his arms. "Send most of your people to Destra, but deploy your ships here. I've already commanded the Ori to see to your security...you won't have to worry about conventional threats there."

"This is acceptable," Odin said, nodding slightly.

Suddenly the open chamber swirled with red/blue 'mist' as Nidhogg made his presence known.

"We offer a suggestion," he said, also speaking in Asgard.

"You may speak," Odin said, with just the barest hint of resistance.

"The Asgard may keep a sanctuary in Jotunheim, from which they can see to their wards. Those that remain here can also be entrusted with the knowledge the others must purge."

"We do not have the technology to transfer from Jotunheim to Midgar," Thor said more amicably than Odin had.

"We shall provide a portal," Nidhogg announced confidently.

Ryan squinted slyly at the giant head. *"You want the Ascended Empire to try and backtrack them?"*

"The enemy of our ally is our enemy as well," Nidhogg declared. "We wish to study this enemy...in order to do so we must locate them within Midgar."

"We had begun to develop a device to detect ascended beings," Odin revealed, "after initial reports of the Ori reached us. While our initial success was limited to a basic study of Alfleheim, I would surmise the Alterra have the technology to complete our task."

"This would be most helpful," Nidhogg urged.

"I have already looked into this," Ryan said dejectedly. "The readings from that dimension are erratic. Like Nifleheim, no matter can transition across the void, and I have not been able to create a workaround for this, though Janus has said there is a way. Thus far I've neglected to use any of the blueprints he brought with him from the other timelines until we're in a position to benefit from them. Some of which will invariably draw the immediate wrath of the Ascended Empire."

"Is one of them a detection device?" Odin pressed.

Ryan shook his head. *"No. The technology lies along a different path."*

Odin sensed his hesitation. *"You fear us following the same path that led to defeat in the other timelines?"*

"According to Janus not one has succeeded."

Nidhogg looked to Thor. *"Then we must provide them with other options."*

"I agree," he said, glancing at Odin who also nodded. *"We will pursue the detection technology while the Alterra look to other means."*

Ryan knew that was risky. If they tipped their hand too early there wouldn't be a fight at all...just a pathetically easy slaughter. But then again, his allies might stumble onto something useful.

"Thank you," was all Ryan resolved himself to say.

"We will be cautious," Odin assured him.

Ryan nodded. *"In the mean time, the Furlings are losing their war badly...but this you already knew. We have a limited window of opportunity to grow strong enough to come to their aid. This, we need the Asgard for more than anything."*

"We originally aided the Furlings in their war against the Vrox," Thor warned, "but the emergence of the replicators forced our withdrawal. Had they not, there was no guarantee of a combined victory. The Vrox is difficult to purge."

Ryan shook his head in frustration. *"I have studied the menace from afar, and I believe it can be destroyed, but the Alterra don't have the resources necessary to launch that large of a campaign. Our entire workforce is nothing more than human form replicators of my own design. Luke has been working to upgrade the crude designs, but no matter how advanced we make*

them, they are a severe disadvantage so long as we must rely on them. Cleansing Pegasus and reestablishing the base elements of our infrastructure there are our first priority, which will begin in two or three months, after which our attention will be focused there for many years."

"We understand," Odin said slowly. *"We will do what we can to fill the void."*

"As for Pegasus," Ryan said, remembering something else of importance. *"There is a matter there that concerns you as well..."*

4

"We have received a response," Thor said from the bridge of the *Ymir*.

Ryan looked up from a datapad in his hand. He'd been reviewing the history of the Asgard/Vanir split for the past three hours as the Asgard warship had traveled from Ida to Pegasus.

"That was fast," Ryan commented, standing up from the throne-like chair Thor had provided for him, one slightly larger than his own in the center of the bridge.

"Due to their desperation, no doubt," Thor commented.

100,000 years ago 6% of the Asgard population had left Ida and settled in Syrex along with the indigenous Humans and the sparse number of Asgard worlds spread throughout the galaxy. Those calling themselves the 'Vanir' thought that the more remote location within the Asgard empire would give them the freedom necessary to conduct the genetic research necessary to save their species...research that the majority of the Asgard considered unethical and had subsequently banned.

Their initial success in conducting clandestine experiments on the native Human populations came to light when periodic genetic testing on the entire Asgard population revealed irregularities within the Vanir. The Asgard High Council quickly ascertained the cause of the minor 'improvements' and moved against the Vanir colonies, freeing the test subjects and imposing societal restrictions on those responsible.

A second wave of clandestine tests was conducted years later, capturing Humans from Syrex and transporting them through the stargates to a research outpost in Eridanus, a galaxy devoid of Humans. Tests were conducted here with impunity for many centuries, but eventually the Asgard High Council learned of the unsanctioned research and shut it down.

Penalties this time, however, were much harsher. The Vanir colonies were stripped of certain types of technology, especially medical, in an effort to prevent such experiments from happening again.

This caused a permanent rift between the two, and the Vanir left Asgard space altogether. They disappeared from all historical records 72,000 years after the initial split, and hadn't been heard of since up until their raid on Atlantis to retrieve the activation key to the Attero device.

The Vanir had covered their tracks well after their first two failed attempts. No noticeable deviations were discovered within the monitored Human populations. The High Council kept a keen watch over them for this and other reasons, but there were simply too many Humans to monitor. A few dozen here and there were almost untraceable, and coming from primitive populations where it was common for individuals to disappear in the wilds, the locals might not even miss the test subjects.

Through a combination of happenstance and cautious intelligence the Vanir discovered the lack of adequate monitoring within the Pegasus galaxy. True, there were two sets of seed species within the galaxy, and one had the technology of the Alterra at their disposal, but these 'Ancients' didn't have the curiosity, obsession, or vengeance that their progenitors had displayed, and it was believed that the new Ancients could be eluded with ease, especially given that they were engaged in a distracting war against one of the rare indigenous species within the galaxy.

Then the Ancients had gone and lost the war... imagine, the Ancients actually *losing* a war. The replacements were certainly not a quality recreation of their forbearers, and they had left the Vanir in a difficult situation.

All of the Vanir colonies had transferred to Pegasus once the initial incursion proved easier than expected. They had pooled all their resources into the development of five hidden worlds, off the gate network, where they could focus solely on the problem of their species' genetic degradation.

Unlike the Lanteans, however, the Wraith proved even more paranoid than the Alterra had been and soon discovered their existence... and committed their full resources to exterminating them as they had the second generation Ancients. All of the Vanir worlds were discovered, and the Wraith soon brought sufficient force to breach their formidable defensive technology... which had been skimped on due to the previous technology purge and the Vanir's preclusion for stealth.

In a last ditch effort the Asgard had set up a sixth colony on a marginal gas giant... one with a solid core, and therefore a stable surface. There was just enough trace oxygen in the atmosphere that, coupled with a breath mask and the high atmospheric pressure, enabled the Vanir to live and work in the oppressive atmosphere that shielded them against surface scans and made it difficult for orbital plasma fire to reach the ground, even if the Wraith could target the surface facilities.

Over time the Vanir extended their facilities underground, further insulating them against attack, but the world didn't prove as stable as it had initially appeared. Seven thousand years after first arriving on the world, another smaller gaseous planetoid, little more than a dense, spherical nebula, collided with the Vanir world, altering the composition of the atmosphere and destabilizing the solid core. Toxins now filled the even thicker air, now too concentrated for the Asgard's resilient physiology to resist the pressure, and tectonic fluctuations threatened the stability of their subsurface structures.

Increased winds and violent storms had also sprung up after the collision of planetoids, making the surface difficult to inhabit as well. Confronted with increasing infrastructural challenges to overcome, the Vanir came to the unwelcome conclusion that they must leave their sanctuary world or face eventual destruction, either from the growing instability of the planet's core... or from the impact of a slowly descending moon tugged out of orbit by the planetary collision.

If they'd still retained their fleet, the moon's orbit could have been salvaged, but the two large damaged vessels that had carried most of their survivors to the world had been grounded and dismantled to help build their new colony. None but a few small, fast ships had been preserved, so that they might occasionally acquire new test subjects. It was with these that the Vanir began venturing out into unfamiliar territory in search of an answer to their dilemma.

During this search they kept away from the gate network and happened upon three abandoned Ancient facilities.

One was a small outpost, undamaged yet abandoned during the hurried evacuation of Pegasus during the last days of the Wraith/Ancient war. In this small outpost, the databanks contained the location of several destroyed sites with potential technological rubble for the Vanir to scavenge in lieu of setting up risky mining operations outside their sanctuary.

This database also contained the location of an intact, but abandoned weapon designed to defeat the Wraith by destabilizing their hyperspace technology. The Vanir immediately sought

out this world, but to their chagrin the weapon's activation key was missing, making it impossible to use.

The third location, also obtained from the database, detailed another small outpost that had gathered up refugees that were then transferred to Atlantis for evacuation to Earth...however, the ships these refugees traveled on had been left behind at this location as the few survivors were concentrated onto the more advanced vessels thought capable of running the Wraith's blockade.

The Vanir had gladly scavenged and repaired these vessels, turning them to their use. It was with one of these Lantean ships that they invaded Atlantis and seized the Attero device's activation key, as well as kidnap Daniel Jackson and Rodney McKay in order to bypass the genetic encoding on the technology. That incident alone had Ryan questioning the Asgard's logic in dealing with the Vanir.

"What does the message say?" the Alterra asked.

"They will rendezvous with us in a neutral system to discuss the cure we've promised," Thor said, summarizing the message. *"The chance of a real solution to their genetic degradation is too significant for them to ignore."*

"You think you can trust them?" Ryan reiterated.

"I still hold to the belief that they are committing these atrocities because they see no other way to survive. If we give them that means, then we eliminate the cause of such behavior."

"Your call," Ryan relented. *"If you want to give them a chance at reunification I'll assist where I can...but I won't sanction their previous actions."*

"Nor will we," Thor echoed. *"They will not receive the new bodies you have created for us. We will purge their contamination and allow them to develop from their current physiological level. In addition, they will not be allowed to rise above a certain level within Asgard society...indefinitely."*

"It's your civilization."

"Do you have a recommendation?" Thor asked.

Ryan hesitated for a moment. *"Actually, I do have another idea...if you're willing?"*

"Yes?" Thor asked, curious.

The Ymir arrived at the coordinates an hour before a small Lantean transport vessel dropped out of hyperspace nearby. Thor contacted the vessel and arranged to beam one of its crew aboard.

A small, white-tinged Asgard materialized on the bridge in front of Thor. The massive space dwarfed both of the small aliens, but it was immediately obvious that Thor was the bigger of the two.

"Greetings. I am Thor, Supreme Commander of the Asgard fleet."

"I am Jever, 3rd Hierarch of the Vanir," the sickly alien said as Thor chose to remain seated in his command chair. *"You claimed to have a cure for our illness,"* he said, forgoing diplomatic niceties.

"Indeed we have," Thor confirmed, *"which we are willing to share."*

"I'm curious," Jever said, not fully accepting what Thor had told him, *"did you discover the source of the degradation?"*

"We have," Thor said, standing. *"It is a transdimension lifeform, similar to a single-celled microbe. It has the ability to partially exist in our dimension and latches onto our physiology. The random interaction of the two is the cause of the deterioration of our genetic code."*

"How did you come by this knowledge?" Jever asked.

"Not through experimentation on Humans," Thor chastised.

"We did what we had to in order to survive," Jevarr said, unapologetically. "You would have doomed our race to extinction out of meaningless sentiment for the Humans."

Thor shook his head slightly. "The Ancients taught us better."

"And what did it gain them?" Jevarr challenged. "They too are dead, as we believed you were."

"Nearly," Thor admitted, "but we found a way to preserve ourselves long enough for help to arrive."

"So you didn't come by the solution yourselves," Jevarr said, partially satisfied. "Did the Nox finally live up to their reputation?"

"Must you be so dismissive of our allies?" Thor pleaded with him.

"We have no allies. We need no allies. We must, and will, see to the preservation of our own civilization through whatever means necessary. In the end, only the results are of consequence, and only we can secure our own results."

"No matter how many Humans you kill?" Thor argued.

"Your loyalty to the Ancients and their legacy project has got in the way of your better judgement. You have no cause to shield the Humans. Their lives are of no concern to us, save for the medical insights they might provide, but if what you claim is true we will no longer need them for even that purpose."

"Superiority comes with responsibility," Thor reminded him. "You have forgotten this, either from your years of isolation or your desperate, convoluted logic. If we are to give you the means to cure your ailment, this philosophy cannot be allowed to persist."

"You would hold the cure as leverage against us?" Jevarr said, some small hint of fear in his voice.

"No, we will not. We offer you the cure freely, as well as provisional reunification. However, others are not so forgiving..."

Stevenson appeared behind Thor in the background and walked slowly up next to him while eyeing the smaller Asgard.

"Why is there a Human with you?" Jevarr asked disapprovingly.

Thor looked up at Stevenson briefly then glanced back down at the Vanir. "Your senses betray you, my wayward brother. He is not Human."

Ryan crossed his arms over his chest with an extremely displeased look on his face. "Ego a an'quietas. Nu vu'revenir'ni."

Jevarr's eyelids blinked a single, meek time. "Oh shit."

5

The *Ymir* dropped out of hyperspace alongside the Vanir/Lantean transport over the nameless gas giant that served as their homeworld. No other ships were visible, but according to Jevar there were several grounded beneath the thick clouds where they would be obscured from sensors.

"With your permission?" Jevar asked Thor sheepishly.

Thor nodded and the Vanir activated the ship's communications system. There was a long, pained argument between Jevar and the other Hierarchs that Thor observed from the background. Jevar informed them of the validity of the cure, as well as the other revelations and *complications*. They didn't take the Ancients' demands very well, but in the end they came to the same conclusion that their emissary had...they simply had no choice.

Stevenson had made it abundantly clear that they wouldn't be able to continue their research, and without it they couldn't survive without the cure the other Asgard had already received. The Alterra had also insisted that the Vanir's sovereignty was at an end, and if they ever wanted to regain a measure of autonomy within Asgard society they would only be allowed to do so on an individual basis...after they paid a specified penance.

To that end the *Ymir* had taken a detour on its way to the Vanir world to borrow a nearby stargate. It had been set up in the main cargo hold where Stevenson was overseeing the recalibrations necessary to link it back into the Pegasus gate network.

After he had finished he returned to the bridge in time to catch the last bits of the Vanir's conversation...which ended rather quickly once they saw for themselves that the Ancient was in fact real. The Hierarchs agreed to his and Thor's demands and activated a tracking beacon so they could locate their surface settlements.

Thor lowered the *Ymir* into the atmosphere and slowly made the descent through several hundred miles of dense gas until the ship closed within adequate sensor range...amounting to little more than 20 kilometers. Without delay Thor began beaming the 15,000 Vanir aboard his ship directly into the cargo bay where Stevenson waited with an open wormhole...

Back in Atlantis Elizabeth, Daniel, and Lorne oversaw the relocation of the steady stream of Asgard coming through the gate to a specific section of the city that would become their home up until the time that the Pegasus galaxy was free of the Wraith, Romulus and Remus's forces, and any other threats that might be lurking. Only when the Human populations that the Vanir had previously exploited for the research were finally free would they be allowed to rejoin the rest of the Asgard civilization under Thor's terms.

"What's going on?" Rodney demanded, shuffling his way through the double line of Asgard to get to the Lanteans.

"We're going to have some roommates for a while," Daniel said sarcastically.

"I thought they were dead?"

"So did I," Daniel admitted. "Seems they played a trick on us...rather impressive if you think about it. They get their computer core into our hands, convince everyone they're dead so no

one comes looking for them, and hole up until the Alterra resurface and solve their cloning problem."

"Actually," Elizabeth said, cringing, "these aren't those Asgard."

"What?" Daniel and Rodney asked in tandem, glancing at each other in surprise before turning back to Weir.

"These are the Pegasus Asgard," she confirmed.

"The ones who invaded Atlantis?" Lorne chimed in. "What the hell are they doing here?"

"Ryan said they'd worked out a deal with the other Asgard to reincorporate them into their civilization after they'd made amends for what they'd done."

Rodney scoffed. "How do they plan to do that?"

"I don't know," Elizabeth admitted. "He only gave me a brief explanation before sending the first of them through."

Daniel watched as even more continued to come through and Lorne's security forces, mostly replicators, directed them out of the gateroom. "Exactly how many of them are coming?"

"All of them, I assume."

"How many is that?" Rodney asked.

Elizabeth shrugged. "Beats me."

"Beats you?" Daniel echoed.

"Hey, I just look after the city. The Alterra are the ones in charge."

"That they are," Daniel said, looking none too happy.

"Well as long as they're here," Rodney said, miffed, as he descended the stairs and stood among the flow.

"Excuse me!" he yelled out as the Asgard continued walking by him. "Yes, I'm talking to the little grey ones. I don't suppose any of you are the ones that invaded this city and kidnapped me and my friend a few years ago? Hmmn? Anyone?"

"McKay!" Elizabeth whispered/yelled from the railing.

"It's a fair question!" he argued back.

One of the small aliens stopped beside Rodney and looked up at him and said something pithy in Asgard.

"Was it you!" Rodney accused him. "It was, wasn't it?"

The Asgard looked down and continued on, blending in with the others.

"Hey, I'm talking to you," Rodney demanded after a moment's hesitation, but by that time he'd already lost him in the crowd. Undaunted McKay tried to track him down.

"Where'd you go?" he demanded. Suddenly a firm grasp of his arm stopped him.

"What do you think you're doing," Lorne whispered as he pulled him out of the Asgard's path.

"These little buggars almost killed us...not to mention put a nice hole through dozens of levels in the city and, oh yeah, now I remember, caused the stargates to explode."

"I remember," Lorne said. "But even assuming that one was one of them, and I doubt that's really the case, what did you plan on doing with him."

"Oh, I've got some ideas," McKay said, trying to move off, but Lorne jerked him back. "Look, all I planned to do was give him...it...a piece of my mind."

"Don't you have something better to do?" Lorne demanded. "Like maybe get your butt down to the track. You, Jennifer, and Ronon are the only ones that haven't earned your Ancient stripes yet...and coming from someone who's been through the process I can assure you that you'll get a lot more out of the effort than you will chewing out some random Asgard."

"For the record, Ronon doesn't want it," Rodney responded, "and I'm starting to agree with his reasons."

"You're just a coward," Lorne jibbed, letting him go.

"A coward!" Rodney demanded. "What is it exactly that I'm afraid of?"

"Pain," Lorne said succinctly.

"Well... that's probably because it hurts."

"Brilliant statement, Einstein," Lorne said, walking off to attend to his security detail as the number of Asgard continued to rise, seemingly without end.

"I'm not cut out for physical training," Rodney argued, following him back into the gateroom. "I'm a scientist for crying out loud."

Lorne suddenly turned back on him and pointed a finger into his chest. "The tests are for your weaknesses, not your strengths. Now you either get your fat butt out of the way of these Asgard, or I'll have a pair of replicators take you down to the gym and hold you there until you get five miles in."

Rodney's eyes widened. "You wouldn't."

"Oh no?" Lorne asked, pointing to one of the nearby replicators. "Guard!"

The human form replicator left its post and walked over to him.

"Assign a pair of escorts to Dr. McKay. They are to take him to one of the gymnasiums and confine him there up until the time he has completed five miles of running, as logged in the computer."

"Order acknowledged," the replicator guard said, turning to Rodney. "Please come with me, Dr. McKay."

"You bastard," Rodney said to a smiling Lorne as the replicator saw that McKay wasn't moving and added a gentle push to his verbal command. The Human complied, knowing that the guard would carry him there if necessary, and disappeared down another hallway.

"*That was a little mean,*" Elizabeth commented when Lorne rejoined her on the platform. A replacement replicator emerged into the gateroom and took the place of the missing one.

"*He needs a kick in the pants,*" Lorne argued. "*I hear he's been giving Janus fits as well.*"

"*He warned Rodney that he'd revoke his work pass if his ego continued to exceed the dimensions of his skills,*" Elizabeth said, quoting the Alterra.

Lorne snickered. "*Sums it up nicely. What's the deal with Keller?*"

Elizabeth glanced at Lorne, then at Daniel who was listening off to the side as he watched the Asgard. "*You both have to promise not to say anything.*"

Lorne frowned. "*Sure. What's up?*"

"*Daniel?*"

"*Of course,*" he insisted, only half paying attention.

Elizabeth nodded. "*Jennifer has already passed her test, but she doesn't want Rodney to know until he passes his.*"

"*Fat chance of that,*" Lorne commented. "*Has she already been transformed?*"

"*No. She insisted on waiting for her husband.*"

"*Wow,*" Lorne commented.

"*I know,*" Elizabeth commented.

"*That's an awful lot of Asgard,*" Daniel commented as more continued to come through. "*I wonder which ones they are.*"

Elizabeth frowned. "*Don't tell me you're holding a grudge?*"

"I have to agree with Rodney on this one," the Lantean said. "They killed thousands, if not millions of people...and they used us to do it."

"Please tell me," Lorne half pleaded, "that I don't have to worry about you picking a fight?"

"You won't," Daniel said evenly, but his eyes were on the Asgard. "But don't expect me to be a friendly neighbor."

"Fair enough," Lorne agreed.

"And you should cut McKay some slack," Daniel continued. "Not everyone is going to make the transition in the same timeframe."

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. "Since when did you become a fan of McKay?"

"I never said I was a fan," Daniel said, finally looking away from the Asgard. "But his whole world up until this point had him as the smartest man around...now he's just one of the peons with outdated knowledge, some of which is flat out wrong, that's formed the basis for his universe. If I'd had the rug pulled out from under me in a similar fashion I'd be shaken up too."

"I hadn't thought about it that way," Elizabeth considered.

"That all may be true," Lorne added, "but he isn't even trying."

"He'll find his way eventually," Daniel said, looking back toward the still incoming Asgard. "But it has to be his way, not yours."

"Wanna put some money on that?" Lorne asked.

"We don't use money," Daniel reminded him.

"Figure of speech," Lorne clarified. "I don't think he'll make it."

"He has to look at it as a challenge," Daniel said slowly, his mind elsewhere. "When it rubs him that way he won't stop until he succeeds. His ego won't let him."

"The only question is," Elizabeth interrupted, "how do we get him to look at it that way?"

"It's not up to us," Daniel said, his voice still distance.

Elizabeth hung her head for a moment. "No, I suppose it's not."

The last of the 15,000 Vanir came through the gate along with Stevenson before the wormhole finally shut down over an hour later. After he returned the borrowed gate, Thor was then free to return to Asgard business while Ryan saw to the arrangements for the Vanir's work schedule. Most of them would be tasked with helping the Lanteans establish and run their infrastructure, both within the city and abroad, while others would gather and analyze as much data on the alien species created by Romulus and Remus in preparation for the war that Janus had said would come once the Wraith were defeated.

Still, a few others would be assigned to random tasks as they popped up. Given that all the Vanir were clones, they all possessed some degree of scientific knowledge. This meant that Ryan and Elizabeth now had 15,000 scientists/techs at their disposal. Over the next few days the two leaders would brainstorm other uses for them, including engineering berths on Traveler ships, analysts reexamining Wraith technology for the elusive 'weakness' that the crew of the *Aurora* had claimed existed, and teachers for the steady flow of Human volunteers arriving on Atlantis and Yavin.

One of these 'teachers' would take Janus's place instructing the small group of Lantean/Pre-Lantean scientists on the finer points of basic physics...including McKay.

Meanwhile Ryan and Sheppard began to prepare their battle plans for the war against the Wraith that they were about to restart.

Déjà vu: Part 1

1

Arin thrust his arm forward, palm up, and released a telekinetic blast toward Ryan's tumbling form. The Alterran flipped backwards onto his hands, his back bending at an impossible angle for a Human, and whipped his legs up over his head and into Bret's chest, knocking him backward as Arin's invisible blow sent him half tumbling to the side.

Ryan had felt the energy building in Arin and had produced a negation field around himself in time to absorb part of the blow, but not all of it. He fell onto his right knee and tumbled over laterally until he landed on his chest, momentarily knocking the wind out of him.

Even without breath, he glanced at Arin and pulled his feet out from under him. His cloned brother backbent and caught himself with his hands on the ground then whip kicked his feet up over him and back around to the ground where he took a guard stance, forearms out in front of him.

Ryan sucked in a quick breath and stabilized himself. He rolled up on his right shoulder and pushed himself up onto his feet one handed. He twirled about, arms spread, just in time to hit Bret squarely in the chest as his other brother tried to catch him off guard with his own telekinetic blast.

As Bret flinched backwards from the impact, Ryan bent down, gathered his knees beneath him, then launched upward in a massive jump...

He caught the railing of the catwalk above them in the Alterran-only training chamber and easily wicked himself up and over the edge where he looked back down on his twins as they came together, shoulder to shoulder beneath him, and telekinetically picked up and hurled several heavy, but soft cubes scattered around the chamber at him.

Ryan half extended his hand and stopped them midway...his energy-based skills were far beyond those of his clones and the rest of the Alterra, but even with his advantage he was having a hard time keeping his two opponents at bay.

Arin was the clone dedicated to studying and improving his hand to hand combat, while Bret had self-assigned himself to developing superior personal armor and weapons...the likes of which he now used on Ryan.

The original Stevenson dropped to a knee on the catwalk as he was caught by a widespread stun pulse from Bret's wrist blaster. The disabling energy fought to interrupt and overwhelm the impulses of his nervous system in a tug of war with Ryan's own internal purging wave. His body, ever more attuned to the flow of energy with each passing day, absorbed and flushed the stun blast in a cascade of static electricity redirected into the metal grating of the catwalk beneath him.

In the four seconds the process took, Arin had leapt up onto the catwalk and kicked into the side of Ryan's chest. He fell onto his side and suddenly found Arin on top of him, wrestling for leverage.

A moment later Bret joined him and they pressed their elder brother to the ground...pinned. A second stun blast made sure he'd stay put.

Arin stood up and smiled above Ryan's prone form. "*Five/seven now.*"

"*Two beats one any day,*" Bret said, fist bumping Arin.

"Ah," Ryan moaned, purging the second stunblast and sitting up beneath their proud gazes. They were catching up.

"*Round 13,*" Ryan said, focusing hard. He lifted both of the clones off their feet and threw them over the edge of the catwalk...where they nimbly regained their balance midair and landed on their feet.

"What are you doing here?" McKay asked Zelenka as he slipped into the seat in front of Rodney.

"The same reason you are, I imagine," the other scientist replied pithily. "Mereiov is instructing us in the basics of hyperspace travel."

"Even Lanteans," McKay said, crossing his arms and leaning back in his 'desk.'

Zelenka frowned. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Don't you just download everything you need," McKay said, pointing his index finger at his temple.

"Actually no," Zelenka corrected. "We have to earn those first."

"Really...and what do you have to do for that?"

"Prove a basic understanding of the underlying principles. Without them, the knowledge downloads would only allow us to reciprocate the data."

"I thought that was the whole point," McKay argued.

"Actually no...at least not how it was explained by Janus. In order to be able to one day go beyond the Ancient knowledge, we must first understand it. Apparently you can't download comprehension."

"But isn't that *exactly* what our beloved master Ancient had done to him?"

Zelenka shrugged. "Perhaps...but he isn't technically a scientist, just knowledgeable. Janus heads our department, and he's said that that he also had to master the basics in order to be able to fully process the knowledge downloads."

"Guess your transformation wasn't that useful after all," McKay grumbled.

"You'd be surprised," Zelenka said evenly. "My mental processing power has increased greatly...and I don't require as much sleep, meaning I can work longer hours and the all-nighters aren't as debilitating," he said as three more individuals entered the room. They were also candidate scientists, two from the Traveler fleet and one from the Genii that had arrived less than a month ago when Sheppard arranged for their membership in what he jokingly referred to as their 'Federation.'

"I always wondered what it'd be like to go back to kindergarten," McKay half whispered as the others found seats in the enlarged, semi-circular briefing room.

"I hope you don't plan to be rude when Mereiov arrives."

"Or what?" McKay scoffed.

Zelenka frowned. "If you're not here to learn..."

"Oh, I'm here to learn," McKay clarified. "It's either this or sit in my quarters twiddling my thumbs. Weir won't let me go back to working on the city until I pass baby boot camp."

"You know, the Alterra are far more knowledgeable about Atlantis than we are," Zelenka whispered as more candidates arrived.

Rodney leaned forward. "We took care of this city for six years on our own. Don't you think that should count for something?"

"You think it hasn't?" Zelenka asked, somewhat surprised.

"If it did, we wouldn't be stuck back in school."

"Well, I for one look forward to the studies. We'll probably learn more in the next three hours than Earth could have in 3000 years without outside help."

"Thank you, Mr. Positive," McKay snided as Mereiov walked into the room and up onto the central podium that had been adjusted for his diminished height. He activated a holographic map of hyperspace around 'Dune.'

"These sensor readings," the Asgard began, "are being taken from the vicinity around Atlantis and will be updated continuously as the city's sensors sweep the system. This is the dimension known as Nifleheim by the Ancients, but most species refer to it as 'hyperspace' due to the rapid transit it allows due to an absence of matter of any kind."

"Tell me something I don't know," McKay whispered behind Zelenka where the Asgard couldn't see his lips.

"Interstellar travel through hyperspace," Mereiov continued, oblivious, "is achieved through a variety of means, all of which create an interference field around the matter of the craft in question, allowing it to transition into the alternate dimension and remain there for an indefinite amount of time. However, if this field is deactivated, or dissipates below sustainable levels, the matter is automatically reverted back into the dimension from whence it came. This aspect of hyperspace allows for the inertia misalignment achieved during the initial transition between dimensions to be reversed without additional power output."

The Genii raised a hand.

"Yes..." Mereiov asked monotone.

"My knowledge of hyperspace is still theoretical, and basic at best, but are you saying that whatever speed a ship achieves in hyperspace is instantaneously negated when it returns to our dimension?"

"Provisionally, yes," Mereiov answered. "If such speed was attained through the transition between realms, it will be reversed upon any exit from hyperspace. If the acceleration was achieved once inside hyperspace, that inertia will not be negated and it will carry over into realspace...which the Ancients refer to as Midgar."

"Whoa...whoa...wait a minute," McKay interrupted, snapping his fingers to get the little alien's attention. "You can't accelerate inside hyperspace. All the speed comes from the dimensional cheat."

"That may be true of some hyperdrive engine designs, but it is not an absolute rule," Mereiov explained patiently. "Most primitive technology uses thrust-based engines to achieve acceleration and maneuvering, which cannot pass beyond the interference field without reverting to realspace. When such matter connects with the field, it destabilizes it proportional to the mass and velocity of the thrust, resulting in a collapse that automatically takes the ship out of hyperspace. This makes any thrust-based engines nearly inoperable within hyperspace...however, other non-matter based engines can be used without jeopardizing the integrity of the field."

"Interesting," McKay mused. "What level of matter interference are we talking about?"

"A single thruster burst from your Earth designed ships would be sufficient to jeopardize the weaker fields produced by your hyperdrive technology."

"Our technology? We got it from you," he pointed out.

"Yes, but it had to be downgraded in order to accommodate your lack of necessary support systems, composite materials, and power generation."

McKay's eyes widened. "Are you saying you gave us junk hyperdrive technology?!"

"I've reviewed the designs you were given," Mereiov said, refusing to be angered by McKay's thinly veiled insults. "They are as advanced as were possible given the construction of your ships. The hyperdrives on our vessels are based on similar principles, but the application is far superior due to the technology of our support systems."

"Isn't the hyperdrive technology independent from other systems?" the outspoken Genii inquired.

"What he said," McKay added.

"Partially," the Asgard stated, "but power generation is independent from the hyperdrive, as are the navigation and computer systems. A standard Asgard hyperdrive requires more power than naquada generators can provide, better sensors for accurate navigation at higher speeds, and more advanced processing capability in order to operate the device properly."

"So the starship is an integrated technology," the Genii said reflectively, "not just a frame with separate components attached."

"Correct," Mereiov said with just a hint of satisfaction.

"Show off," McKay mumbled. "So...how fast are your ships anyway?"

"Faster than Earth's...slower than the Ancients'."

"Gee, thanks," McKay mocked. "Care to narrow it down a bit more."

"No."

"No?" McKay half laughed. "What, are you afraid we'll steal your secrets?"

"I doubt you have the mental capacity to profit from any such theft."

Zelenka stifled a laugh, but McKay caught it anyway.

"Asgard humor, no doubt," he said, glaring at the back of Zelenka's head.

"There are many hyperspace applications," Mereiov continued, ignoring the jest. "We will study two today. The basics of the most primitive hyperdrive engine...and the mechanics of the stargates."

McKay perked up at that. "Really?"

Zelenka half turned around. "Rodney, please shut up."

"How about you make me, raggedy Andy."

"Who?"

"Never mind."

"Perhaps you would like to explain the function of the stargates?" Mereiov offered.

"What's the point," McKay said, sighing. "You're just going to disagree with whatever I say anyway."

"Probably," the Asgard confirmed.

McKay threw him an annoyed glance.

"Alright then...Stargates 101. You have an entry gate and an exit gate. They establish a wormhole through subspace between the two that transmits a deconstructed matter stream."

"Incorrect," Mereiov noted.

"How?" McKay asked. He'd tried to simplify it beyond disagreement.

"What you refer to as 'subspace' is a mathematical fiction. The stargates operate as a portal into hyperspace."

Rodney's jaw dropped. "How?"

"Makes sense, actually," Zelenka finally spoke. "That's why the Attero device affected the stargates."

"Indeed," Mereiov confirmed.

"What's the Attero device?" one of the Travelers asked. "That wasn't in our notes."

Zelenka glanced at Mereiov then turned toward the woman to explain. "The Attero device was the Lanteans' attempt to defeat the Wraith by tampering with their hyperdrives across the galaxy simultaneously. The device produced a disturbance in hyperspace that affected only their type of hyperdrives, causing the destruction of their ships whenever they attempted to use them. Unfortunately, the technology also disrupted the function of the stargates, causing them to overload when used."

The Traveler's eyes went wide with comprehension. "That's what destroyed our colony?"

"Unfortunately yes," Zelenka confirmed.

"Who used it?" she demanded.

"Our little grey buddies," McKay said, smiling.

"You did!" the Traveler demanded.

"It was not me," the Asgard said unabashedly. "But we must all pay the debt of those who did, no matter how unenviable the task," Mereiov said, looking directly at McKay.

"How do the stargates attain the nearly instantaneous transit times across galaxies," Zelenka asked, both interested in the topic and in changing the subject, "when a ship cannot?"

"The stargates create a super-accelerating conduit," Mereiov was glad to explain, "that has an internal, oscillating structure that drags an energized matter packet through an isolated region of hyperspace...observe," he said, using remote controls on his dais to activate Atlantis's stargate.

The holographic image of hyperspace was streaked by a long thin line emanating from the point where Atlantis rested and off the map to the destination.

"The conduit is not a fixed route," Mereiov explained. "Fluctuations within hyperspace will cause the route to meander, but the polarity of the energy matrix keeps both ends secured to the pair of stargates. Transit time will vary slightly, dependent on the length of the conduit during these fluctuations."

"Interesting," the Genii muttered.

"Hold on a minute," McKay interrupted again. "If it's a polarized conduit, and not a traditional wormhole, how can we receive EM against the flow?"

"The oscillating nature requires a reverse flow around the perimeter of the conduit in order to keep the entire matrix self-contained. Certain types of energy can be carried along this backflow, but matter cannot."

"Like how a waterslide recirculates the water uphill through the plumbing," Zelenka said, thinking aloud, "but the person can only go downhill."

Mereiov's eyelids rose. "Waterslide?"

"I'm sorry," Zelenka said, shaking his head. "It's a type of amusement ride on Earth. A small amount of water is run downhill through a half tube to provide lubrication for a person to slide down."

"Sounds fun," the Traveler woman said.

"So I've heard," Zelenka said.

"Wait a minute," McKay interrupted. "You've never gone down a waterslide?"

"No," he admitted.

McKay shook his head. "Why am I not surprised."

"Your analogy is sound," Mereiov approved, "if the water is recirculated."

"It is," Zelenka confirmed.

"How is your initial speed obtained?"

Zelenka shrugged. "The friction of the moving water, I suppose."

"That and you push off with your hands," McKay added.

"Then in this analogy," Mereiov continued to explain, "the stargates provide the initial 'push' as you suggest. The flow of the conduit completes the acceleration, as well as insuring that the object is insulated against disruptive factors within hyperspace. The receiving stargate slows the object to a stop where the energy stasis is reversed."

"What is this energy stasis?" the Genii asked.

"Any object passing through the stargate has to be capsulated in an energy stasis field in order to be transported through hyperspace, much like a ship must be engulfed in a similar interference field to allow its passage."

"I thought the traveler was disassembled at the molecular level?" Zelenka asked, confused.

"Such deconstruction would be fatal," Mereiov noted.

"Then how do your transport beams work?" McKay argued.

"They also engulf the target in an energy stasis...but they do not break the molecular bonds."

"Then our entire understanding of stargate technology is flawed," Zelenka announced, then caught himself. "Earth's I mean."

"Mine too, apparently," McKay said, his sarcasm momentarily gone. His scientific curiosity had just exceeded his ego. "Am I safe in assuming that the acceleration and deceleration of the stargates is also due to an inertial cheat?"

"You are," Mereiov confirmed.

"What about the rest of the inertia?"

"The nature of the stasis field allows for extreme deceleration through energy-related means. The matter remains unaffected until the stargate removes the stasis."

"Interesting..." McKay mused. "I assume this stasis acts like some sort of inertial dampening field?"

Mereiov made a sound similar to a meek grunt. "That is a crude metaphor, but it will suffice for the moment."

McKay thought quietly for a moment, but the Genii had a question. "What is it that we're seeing on the other side of the event horizon? I mean, before we're completely inside."

"It is an artificial pocket of a hybrid dimension...part realspace, part hyperspace. This is where the object is applied with a stasis field, and likewise where that field is removed prior to exiting the target event horizon."

"There was a mishap on Earth," McKay explained, "where a person traveling through the stargate was stuck inside when the entry stargate was destroyed during transit. If the matter of the traveler isn't deconstructed, where was he held?"

"Was there something anomalous with the receiving stargate?" Mereiov asked.

"Not that I recall," McKay said, his tone civil. "The only extraneous factor was on the other end."

"The dialing device prevents such mishaps from occurring," Mereiov explained. "The stargates have many safety protocols imbedded within them. If those fail, backup protocols

within the dialing device assess the nature of the problem and correct it. It is highly unlikely that such an error would bypass both layers of safeguards."

McKay tilted his head to the side. "Well, Earth doesn't use a DHD...dialing device. We built a custom one when the stargate was discovered without one."

"I see," Mereiov said, unimpressed. "Was this person recovered?"

"Yes...we had to borrow another dialing device and get some intelligence from a captive Goa'uld, but we managed to save him."

"In that case, the person in question was most likely held in stasis within the hybrid dimension. If the event horizon is not activated, then the stasis will not be repealed."

"Because it would kill the person," McKay said, beginning to make sense of things. "How come we don't explode from decompression on the other side?"

"The hybrid dimension is configured in such a way to mimic the conditions of the environment affecting the event horizon. This includes pressure and temperature, but not gravity."

"I was wondering about that too," McKay said, nodding. "Whenever I go through the stargate I feel constrained for a split second. I expect my foot to drop off into nowhere but it never does...I also can't exhale."

"Such is necessary to register your entry velocity and trajectory. Gravity on the other side of the event horizon would skew this, as would a solid surface beneath your feet. A long object entering the event horizon from an angle must be allowed to fully enter the dimensional pocket before encapsulation. This means it must be allowed to extend beyond the ring. For this purpose, the pocket dimension is designed to be enlarged as necessary to accommodate any and all objects that will fit through the ring."

"What about a puddle jumper?" McKay asked, dominating the class, but too interested to notice or care. "Why do the pilots undergo stasis before the craft does?"

"They are not connected to the craft, therefore as soon as their bodies fully pass through the event horizon they undergo stasis. If they did not, they could be asphyxiated before the entire craft entered if it was moving very slowly."

"True, true," McKay noted. "Please continue."

Sitting in front of McKay where he couldn't see, Zelenka smiled at his friend's sudden change of demeanor.

On Dakara the stargate activated its end of the conduit through hyperspace and deposited two travelers from Earth safely onto the desert world. Moments afterward a transport beam plucked the men off the surface and set them down inside the bridge of one of the Jaffa's new H'tels.

"Bra'tac..." one of the new arrivals greeted the System Lord seated in his command chair. The Alterra nodded his respect. "O'Neill."

"We're good to go," the General said positively. "There'll be hell to pay back on Earth, but we've got to nip this in the bud while we still can."

"Indeed," Bra'tac agreed, turning towards his helmsman. "Set course for Osser."

The Jaffa did as bidden and opened a hyperspace window. The scattering of air molecules high above Dakara's atmosphere impacted the window and were repelled, but the H'tel with its interference field fully deployed around it passed through into a narrow hybrid dimension. There the full power of the ship's engines were applied and created the dimensional 'cheat' where the ship entered into hyperspace with an inertial momentum far greater than it had in realspace.

With the power generation capabilities of the Jaffa's new technology, that 'cheat' was in excess of any other ship within the galaxy...not to mention greater than that the Asgard and the Furlings were capable of generating. Due to such extreme engine power, the H'tel would arrive at the Chinese-held world, a quarter of the way across the galaxy, within the hour.

2

"Proximity warning," Xiang said calmly from the control center on Osser.

"What have we got?" Zi, his commanding officer, asked.

"No comm chatter, but we are picking up IFF," Xiang said, frowning. *"It's not an Earth ship."*

"Translate into Goa'uld," Zi ordered stiffly.

Xiang brought up the computer's translation protocols and quickly got a match for the matrix the IFF was operating on. The blank receiver screen flashed the translated identification tag:

Jaffa H'tel 002: in the service of Lord Bra'tac, First of the System Lords.

Zi's eyes went wide. *"What's their heading?"*

Xiang panicky brought up a crude, 3D radar tracking prompt. He turned and looked up at his superior, his face white. *"They're coming into the atmosphere and they're heading directly for us!"*

"Get the pilots to their fighters!" Zi yelled so the entire control staff could hear him clearly. *"Begin evacuation of key personnel. Purge all databases. Have the cargo ships cloak immediately then move to the pickup points. We can't take the chance of them being picked off on the ground. Dial an uninhabited world and begin evacuation of secondary personnel. How long do we have?"*

"Six minutes," Xiang said firmly.

"Purge status?" Zi demanded as the control staff hurriedly worked to carry out his orders.

"Twenty seven percent," another staffer yelled over the din.

"Stay with it until completion, then get to the gate," Zi ordered as he and the other control staff began finishing their tasks and running out of the building, grabbing whatever transportation they could or just making a run on foot towards the stargate set less than a kilometer outside the northern edge of their city.

As the Chinese overseers on Osser scrambled to evacuate either by cargo ship or stargate, the H'tel slowly broke through the thick cloud layer above the dozens of settlements and hovered in place, inciting additional terror in the fleeing Tauri.

A pair of small missiles lanced out from a low flying 302 and struck the Jaffa mothership's shields ineffectively. A short burst of stuttered energy blasts followed from the fighter before it arced up and into the clouds, turning away from the massive vessel.

Two more fighters made a run from the south with similar results. By the time all six of the Chinese 302s got into the air and were making their runs against the H'tel the first of the evacuees had reached the stargate...save for the guards who had gone through immediately.

With the gnat-like 302s spinning around the mothership expending their ordinance, the H'tel suddenly dropped its shields...followed by a transport beam stretching out and impacting one of the circling 302s. As soon as the beam retracted the Tauri fighter fell out of control towards the city but it never made it to ground. A short burst of weapons fire from the H'tel destroyed it midair, leaving only bits and pieces to damage the buildings and streets below.

Presented with an opportunity, the 302s launched all of their remaining missiles into the shieldless mothership as more transport beams continued to pluck the pilots from their ships. Five missiles and many small energy blasts hit the armored hull of the H'tel, chipping away at the red and black protective layer, but failing to penetrate it. Within twenty seconds all of the 302s had been deprived of their controllers and destroyed.

The next transport beam began plucking up the Tauri running and driving towards the stargate. One small motorized cart was within 20 meters of the gate when its passengers disappeared, but being so close to its destination it continued forward, slowing as it went, but still managed to make it through the event horizon. It was the last thing, living or otherwise, to do so.

Suddenly over two dozen Jaffa fighters, tiny in size and colored red/gold, launched from the mothership and arced up into the clouds. Using telemetry relayed from the H'tel, they began chasing the cloaked cargo ships as they attempted to flee the planet. They had a few thousand kilometers to do so before the primitive cloaking devices would be sufficient to hide the ships from the powerful Ancient sensors aboard the H'tel.

The small, angular fighters chased after the slower cargo ships with a fury, knowing that they weren't going to catch them all in time, but the pilots wanted to get as many as they could in order to impress Bra'tac and perhaps earn their new symbiots faster than expected. When the Lok'na'te came within range of the Tauri vessels they attacked with their tiny disruption pulses, each little more than a tiny bolt of orange energy that would interfere with the operations of the ships, but do very little hull damage.

Low powered as the weapons were, Bra'tac had made a point to include them in the fighter design. If the Jaffa were to be tasked with the protection and peace keeping of Avalona, then they were likely to encounter more situations where a vessel needed to be taken intact rather than outright destroyed.

Disabling the weapon and engine systems of a craft without critically damaging it was no small feat with conventional weapons, but the disruptor made it easy for even a novice pilot to accomplish the same task. Any impact on the hull would spread out and deaden the ship's systems.

Several hits were necessary to fully disable the cargo ships, but one was all it took to temporarily knock out their cloaking devices. As such, all the Jaffa needed to do was 'tag' each ship once and that would effectively extend their range of pursuit.

Even with their cloaks down, a few more of the cargo ships managed to make the jump to hyperspace. At that point the Lok'na'te could no longer pursue, devoid of any interstellar engines of their own, but they had managed to disable four of the fourteen craft and circled them like sharks in orbit, insuring they would not repower their systems and escape before the H'tel returned to pick them up.

Back on the ground the transport beams canvassed the streets closest to the stargate, picking up any and all personnel moving about, but they left those remaining within the buildings alone for the time being. After a few minutes the stargate shut down and the H'tel sent a signal offworld. Less than a minute later an incoming wormhole activated and a large contingent of Jaffa stepped through, weapons ready, along with seven Tok'ra. Behind them came more Jaffa carrying cargo crates which the Tok'ra began taking components out of in a small clearing less than 50 meters from the stargate.

Within a few minutes the Tok'ra had the first of their force shield containment wards set up and the H'tel beamed three people back down inside the fence-like perimeter.

"Do not be afraid," Delek said to the frightened villagers from the opposite side of the translucent containment field. "We are here to help you."

"Yes....yes....yes....yes....no," O'Neill said, pointing to the line of people being processed onboard the mothership. The woman he was pointing at, next in line, was escorted off to the left into another room by one of the Jaffa where she would be beamed back down to the surface.

"Yes....yes....yes," O'Neill continued, picking out the Chinese from the villagers. The illicit Tauri were escorted off to the right into several prepared holding cells in addition to the ones that came standard with the ship.

"Yep....uhuh....you betcha....nope," he said, catching another of the villagers and sending him out of line as Jack quickly got tired with repetitive 'yeses.'

"Oh yeah....bingo....absolutely....totally....definitely....undeniably....positively," he went on until he saw a person he couldn't quite place. "Hold up fellas!"

O'Neill turned around. "Mitchell?"

"On it," the Colonel said, walking up to the questionable person next in line. "*What's your name?*" he asked in Chinese.

The young man looked at him blankly, not saying anything.

"*Do you understand me, son?*" Mitchell tried again.

The man nodded.

"*What's your name?*" Mitchell repeated.

"Xang," he said meekly.

"*Relax Xang,*" Mitchell said, exchanging a glance with O'Neill, "*you'll be seeing home within the day.*"

O'Neill pointed to the right and the Jaffa escorted the man off to the holding cells.

"Next..."

Seven hours later O'Neill, Mitchell, and Bra'tac beamed down to the impromptu Tok'ra encampment where they were holding the 7,539 natives as the Jaffa/Tok'ra taskforce continued to bring more equipment through the nearby stargate.

"That went well," Mitchell said as Delek walked over to meet the trio.

"Yes, very nice," O'Neill said, congratulating Bra'tac.

The System Lord nodded. "I too am glad we were able to avoid bloodshed. It will be a sad day indeed if the Jaffa and Tauri were ever to meet on the field of battle. Thank your President for sanctioning this mission. He has shown wisdom this day."

"Well, I wouldn't go that far," O'Neill cautioned, "but we had to do something about the Chinese."

"Your involvement just made the whole mess a lot cleaner," Mitchell added.

"Had your President not approved of this," Bra'tac warned, "we would have been forced to act on our own eventually. I hope that you will be able to secure this rogue faction from your world?"

"That's the plan," O'Neill said sarcastically, "but you know what they say of the best laid plans."

"Indeed," Bra'tac said, nodding as Delek finally caught up to them.

"I assume you've cleared all of the settlements?" the Tok'ra asked brusquely.

"We have," Bra'tac confirmed. "Have you located the Tauri command center?"

"Yes, but it is too small and primitive for our needs. I've requested additional supplies from our homeworld, including several prefabricated structures. Once those are set up we will begin making what use we can of the indigenous buildings. It will be difficult, given that the infrastructure on this planet was designed to supplement your world as opposed to making Osser self-sufficient, but we will make sure this civilization doesn't spiral out of control in the Tauri's absence."

O'Neill sensed the subtle rebuke there, but in truth he agreed with the Tok'ra...for once.

"Thanks for cleaning up our mess," he offered candidly.

"I assume changes will be made on Earth to prevent this sort of thing from happening again?"

"We're working on it," O'Neill said, not satisfied with his own answer.

"I imagine," Bra'tac offered, "that such change will come at a cost to your world?"

"If you mean will we start fighting each other militarily...probably not. On Earth we usually use other means. Right now China has managed to tick off just about everyone and isolate itself, but if they really want to dig their heels in there will be trouble."

Bra'tac nodded. He'd seen many such power struggles between the Goa'uld over his century of service to Apophis. "Let us hope they will see reason and do not attempt this again."

"We'll be on the watch now," Mitchell assured him. "They set all this up in secret...that's an advantage they don't have anymore."

"There is still the matter of the four other worlds they have taken," Delek reminded them.

O'Neill and Bra'tac exchanged glances. "We hope they will voluntarily cede those worlds when we return to Earth and they hear from their own people what has transpired on this day," Bra'tac said.

Delek looked at the two Tauri. "Will that happen?"

O'Neill shrugged. "If not we'll just use the mothership approach again. They don't have anything bigger than a cargo ship to fight back with."

"And," Mitchell added, "once their ego gets bruised by this they may want to avoid it happening four more times."

"Let us hope so," Bra'tac echoed. "Delek, have you any further need of the H'tel?"

The Tok'ra considered for a moment. "I would recommend a full sensor sweep of the planet to insure all of the Tauri are actually gone, but if that is the case I see no further need for its presence."

Bra'tac nodded. "We will depart for Earth then."

"Good luck," Delek offered to O'Neill, out of character.

"Thanks," Jack said as Bra'tac conversed with several of his Jaffa that he was leaving on the planet to assist the Tok'ra. Delek left the group to continue the restructuring of Osser that would allow the natives to be gradually released from their temporary confinement.

Mitchell stepped closer to O'Neill and whispered over his shoulder.

"Did that stiff-assed Tok'ra just wish us luck?"

"I know," Jack said, equally surprised. "Then again, he didn't specify what kind."

Mitchell snickered. "No sir, I suppose he didn't."

"Ten bucks says the next thing that comes out of his mouth is a complaint," O'Neill offered lightly.

"I'd say that's a pretty safe bet," Mitchell confirmed.

"No takers?"

Cam tilted his neck innocently. "I may still be the new guy, but I wasn't born yesterday."

"Damn," Jack half whispered in defeat as Bra'tac returned.

"The grain you spoke of is indeed Kassa," he relayed to them.

"Totally saw that one coming," Cam said.

O'Neill raised an eyebrow. "Don't suppose they left any records of where they were sending it?"

Bra'tac shook his head. "Their data systems were deleted prior to our arrival. We are currently attempting to access the navigational logs on two of the cargo ships. They may offer some insight into the matter."

"How long will that take?" O'Neill asked.

"A matter of hours, but we need not wait here," Bra'tac said, answering his unspoken question. "The information will be transmitted to the H'tel whenever it is acquired. We may depart for Earth at any time."

"Let's go," O'Neill said.

3

When the H'tel entered Earth orbit it was met by the three Tauri warships and escorted by the two American vessels as the *Kerensky* kept its distance, either intimidated by the larger vessel or not sure of the Jaffa's motives. The *Phoenix* and the newly finished *Icarus* took up flanking positions alongside the pyramid ship as they circled around the planet towards China.

"How'd it go?" Landry asked O'Neill after he'd beamed down into the SGC.

"Like a charm," the higher ranking General answered as the rest of SG-1 met him and Mitchell in the briefing room. "But," O'Neill continued, "there are a number of unaccounted for Chinese that managed to gate offworld. They may have went to one of their other bases..."

"Or they could be running around who knows where," Landry finished for him.

"Right," O'Neill answered, a bit stunned at being interrupted.

"You think they've got other operations running?" Carter asked.

O'Neill shrugged. "Don't know. That's what I want you to find out."

"We've got the address they gated to," Mitchell explained. "With your permission, sir," Cam said, looking at Landry, "I'd like to get underway immediately before the trail grows cold."

"Permission granted. If China has other bases out there we need to find them ASAP."

"That's not all," Mitchell said.

"Kassa," Jack said when Mitchell left the moment to him. "There was loads of the stuff lying around...and some of it might have made its way back here."

Landry's eyes went wide. "The Chinese are drug trafficking now?"

"Possibly," Mitchell answered, looking at Vala.

"Well," she said sheepishly, "I did happen to notice a few reports on the news about something called 'Black Rain' being introduced onto your European continent. Supposedly it's twice as potent as anything else on the market."

"If it is a Kassa derivative," Mitchell explained, "we might be able to backtrack the flow...and by 'we' I mean the DEA or some other three letter agency."

"Since this is evil space corn we're dealing with," O'Neill told Landry, "I'm having the SGC take the lead. All government agencies and black ops personnel will coordinate through you."

Landry nodded. "Understood. I'll reassign SG-4 and 6 to coordinating rolls."

"Sirs," Mitchell asked, standing a bit straighter.

"Dismissed," Landry said, giving his leave. SG-1 left to prep for their offworld goose hunt.

"So," Landry said conspiratorially after they were gone. "What's our next move?"

"Bra'tac is returning the prisoners to China. In about six hours we're going to have a confrontation inside the I.O.A. We'll know then."

"Ah...I wish I could be there to see their reaction."

Jack raised an eyebrow. "Trade you?"

Landry laughed. "If only."

"Actually," Jack thought out loud, "why don't you come with. You can sit in the peanut gallery."

Landry hesitated, not sure if O'Neill was joking or not. He finally decided on 'not.'
"Thank you, I think I will."

"Contact the *Phoenix* in five hours and have them beam you up. I'll meet you there."

"Will do, General."

O'Neill searched his pants pockets, frowning. He patted down his back pockets, then checked his jacket pockets. He finally found what he was looking for inside a hidden left breast pocket in his green jacket.

"Ah, there it is," he said, pulling out the small transmitter that was barely the size of a poker chip. He pressed the thumb-sized button and waited. Fourteen seconds later *Phoenix's* transport beam plucked him from the SGC.

"I assume this is the moment where you gloat over your recent victory?" Miss Shen, the Chinese Representative on the I.O.A. leading council, asked O'Neill, now in full dress uniform.

"Wasn't us," Jack said, only half suppressing a smile.

Shen frowned angrily. She'd only received her government's report an hour ago and hadn't had time to fully fume before being summoned into session. "I have eye witness reports of your presence onboard the Jaffa vessel."

"The Jaffa graciously allowed us two observers," O'Neill explained, "and they went to considerable effort to capture your people alive...and for a Jaffa that's saying a lot. I wouldn't count on such leniency next time."

"Next time?" Shen asked coyly.

O'Neill straightened behind the dais. Several American I.O.A. reps sitting in the gallery behind him shifted in their seats as well, including Landry. This was the moment of truth...or at least the first one...that they were going to come across.

"Either China voluntarily evacuates the other inhabited worlds you've stolen...or the Jaffa will take them by force. Master Bra'tac has given you one week exactly from the moment they returned your people. I suggest you not be late."

Shen leaned back in her seat. "It seems we have little choice...unless we recommit our nuclear arsenal to the defense of our colonies."

"Absolutely not!" Harkovli bellowed, the Russian's face turning red.

"That is not a viable option," Victor said in a less agitated voice.

"It would only serve to enrage the Jaffa," Louvere warned. "We can't risk further animosities."

"Relax fellas," O'Neill interjected. "I'm sure Miss Shen is well aware that a dozen of our nukes wouldn't be enough to penetrate their shields...she's just blowing smoke," he said irreverently.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, General," she said icily, "but did not our fighters damage the Jaffa vessel at Osser?"

"Scratched the paint," O'Neill confirmed.

"I believe our nuclear weapons would do considerably more damage," she said smugly.

Jack rolled his eyes. "The only reason your weapons hit paydirt was because Bra'tac lowered the shields so he could beam your pilots out before blowing your fighters to bits."

The Canadian Representative cleared her throat. "A sentiment of true friendship on their part that we would be fools to squander."

"Our weapons have no chance," Harkovli argued, "against the Ancient shield technology that the Jaffa now possess. Your statements here are nothing more than wishful thinking...if not bordering on delusional."

Shen eyed him vehemently but didn't respond.

"Well?" O'Neill demanded after a few moments of silence.

The Chinese Representative neatly assembled her papers and placed them back inside a single folder, tapped it twice on the desktop to even them, then laid it squarely down in front of her.

"You will have our answer in three days," she said as she rose from her seat and headed for the door. A half dozen other Chinese personnel in the gallery rose to leave as well.

O'Neill glanced across the panel of remaining I.O.A. reps. "One more thing," he said, getting her attention before she got to the door. "What have you been doing with all the Kassa?"

Shen was about to offer a retort, but thought better of it and just left the room with the door slamming shut behind her.

"What is this Kassa?" Raj Mesei, the Indian Representative on the 21 member council, asked.

"It's a type of narcotic," Victor informed the newer member.

"Looks like corn," O'Neill offered.

"China is growing narcotics on other planets?" Raj asked. "Did you know of this?"

"No we didn't," the British rep assured him. "The Americans were the ones to discover it."

"And there's a chance they might be bringing it back here," O'Neill said, dropping that bombshell.

"To sell?" Louvere asked.

O'Neill shrugged. "Beats me."

"They are way out of line," the New Zealand Representative said in half a whisper.

Jack pointed a swaying finger at all of them. "Don't think you all are off the hook either."

The I.O.A. representatives glanced at one another uneasily.

"If France is willing to cede all but one of our colonies," Louvere offered, "would that get us 'off the hook?'"

O'Neill rubbed his chin for a moment as he considered. "How many you got?"

"Four."

Jack bobbed his head side to side. "I think I can swing it...but we still have to dismantle the I.O.A."

"Russia has already made it clear that that is not an option," Harkovli reiterated.

"What would we have to fill the void?" Louvere asked, seemingly open to the idea.

O'Neill turned around. "Kelly?"

The junior I.O.A. rep that had been handling most of Coolidge's duties stood up from her seat in the gallery and gave Jack a thick folder, which he opened on the dais.

"First off, this business of everybody getting an equal share of decision making has got to go...some of you have zero experience in offworld affairs. Your naiveté is dangerous when put into positions you haven't earned. From now on your countries are going to have to cut their teeth before they get to start playing with the big boys."

"Your tone is insulting," Harkovli rebuked.

"Not quite what I was going for, but ok," O'Neill said deadpan.

"Russia will not..."

Victor held up a hand. "Let him speak. I'm curious as to what the Americans have in mind."

"Right now we control the stargate," Jack began his diatribe. "We control the moon base. We control the only means of 304 production and most of the 302. We have the most personnel with offworld experience, not to mention offworld combat, and we're the ones that have developed the contacts with other worlds. They know us, they deal with us. You guys have been reaping the benefits of our hard work, then you start telling us what to do through the I.O.A., which has backfired time and again. To put it bluntly, you're *newbs*," he said, emphasizing that term.

"The fact that you've already ticked off the Jaffa and Tok'ra is clear evidence of your lack of real diplomatic skills. Not only did you break the rules we established to avoid confrontations like this, but you also got caught doing it, which goes to show you're not even good at sneaking around," O'Neill said, throwing his hands up in the air for emphasis of their ineptitude.

"We fooled you," Victor reminded him.

"Really...then why are we here having this discussion right now?"

Victor sat back in his seat.

"You guys don't have a clue what you're doing, and we've got enough enemies as it is. If Bra'tac hadn't been here when he was, Earth would be a dead planet. We dodged yet another bullet and you guys don't seem to care. The Aschen tried to wipe us out and all you can do is squabble amongst yourselves. We need to defend this planet properly, with a coordinated effort, because our nine lives are up. Sooner or later the bad guys are going to be the lucky ones and we'll just be dead."

"What sort of coordination are you suggesting?" Louvere asked.

"I've been working on a plan for a while now, for what would be the best case scenario. I didn't think it'd ever happen, but given recent events the status quo just won't do anymore."

"I think we can all agree to that," Mrs. Neville said.

"Speak for your own country," Harkovli reprimanded the Canadian.

"The framework is simple," O'Neill explained. "The SGC has operational authority over all offworld activities as well as Earth orbital defense. Your countries can contribute to the talent pool in the SGC where you are able and start building some experience. We expand the SGC over time into a multinational venture whose participation is based on merit and not politics."

"Eventually the colonization of other worlds will be facilitated by the SGC and your countries will gain a bit of liberty in that area, but for now all colonies will fall under direct SGC control until we can sort out this mess."

"Just for the sake of argument," Harkovli rumbled, "who would that put in command of the stargate program...General Landry or you?"

In the gallery Hank raised his eyebrows. O'Neill hadn't discussed this with him beforehand.

"Both...though we ultimately have to clear everything through the President."

"So Earth will take orders from the American President?" Harkovli laughed humorlessly. "I think not."

"If we are to contribute resources and personnel," Louvere said, exploring the thread, "would we have no say in their use?"

"Participation would be voluntary," O'Neill explained. "If you don't like something you can always walk."

"That's not quite what I meant, General," Louvere continued. "As more and more non-American personnel join the SGC, would your President still have final say?"

Jack considered that for a moment. It was a sticky question to say the least. "Best guess is that eventually the SGC would operate as a separate entity on US soil. Decisions involving multi-national resources would be made by the SGC and not our President. Decisions involving only US resources will always be the prerogative of the President."

Louvere nodded. "France will agree to that in principle."

"Canada may as well," Neville added, "but I must check with my government before we can go any further."

"I don't believe this!" Harkovli nearly exploded out of his seat. "You're giving them exactly what they want!"

"Each nation must act in our own best interests," Louvere explained. "Perhaps you should consider what course of action would serve Russia's future best."

"This isn't an east vs. west issue," O'Neill said, trying to throw him an olive branch. "It's about defending Earth."

"Under your leadership," Harkovli said, biting off each word.

"For the moment, we have the experience," Jack reminded him. "That won't always be the case."

"So you're saying the US's domination will end at some point?"

O'Neill nodded. "We can't let politicians of any country jeopardize Earth's security with petty games...that includes the United States. I don't trust our congress to know what to do out there any more than I trust you guys."

Several US diplomats in the gallery cringed, as did two US Senators in attendance, but neither of them looked particularly angered. In fact, one of them belatedly nodded his head in recognition of O'Neill's words.

"Do you have a formal proposal for us to consider?" Victor asked evenly.

"Nope," Jack answered. "Just some notes I've scratched down over the years."

"So all we have to go on is your word?" Raj asked.

"That's how we used to do it in the old days," O'Neill said pithily.

"Your lack of diplomatic understanding is profound," Harkovli said.

"Thank you," O'Neill said happily.

"I believe it may be us that are lacking in diplomacy," Louvere stated. "Or am I wrong in assuming that the Jaffa hold more to O'Neill's sense of personal honor than they do invective politics?"

"You may have a point there," Haviar DeSoto added. "From the mission reports I've read while stationed in this post, most of the galaxy is more straightforward than we're accustomed to. Perhaps it is best if we leave the, *diplomacy*, in the hands of those in the SGC."

"Gracias," O'Neill added, nodding to the Spanish rep. "Most logical statement I've heard this decade."

"This is not a joking matter, General," Harkovli scolded him.

"Actually, I find this whole debate quite hilarious," Jack responded. "Because you really have no choice in all this. The only way you're gettin back out there is through us."

"Is that a threat?" Harkovli said raising his chin defiantly.

"Pretty much," O'Neill said, staring back. "You screwed up going behind our back. Now you're going to pay for it. You work a deal with us and you *might*, I stress *might*, get to keep some of your offworld assets. You don't play ball and you're grounded."

"You have no right to dictate terms," the Russian growled.

"Ambassador," Louvere interrupted. "Remember that the man you are berating is responsible for saving this planet from destruction no less than *six times*! General O'Neill can be trusted, even if his government cannot, and to put a rather blunt point on the matter...they *are* holding all the cards."

O'Neill held up eight fingers briefly for the Frenchman to see, but didn't say anything.

"Hero or not, Russia will not stand for this," Harkovli said firmly. "We have our own warship and need not grovel at the American's feet like the lot of you!"

"Hey! You started this when you went behind our back," O'Neill argued. "You had your shot, illegal as it was, and you blew it. Now we're trying things our way. You want onboard...great. If not, you can get into space the old fashioned way, because you ain't getting any more technology from us."

After the I.O.A. brass disbanded to consider their options, O'Neill was headed back to his house for a long delayed sleep after his 17 waking hours. He'd gone directly to Paris after returning to Earth and a brief refresher in Washington, and as it was he was having trouble keeping awake while driving out of the Pentagon's parking gate.

Something in his pocket started to vibrate, waking Jack up a bit further as he pulled out on the busy evening streets. He extricated his cell phone from his jeans' pocket and flipped it open, surprised at the calling number.

"O'Neill," he answered, now fully awake. "On my way," he said, putting his truck's turn signal on as he headed toward the White House.

"Mr. President," O'Neill said on entering the Oval Office in civilian clothes. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was present as well.

"General, come in," the President said, standing.

An attendant closed the door behind Jack as he stepped forward and stood at attention.

"I was told it was urgent?" O'Neill asked.

The President nodded. "I need you to personally go to stargate command to relay an order of mine, and I need it done within the hour."

Jack frowned. "What order?"

"We're moving the stargate out of Cheyenne Mountain to a location at these coordinates," the President said, nodding as the higher ranking General handed Jack a slip of paper. "Have the SGC deactivate the beaming jammers and transfer the stargate via the *Phoenix*."

"What?!" Jack asked/exclaimed.

"This is a direct order, General," the President said, looking him straight in the eyes. "You have one hour to transfer the stargate. If you are so much as one minute late you will be court-martialed for disobeying a direct order. Is that understood?"

"Why are we moving the gate?" Jack demanded, "and where is this?" he asked, holding up the piece of paper with the coordinates.

"There's no time for discussion," General Bowerton chimed in. "It is imperative that this happens no less than 59 minutes from now. We'll explain everything later."

"With all due respect, sirs..."

"Are you refusing to follow a Presidential Order?" the President cut him off.

"No, sir..."

"Then get moving. You're on the clock," the slightly taller man said, pointing at the door.

Jack stood still, looking back and forth between them trying to figure out what was going on. This felt all wrong.

"Now, General," Bowerton barked.

Jack held the man's gaze for a long two seconds then turned on his heels and left the room.

4

As he left the Oval Office O'Neill pulled the door shut a little hard, making a loud bang in the subdued evening environment of the White House.

"What?" he asked two secret service guards down the hallway as he walked by them. "Never heard a door slam before?"

Jack continued outside to where his truck was parked and angrily dove a hand into his duffle bag inside. He rummaged around for a while before finding his dirty dress uniform's pocket. He pulled out the transport chip and palmed it as he jogged back inside.

"Excuse me," Jack said, ducking past the security guards that had just let him out and around a corner into a deserted alcove, out of view. He pressed and held the transmit button and waited for the Asgard beam to transport him out of the stagnant, oppressive, infuriating governmental headquarters to and into surroundings more comfortable to him, though at the moment nothing was going to quell his roiling emotions

What had just happened?

"General," Ronson said from his command chair onboard the *Phoenix*, "welcome back."

"Give me a sensor sweep of these coordinates," O'Neill ordered, "and I need it ten minutes ago."

Ronson stood up frowning and took the slip of paper from him. "Where is this?"

"Beats me," Jack said as the bridge crew snapped into action.

"What are we looking for, exactly?"

"I honestly don't know," Jack said, his voice weird.

"Is something wrong?" the Colonel asked, sensing his off mood.

Jack just looked at him and shook his head in dismay, then cradled his forehead between a pair of fingers.

"Colonel," one of the bridge crew called out from the aft stations, "we have something."

"Where are we looking at?" Ronson asked.

"The Sahara Desert, southern Egypt."

Ronson glanced at O'Neill, but his face had scrunched up in frustration or worry...he wasn't sure which.

"Here," the Lieutenant said, pointing at a small screen. "Some sort of underground facility, several levels deep and over a mile wide."

"Those coordinates were to the inch, Lieutenant," Ronson said, his mood souring as well.

"Right here, sir, in the largest chamber."

She zoomed in and a familiar schematic manifested itself from the top down.

"Is that what I think it is?" Ronson asked.

Jack didn't answer. He stepped off to the side and leaned his forehead against a bulkhead, thinking hard.

"Looks to me like a copy of the SGC's gateroom," the Lieutenant offered.

"That's what I thought," Ronson confirmed. "What's going on, General?"

O'Neill didn't say anything.

"Jack?" Ronson whispered over his shoulder.

"I've got 53 minutes to make a decision," he said quietly so only Ronson could hear.
"You'll know by then."
Ronson nodded, sensing something very wrong was going on. "What can I do?"
Jack hesitated for a moment, then made a snap decision. "I need to make a phone call."
Ronson nodded. "This way."

"George! Phone!"
"Thank you, dear," Hammond said from his camp chair next to the fire pit. He stood up and handed his hot dog on a roasting stick to his granddaughter. "Will you hold this for me? Grandpa needs to answer the phone."
"Sure," the five year old said eagerly, taking the seemingly heavy metal rod from him.
"Hold it steady...don't let it touch the ashes."
"I won't," she assured him as it wobbled over the flames.
"Good girl," he said smiling as he walked up to the door into his house.
"Who is it?" he asked.
"Military," his wife answered handing him the phone.
"Thanks," he said as she walked back outside to the grandkids. "Hello?"
"Sir, do you have a minute?"
"Jack?"
"Yes, sir. I don't mean to pry but I'm in a bit of a hurry. Are you free to talk."
"Anytime," Hammond said.
"In person?"
"Something wrong?" Hammond asked, sensing the change in his voice as well.
"I'm in one hell of a pickle, sir."
"Where are you?"
"Ten seconds away. I'd rather not talk about this over an open line."
"If it's that urgent, come right up to the door. We can talk in the den."
"Thank you, sir," Jack said a moment before he materialized three feet away.
"And here I thought you were driving up my lane," Hammond said, extending a hand in greeting. "Good to see you again, Jack."
"Likewise, sir," O'Neill said, his complexion paling. "I only have a few minutes."
"What's going on?" he asked, waving Jack toward a nearby room and the couch inside.
"I may have to disobey a Presidential order," he said, coming straight to the point.
All enjoyment of a friendship renewed drained from Hammond's face. "Go on."
"I got an emergency call on the way home telling me to get to the White House ASAP.
As soon as I got in the door the President ordered me to move the stargate, handed me a scrap of paper with the coordinates, and wouldn't answer any questions. He said I had one hour exactly to get the gate moved or face court martial. As of now I've got 47 minutes left."
"Move it to where?" Hammond asked, aghast.
"I had the *Phoenix* do a sensor scan. It's a mockup of the SGC in Egypt."
"Egypt? How in the stars does he expect you to fly the gate there in an hour?!"
"He wants it beamed over."
Hammond considered that. "We can do that now?"
"Yeah," Jack said, dipping his head and grabbing the back of his neck with both hands.
"There has to be some sort of safeguards in place to keep our enemies from doing that to us, right?"

"We've installed jamming devices around the gate. I'm supposed to deactivate those personally."

"This is unbelievable," Hammond said, standing. "Someone is trying to steal the gate under the cover of darkness...and you said the President is the one who ordered it?"

"Yep."

"Does anyone else know about this?"

"General Bowerton was there too."

"The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Bowerton?"

"The same."

Hammond paced back and forth once. "You were right when you said you were in a pickle."

"Have any brilliant advice I could borrow?" Jack all but pleaded.

Hammond considered. "If they're doing this in a hurry, it's possible that they're afraid of causing a fuss. They know that we'd never willingly give up the stargate, so they're trying to get it out before anyone's the wiser."

"If I stall..."

"That might cause them to reconsider their plans, if enough people found out first...but then you're still facing a charge of disobeying a direct order, from the top of the chain of command no less."

"Well, if you're going to rebel, you might as well go big," Jack said, half attempting a joke.

"I still can't believe the President would be a part of this?" Hammond argued.

"It's not entirely out of character, based on some of the other things that have been going on, but I had no clue this was coming."

"That's probably by design...how much time did you say you had?"

Jack checked his watch. "45 minutes."

"I don't know what to tell you, Jack."

"Neither do I, sir," he said, leaning back on the couch and looking up at the ceiling.

"Whatever you decide, you'll have my full support," Hammond assured him. "I still have a number of contacts in high places. I'll get on the phone and see what I can do. Maybe a little sunshine on this mess will be all the cure we need," he said, retrieving his cordless phone from the other room.

"George...we both know that if that gate leaves US soil, it isn't coming back."

Hammond reluctantly nodded. "You're probably right about that."

"I'd bet my ridiculous paycheck that the President probably doesn't think Landry will deactivate the jammers on his order alone...at least not without making some phone calls first."

"You're the only one with enough clout to pull it off," Hammond agreed.

"And he hasn't left me enough time to do anything without violating his direct order," Jack said monotone, his mind elsewhere.

"What are you thinking, Jack?"

O'Neill blinked twice then looked directly at Hammond. "I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't. I can't let the President steal the stargate for the I.O.A. or whoever else is behind this...and I end up in jail if I don't."

"The I.O.A.?" Hammond said, his frown deepening.

"The President has bailed their asses out of the frying pan several times."

"Then this could be part of an international coup," Hammond thought out loud. "In fact, his election could have been engineered for this very act. No one can legally overrule the President...and the Congress can't remove him from office without telling the public what's really going on."

"I really didn't want to hear that," Jack said, his nerves ever more on edge.

"I've been involved in enough political games to recognize a few moves...and any President of the United States willing giving up the stargate is committing the political equivalent of a kamikaze run. He does this and his career is over one way or another."

"Where does that leave me?"

"In the hot seat...as usual," Hammond said, sitting down next to O'Neill.

"I wish it were, sir. I don't have anyone to shoot...or a gun for that matter," Jack said, patting the side of his jeans out of habit.

"Fate rarely comes at a moment of our choosing."

Jack frowned. "Patton?"

"Transformers," Hammond admitted. "The kids make me watch it with them over and over again."

"I'm so angry I'm sick to my stomach," Jack admitted. "I feel totally helpless."

"If you didn't have any control then the President wouldn't have needed you," Hammond reminded him.

"Meaning?"

"You *can* do something...it's just the consequences that are the problem."

"Are you telling me to cause trouble, sir," Jack asked, seeing the irony.

"I don't know of anyone more qualified," Hammond said, placing a hand on his shoulder. "In complete honesty...this may end bad no matter what you do."

Jack pulled a sock hat out of his pocket and twisted it between his hands. "You really think stalling will do any good?"

Hammond nodded cautiously. "If enough people are made aware of what's happening before the gate is actually moved, the President may be forced to change his orders...you might even be let off the hook."

"You don't sound too confident about that last part."

"I'm not. There's no one to plead your case to if the President doesn't bend under the pressure."

"He may still move the gate after I'm locked up."

"Then I suggest you put as much pressure on him as you can."

Jack managed a forced smile. "I wasn't looking forward to retirement part 2 anyway." He checked his watch. "Whatever happens, I've got to get the ball rolling now."

"I wish I could be of more help."

"You already have, sir. I knew from the moment he ordered me to do it that I wasn't going to...I guess I just needed to hear it from you to make sure I'm doing the right thing."

"Sometimes the right thing lands you in jail," Hammond warned.

"Been there, done that," Jack said, some of his swagger back. "Thanks," Jack said, saluting.

Hammond returned the salute. "Whatever happens, I want you to know it's been a honor serving with you...a headache at times, but a honor none the less."

Jack nodded. "Back at you, sir," he said, fishing in his pocket for his transport coin.

"Wait a minute," Hammond said as a thought occurred to him.

"Sir?"

"I'm not sure how much protocol has changed since I left the SGC, but there's one surefire way I know of to send a warning flare out to every agency and country associated with the stargate program."

Jack frowned.

"A lockdown," Hammond told him.

Jack's eyes widened. "I always knew there was the mind of a genius beneath that bald head. Gotta go, sir."

Two seconds later a white flash whisked O'Neill up to the *Phoenix* and out of Hammond's living room. With a precision developed through years of practice Hammond picked up his cordless phone and dialed the switchboard at the Pentagon.

5

"Colonel, we're receiving a transport request from General O'Neill," the Lieutenant at the left bridge control station reported.

"Permission granted," Ronson approved.

"Bridge, sir?" the Lieutenant asked.

Ronson nodded, and a moment later Jack appeared a few feet in front of them.

"You know," the *Phoenix's* commander commented, "I had thought these transport duties were going to be taken over by the moon base?"

"Right now that's the least of our problems," Jack said, not moving. "I need you to send me to the SGC."

"Still can't tell me what's going on?" Ronson asked.

"For your own sake," Jack told him. "You'll hear soon enough."

"Lieutenant?" Ronson said.

O'Neill disappeared in a flash of light.

"Any idea what's going on, sir?" the Lieutenant asked.

"No, but if it has O'Neill worried then it has to be something big."

"End of the world big?"

Ronson shrugged. "It wouldn't be the first time."

"No, sir, I suppose not."

"Keep those coordinates he gave us under surveillance," Ronson ordered. "He may not want to tell us what's going on, but that doesn't mean we can't try and find out for ourselves."

"Yes, sir."

Jack found himself in the middle of a deserted briefing room. "Hello?" he yelled. "Anybody?"

"General?" Landry said, stepping out of his office. "What brings you back to the SGC?"

"Trouble," Jack said plainly. "Where's SG-1?"

"Still offworld chasing down the Chinese...what's wrong."

"I have," Jack checked his watch, "32 minutes before I'm in violation of a Presidential Order to move the gate out of Cheyenne Mountain. After that all hell is going to break loose. I need to know how far we can extend the beaming jammers...over the entire SGC if possible."

Hank was taken aback. "They extend over the entire base automatically when the SGC goes into a lockdown."

"Perfect," Jack said, turning around and heading down the stairs.

"What was that about moving the stargate?" Landry asked, following in his footsteps.

"The President is trying to move the gate out of US custody before anyone notices. The President ordered me to have the *Phoenix* beam the gate out of the SGC within the hour."

"That's borderline treason," Landry whispered as they passed several other people in the hallway at the bottom of the stairs.

"Yes it is," Jack agreed as they stepped into the control room. "Who's the highest ranking team still on base?"

"SG-7," Landry answered.

"Get them up here," Jack ordered.

"Walter," Landry deferred.

"Yes, sir," the gate operator on duty answered. "SG-7 report to the control room," he announced over the base-wide intercom. "SG-7 to the control room."

"Hank, in a few minutes I need you to play receptionist when the phone line gets hot."

"It might help if you slowed down and filled me in first."

"There's not much more to tell," O'Neill said as he waited impatiently for SG-7 to arrive.

"Might as well get the rest of the teams down here too," he added.

"Yes, sir," Walter acknowledged. "All SG teams report to the control room."

"Gate room," Jack corrected him.

"Check that. All SG teams report to the gateroom. All SG teams to the gateroom."

"And hurry," Jack added.

"Make that ASAP," Walter added.

"Can we get back to the part about the President ordering you to move the gate?" Landry pleaded.

"What?" Walter gasped, half turning around. "Sorry, sir."

"No, Walter, I had about the same reaction myself. Thing was he wouldn't let me ask any questions, nor did he bother to tell me where he wanted the gate moved to. He just gave me the coordinates and told me I had exactly 60 minutes to get it moved or face court martial. General Bowerton was with him when he gave the order, so I doubt this is an April fools joke."

"What coordinates?" Landry asked.

"I had the *Phoenix* check...turns out its some brand spanking new facility in Egypt of all places."

"Egypt?! I didn't know we had any bases in Egypt?"

"We don't...least not that I know of."

Landry thought fast. "Well who else would..."

"Now you're catching on," Jack noted.

"The I.O.A.," Landry said, biting off each letter.

"That'd be my guess."

"And the President is working with them..."

"Or for them," Jack added. "Doesn't matter right now. What does matter is that gate doesn't leave this facility under any circumstances. Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly," Landry echoed as SG-7 came running into the gateroom while its commander charged up into the control room.

"What's up?" Colonel Larson asked hurriedly, noticing General O'Neil's presence. "Sir," he added with a curt nod.

"Trouble, Gary," Jack said stepping over to him and grabbing his shoulder. He whispered in his ear.

"Quietly take your team and arm them for base defense, stunners only, then stand guard over the armory ready to take down anyone that tries to gear up without my permission over the radio. We've got an internal power struggle brewing and I don't know who'll take whose side."

Larson pulled back enough to look Jack in the eye. "You can count on SG-7 to have your back, sir."

"Thanks," Jack said as the Colonel left to get his men as the other SG teams began filling into the gateroom.

"If the President issued the order," Landry said quietly after Larson left, "then we're in a very sticky situation."

"I know," Jack said, way ahead of him. "We're violating the chain of command...but if we let the gate go, we're not going to get it back again short of going to war."

"True," Landry agreed. "Alright, how do you want to play this?"

"I'm the crazed General refusing the follow orders...you're the middleman trying to work out a solution while letting everyone know exactly what's going on and how it jeopardizes national security."

Landry nodded. "I can do that, but it leaves you holding the bag."

"As always," Jack muttered. "Walter...initiate a full lockdown of the base."

"Sir?...yes, sir," he said, getting his wits about him. A moment later the base alarm sounded.

"Make sure the jammers are up and stay up," Jack ordered Landry. "If they can beam us out at will this is going to be a very short standoff."

"Walter..." Landry began as Jack jogged out of the control room and met the on-base SG teams on the gateroom floor.

"Alright...listen up!" Jack said in full badass mode. "The President had turned traitor on us. Not forty minutes ago he ordered me to quietly move the stargate out of Cheyenne Mountain to what we think is an I.O.A. facility in Egypt. He gave me exactly one hour to get it beamed over or face court martial. I think he intended to catch everyone off guard and get the gate moved before anyone knew about it...but that didn't happen. I'm not moving the stargate. It's the single most important piece of our national security...hell, planetary security, that we possess."

"Right now the President is probably royally pissed off, and I'm not exactly sure what's going to happen. He's not going to get the midnight coup he expected, but if he is set on this course of action he may be willing to go to further lengths...possibly an assault on the SGC to deactivate the jamming devices preventing our ships from beaming out the gate. If you hadn't noticed, the base has just gone into lockdown and will stay that way until I'm assured that the President or others aren't going to steal the gate."

"Worst case scenario, he sends an assault force, in which case I need your help to keep them out. Technically he outranks me, but at this point we're past the chain of command. This is blatant treason and we cannot let this gate go," Jack emphasized by turning around and pointing at the heavy ring behind him. "Do you understand?"

The SG teams snapped to attention. "Yes, sir," they said in unison.

"Good," Jack said, nodding. He hadn't expected any less from the SG teams, but he hadn't felt secure until he'd heard it from them himself. "For any of you poetic types...and you know who you are...the SGC just became the Alamo."

Déjà vu: Part 2

1

"There," Teal'c said quietly, pointing towards some brush.

Mitchell frowned. "You sure?"

"I am," he said with certainty.

"Alright," Cam whispered in the dead of night, "The three amigas stay here, you and I will check it out," he said, glancing back at Carter.

She nodded and turned back to look at the other two women. "Tri-point around the gate," she ordered, referring to a defensive formation. "Keep it loose."

"Got it," Vala echoed, moving off about twenty meters to the north of the gate. Carter took southwest and Jennifer Hailey took southeast as Mitchell and Teal'c followed the invisible trail off toward the northwest with the Jaffa in the lead.

Cam held up a hand as Teal'c moved a branch to his left and let it snap back. The Colonel caught it and moved on in a crouch beneath some overhanging vines. The entire planet was covered in dense foliage with an oppressive atmosphere that made the whole area feel like one giant greenhouse. Even in the moonlit night the moisture in the hot air was suffocating. Cam didn't want to be around when the sun came up... whenever that would be.

Teal'c stopped and knelt with an upraised fist that unraveled into a pointed finger that tilted toward the ground.

"I see it," Cam said, noticing the subtle boot print. "Good eyes."

"The trail is haphazard," Teal'c noted, "they haven't come this way before."

Cam lifted his head and looked around, not really seeing anything beyond a couple of meters in the wisps of moonlight breaking through the short canopy. "Plan B?"

"It would seem so," Teal'c agreed.

"How far you guess?"

Teal'c grunted and walked forward.

"Is that far or close?" he asked, still a whisper.

"Close," Teal'c confirmed as he turned to the left and pulled back a lock of vines. On the ground was a wad of prints and several cigarette butts.

"Hmnn," Cam mumbled. "Interesting."

"Indeed," Teal'c said as he pointed further off to the left. "It appears they doubled back."

"How many?"

"At least three."

"Go," Mitchell said, fingering his radio's call button. "Heads up. These guys may be closer than we thought."

"Copy that," Carter's voice came back. "No activity here."

"Roger," Cam said, following a couple of steps behind Teal'c.

A few minutes later Teal'c stopped them again, this time with his staff weapon raised...but as soon as he pointed the tip forward he lowered it back down.

"What?"

"Hailey," Teal'c answered, standing up and pushing his way through more brush and vines.

"They came all the way back," Mitchell said aloud, catching the freshly minted Major's attention.

"No joy?" Hailey asked from afar.

"Looks like a wild goose hunt to me," he said as they met up in a small clearing beneath a gnarly tree. "They probably hid out here for a while then dialed another address," he said, getting on his radio. "Pull back to the gate," he ordered.

The three waded through the underbrush back towards the obscured gate as the other two members of SG-1 did likewise and became visible through the break in vegetation around the gate...but Teal'c soon broke off from the group.

"Find anything?" Carter asked.

"Trail doubled back," he told her. "Feel like digging through the DHD again?"

She winced. "Not really."

"There's gotta be some way to find the last address dialed," Cam argued.

"The new software can get us within ten, but we're still going to have to check them all out, but there's no way for me to tell which is which."

"The Ori knew a way," Cam noted.

"Colonel Mitchell!" Teal'c's voice boomed from the other side of the gate and out of sight.

Cam turned around. "Where is he?"

"Over there," Vala said, leading the way.

Not far off, but through a maze of plants, roots, and soggy holes they found Teal'c kneeling over a small clearing the size of a couple of phone booths.

"What did you find?" Cam asked.

Teal'c rapped a knuckle on something hard.

"Rings," Carter guessed in the dim light.

"Indeed," Teal'c confirmed.

"So the Chinese didn't leave the planet?" Vala said aloud what everyone else was thinking.

"There has to be an activation button," Hailey said.

Carter nodded. "She's right. If they fled Osser in a hurry they wouldn't have had time to grab a remote. There's gotta be something around here for them to use."

"Fan out," Mitchell ordered, activating his flashlight. The rest of SG-1 did likewise, no longer worried about being spotted. Wherever this set of rings led was probably far off or underground, either of which would be out of sight.

"Jack," Landry said, stepping out of his office. "The President is on the phone."

O'Neill checked his watch. He technically still had three minutes till deadline, but triggering the lockdown had washed that formality away. "Not interested."

Landry nodded. "I told him you'd assumed command and taken me out of the loop."

"Anyone else call yet?"

"Three automatic responses from the CIA, NID, and Homeworld Security. I've got another from the FBI on hold until I finish with the President. I promised to personally tell you you're in direct violation of a Presidential Order and relieve you of command."

"Funny...I don't feel relieved."

"Just going through the motions...plausible deniability and all."

"Yes, please all you need to. If this goes south I don't want it landing on anyone besides me," Jack said in earnest.

Landry nodded. "Attempt to relieve you of command failed. I'll inform the President."

"Send him my worst," O'Neill joked as a pair of Colonels jogged up the stairwell into the briefing room where Jack sat alone at the long table. He raised his eyebrows at them.

"Lockdown is confirmed," Colonel Herreson said a little out of breath. "All entrances have guards posted in case they try and force their way in."

"All secondary personnel have been confined to quarters," Larson added. "They're not very happy about it, but they're staying put voluntarily. I've got guards posted in case we need to lock them in."

Jack nodded. "Any holdouts?"

Larson half smiled. "None, sir."

"Put additional guards on the beaming jammers. If those are sabotaged then the 304s can pull us out at will...and if they do manage to infiltrate the base that'll be one of their top priorities."

"Sir," Herreson asked, "are there any other alien transportation devices on base?"

"Good question," Jack said, glancing at Larson who shrugged in response. "Walter!" Jack yelled.

A few moments later the gate technician scurried up the stairwell in a hustle. "Yes, sir?" he said nervously.

"Breathe first, Chief."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," Walter said heaving more from agitation than exertion. The lockdown had put many people in the SGC on edge. Alien incursion was one thing, but turning against their own President was something new entirely.

"Now..." O'Neill said slowly. "Do we have any alien gizmos lying around that will allow someone to access the SGC from the outside? Any rings or something like that?"

Walter thought hard for ten seconds. "I don't think so, sir. All of that sort of thing usually goes to Area 51."

Jack nodded. "Check on it anyway, will ya?"

"Of course, sir," he said, waiting.

"Dismissed," O'Neill belatedly added.

"Yes, sir," Walter said, hurrying off.

Jack exchanged glances with the two Colonels. "Everybody else like that?"

"A lot of the civilians are," Herreson admitted.

"Not the SG teams," Larson said solidly. "They're committed."

"Keep me posted," O'Neill said, nodding. "If anyone so much as sneezes I want to know."

"Yes, sir," the Colonels said together before heading back down the stairs. Once they were gone Jack could faintly hear Landry's voice on the phone with someone other than the President, based on the tone of his voice.

Jack leaned back in his seat and twiddled his thumbs a few times in obvious protest to the waiting...he preferred taking direct action, and no matter how much the desk job had tried to suck the life out of him it'd failed to change his basic nature.

Senator Jefferson was reclining in an oversized chair in the club lobby, relishing his recent victory on the golf course as he sipped brandy with the two other congressmen and a lawyer that hadn't fared so well on their outing when an aid approached him with a phone in hand.

Jefferson frowned. "Tell me it's not Jenkins again?"

"No, sir. He says he's an old acquaintance of yours...a George Hammond. He says it's a matter of national security."

The elderly Senator's face hardened. "If you'll excuse me," he told the other members of his party as he stood up and took the phone, "I need to take this in private."

Congressman Rawlings waved him off casually until the name got past the brandy. "Did you say Hammond?"

"I'll let you know," Jefferson said quietly as he walked off. The other congressman and lawyer were oblivious to the name and were committed to not letting the interruption spoil their moment of relaxation.

Jefferson walked over to one of the golf club's panoramic windows in what was an empty section of the enormous lounge. "Jefferson," he said into the phone.

"Senator," Hammond's voice said calmly but urgently across the communications network. "We have a situation."

"I thought you'd retired, General?"

"I am, but a situation has come to my attention that I can't overlook. Jack O'Neill just received an order from the President to move the stargate outside the United States."

"What?!" Jefferson asked, not believing he'd heard right.

"I spoke with him just a few minutes ago. The President threatened him with court martial if he didn't have the gate transferred via beaming technology inside of the hour. You should know that O'Neill intends to disobey that order."

"Are you sure the order came from the President and not just in the President's name?" Jefferson asked, his mind racing through possible scenarios.

"He told me he receiving the order from the President, in person, inside the White House."

"Dear god," was all Jefferson could say.

"I promised O'Neill I'd get the word out while he buys time," Hammond added.

"Good work," Jefferson said, composing his mind into a course of action. "We won't let the President get away with this. I'll call for an emergency meeting of the Senate...at least those with clearance anyway," he added, almost as an afterthought.

"I'll leave you to it then," Hammond said. "I've got some more calls to make."

"Thank you for the tip, General. God...it looks like O'Neill may have saved our asses again. That man must have balls of steel."

"He does," Hammond agreed, "but right now he's on the wrong side of the chain of command."

"I understand," Jefferson said, nodding even though Hammond couldn't see. "I owe you one, General," he said hanging up. He walked back to the lounge chairs in a hurry.

"We have to go, now!" he told Rawlings.

"What's wrong?" Congressman Reynolds asked, half drunk.

"Nothing you need to worry about," Jefferson assured him as he pulled Rawlings away by the elbow.

"Aliens?" Rawlings whispered.

"Worse," Jefferson told him as they headed for the door with his aid following a step behind. "We have to call an emergency session now."

"Now now?" Rawlings asked. "As in tonight?"

"Within the hour," Jefferson told him as a car was pulling up in front for them, no doubt summoned by the astute aid.

Rawlings pulled his arm free of Jefferson's grasp. "You can't get them there that fast."

"No choice," Jefferson said, climbing in the back ahead of Rawlings. He waited until the door closed before adding, "We'll have the 304s beam them in from wherever they are."

"Tell me what's happened," Rawlings demanded as the car began to drive away in a hurry with the aid giving directions from the front seat. The back compartment was sealed so no breach of security was an issue with the driver.

"The President tried to move the stargate out of the country, but O'Neill balked."

Rawlings' face soured. "He can't do that without our approval."

"He just tried," Jefferson reaffirmed, "and if we don't hurry he might still succeed."

Rawlings just looked at the Senator with a blank face for a few seconds, then suddenly pulled out his own cell phone. He dialed a preset number and waited for a connection.

"Rawlings, code 327," he told the person on the other end of the secure line. "Put me through to whoever's in command at Homeworld Security. I need to arrange some immediate transport for members of Congress."

2

Four hours into the lockdown the surface hatch of one of the emergency exit shafts was forcibly opened and two canisters of tear gas were dropped over the edge. The canisters clanked against the walls and ladder until they hit bottom and rattled around for half a second before spewing out an ever thickening cloud of poisonous gas.

Through that gas a long line of black clad, mask wearing special ops teams climbed down the ladder as far as they could until they were backed up in the shaft waiting for the bottom man to burn his way through the hinges of the locked hatch and gain access to the SGC through the 'back door' rather than trying to cut their way through the foot-thick main door on the surface.

After thirty seconds of work the hinges melted through and the door popped ajar. The first man in position kicked open the heavy door halfway before it stuck in place. The gas poured out like a thick mist ahead of the trooper as he edged his way through the gap and into the corridor.

He couldn't see past the cloud until he'd taken three steps and moved into less foggy air...where he caught an intar round in the chest.

It didn't fully penetrate his flak jacket, but the combination of four more tiny energy blasts soaked enough energy through to render him unconscious before he could fire a shot. His finger, however, managed to depress as he fell and peppered the wall with a cascade of ricocheting bullets, one of which hit the man in the left calf before the butt of the gun hit the ground and bounced clear of his hand.

The sound of gunfire, both energy and projectile, prompted the assault team to double time it out of the gap and return fire...but since they had to move out in single file they made perfect targets for the pair of SG teams stationed at either side of the entrance. They'd made a hasty pull back when the gas began pouring out, but had retaken defensive positions further down the hallway lying prone on their chests, aiming upward into the cloud.

The teams alternated constant fire as they changed clips one at a time off sequence so as to not allow the invaders a chance to gain a foothold. Most of the assault team didn't make it outside the cloud, which was continuing to spread out and giving the SG teams some trouble, but the canisters had already depleted themselves and what was in the air was already thinning out considerably.

SG-12 and SG-17 kept up the fire of their stun rounds until the cloud dissipated enough that they could see their fellow teams through a gap in the stack of black clothed bodies cluttering the surface exit. Having kept low to the ground, all friendly fire had traveled through the cloud at knee to chest height and impacted on the ceiling above the opposing team, keeping them safe from each other's cross fire and keeping them below the few bullets that the special ops teams had blindly returned fire with.

Both teams rose to a knee stand while SG-12 sent one man ahead to check out the entrance. He stepped over several bodies before tucking his gun around the corner and spraying a few shots into the shaft, exposing nothing more than his weapon and hand. He pulled the fake P-90 back across his chest...listened...then took a quick glance around the corner.

He took a second peek, then stepped over the back of a downed man and inspected the bottom of the shaft. No one was present...stunned or otherwise. All that remained were the two empty gas canisters.

Not wanting to expose himself by looking up the shaft, the man wrenched the door shut, but with the hinges cut it wouldn't go back all the way. Only the lock held it in place, but it was clearly off center and not matching up to the opening in the wall.

"Get a welding team up here," Colonel Mathison ordered. "And some barricades. They might try again."

One of his team members nodded and got on his radio.

"They were firing live rounds," Colonel Frankfort reminded him.

"Yeah...considerate of them, wasn't it."

Frankfort hefted his intar. "And we've got these?"

"Worked well enough," Mathison argued. "And we don't have to hesitate."

Frankfort snorted. "I didn't see them hesitate either."

"No...they didn't," SG-17's leader said, the worry evident in his voice.

"We're supposed to be on the same side," Frankfort argued, gesturing to the unconscious men beneath their feet that the other team members were disarming and dragging off to the side.

Mathison noticed one of the downed men's hand flexing. He pointed his intar at the man's forehead and delivered another shot. "Somebody doesn't think so."

Frankfort shook his head. "I don't like where this is heading."

"Neither do I, but we're not the ones using live rounds."

"I can't believe the President ordered this. Someone else must be pulling the strings."

"Doesn't matter. We've got a job to do either way."

Frankfort nodded once. "Brig?"

"Radio for another team to come get them. We can't let our guard down. These guys seem to want in here pretty bad...and right now the door won't shut."

"You calling it in?"

"We might not be the only one?" Mathison echoed his fellow Colonel's thoughts as he grabbed his radio's call button. "Mathison to General O'Neill."

"O'Neill...what do ya got?"

"Assault team came down number four shaft. We stopped them, no casualties...but they were firing live rounds. One of their own men took a hit in the leg."

"Get him down to the infirmary under guard. Once they patch him up transfer him to a holding cell."

"Any other activity, sir?"

"Shaft two got hit five minutes ago," O'Neill told him. "Lieutenant Rathbone took one in the arm, but SG-7 and 18 kept them out."

"Good to know, sir. We'll continue to keep them out here, but we could use a couple barricades if they come back again in larger numbers."

"Way ahead of you," O'Neill informed him. "Equipment is already on the way. Couple one way shield generators too."

"That'd be useful if we're going to be dodging bullets."

"Yeah..." O'Neill said oddly.

"Not your fault, sir," Mathison said firmly. "We didn't draw first blood. They did."

"Never said it was," O'Neill smarted back, "...but thanks."

"You do what you need to, General...we've got your back all the way."

"Probably better seal that shaft permanently," Jack suggested.
"Already have a welding team enroute," Mathison assured him.

"Good," O'Neill said from the briefing room on one of six radios lying out on the table, "by the way, did they use gas?"

"That's an affirmative," Colonel Mathison's voice answered back.

"Your team alright?" Jack asked.

"Couple blurry eyes, but that's the worst of it. We managed to pull back in time."

"There's some gas masks in the equipment package coming up, along with a medic. Have your men checked out just in case."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

"Anything else to add?"

"No, sir. That just about covers it."

"Good work up there, Colonel. O'Neill out," he finished, putting the radio back on the table before slamming his fist down alongside it.

"Jack..." Landry said quietly from behind him. O'Neill hadn't noticed he'd come out of his office.

"What?"

"We've lost all communications with the outside."

O'Neill looked up at him. "Everything?"

Landry nodded. "I was on the phone with General Neville when the lines were cut. I had Siler check, and it looks like they cut the hard lines at the surface as well as jammed the mobile signals."

"What did the General have to say?" Jack said, not dwelling on the worsening situation.

"He said you were out of line, but he was livid when I told him about the assault. I think he was coming over to our side when we were cut off."

"Now we can't get the word out," Jack said, running his hands through his hair in frustration.

"You can look at it this way," Landry said, sitting down in a chair next to him. "If they're cutting off communications, we must have started to get through to somebody. The fact that they assaulted the SGC no less than four hours after lockdown suggests they're in a hurry. If we can hold them off a while longer the President's political enemies may eat him alive."

"But we have no way of knowing what's going on out there?"

"No...we don't. We don't even have the surface surveillance cameras anymore. We're totally blind."

"Well," Jack said sarcastically as he stood up, "if I'm going to end up being General Custer, the least I can do is dress the part," he said, referring to the civilian clothes he was still wearing.

"If I may?" Landry asked.

"May what?"

"You look like you could use some sleep," Landry said gently.

"Yeah, well now's not the time."

"This could drag on a long time, Jack. I'll look after things for a few hours while you grab a cat nap."

Jack looked off to the side in thought, then turned back with a lowered head.

"When's the last time you slept?" Hank asked.

"Before I went to Dakara," O'Neill admitted.

"Geez, Jack. You've got to be running on empty by now."

"Coffee, actually," O'Neill corrected him. "Two hours...and I'll keep a radio on me."

"Make it three," Landry insisted.

"Two," O'Neill ordered. "Wake me if I oversleep."

"Two," Landry agreed, walking back to his office. "Maybe then you'll be clear headed enough to realize you need more sleep."

"Funny," O'Neill said to his back as he walked back into his office where his once active phone was now dead to the outside world. Jack turned to the stairwell and headed down to his semi-permanent quarters on base where he kept several spare uniforms and other odds and ends for use on his trips out from Washington.

He put the radio he'd taken from the briefing room on his lamp stand and put it on the 'all channel' feature so he'd hear anything and everything that was going on in the facility. Right now the channels were clear, but he kept the volume up high just in case he nodded off further than he planned.

Jack pulled off his jacket and sneakers and laid down on his bed, thinking he'd stay awake and mentally run through his next move, but as soon as his head hit the pillow the mounting fatigue surged past the adrenaline and pulled his eyelids down almost against his will. Thirty seconds later and he was sound asleep.

"Found it," Vala announced, pointing her gun-mounted flashlight at a small metal box set at the base of one of the tree trunks. On top of it was what looked like a foot pad...and it was a mere three steps away from the 'front' of the rings.

"Now what?" Carter asked.

"We take a look," Mitchell told her.

Sam raised her eyebrows. "We have no idea what we'd be walking into."

Mitchell looked at her softly. "I'm open to ideas."

"I will go," Teal'c declared.

"You're just a bigger target," Hailey argued.

Teal'c raised an eyebrow in the dim moonlight but didn't say anything. Instead he pulled off his pack and retrieved a small armband from the main pouch.

"How long have you had that?" Mitchell asked.

"A while," the Jaffa answered.

"Is that a Sodan cloaking device?" Vala asked.

"It is," Teal'c answered.

"What about the radiation?" Carter argued.

"I am Jaffa."

"Your Tretonin?" Vala guessed.

"Indeed," Teal'c said as he slipped on the forearm gauntlet.

"I'm not sure it works that way Teal'c," Carter warned.

"I will be fine," he assured her.

"Do you know that for a fact," Carter asked, "or are you just guessing?"

"It is not the first time," Teal'c told her.

"Doesn't mean there aren't long term effects."

"I will be fine," Teal'c reiterated.

"Alright," Mitchell decided. "Ring in, look around for a few seconds, then we'll ring you back out. If it's clear we'll all go in."

"Why not just radio if it's clear?" Hailey asked.

"We don't know where it will go," Carter told her. "Could be the other side of the planet."

"Right," Hailey said, mentally kicking herself for asking such a stupid question.

Teal'c walked into the center of the rings and activated his cloak. "I am ready," his voice said from nowhere.

Vala stepped on the button and five seconds later the rings exposed themselves from the ground niche and transported the invisible Teal'c somewhere.

"Not up," Vala commented at the lack of visual streak that appeared when two rings connected. It wasn't much, but in the nighttime it would have stood out in stark contrast to the dark vegetation.

"Subterranean?" Hailey offered.

Carter nodded. "Probably...or lateral transition across the horizon."

"Due to the curvature of the planet's surface," the younger Captain added.

"Well, that's probably long enough," Vala said aloud before stepping on the button again.

The rings returned and deposited nothing back into the forest. A moment later Teal'c became visible again. "Come...it is clear, but I know not how long that will remain the case."

The three members of SG-1 all clustered inside the rings around Teal'c while Vala remained over the button. "Ready?"

"Do it," Mitchell ordered.

Vala stepped on the button then darted over to the small hole they'd left for her in the formation. It was a tight fit, but Vala's petite form didn't take up very much space. A second later the rings activated for a third time and whisked them all away.

3

The rings deposited SG-1 at the end of a long, deserted Earth-style hallway. There were no doors or connecting shafts for ten meters or so...just a long kill zone had anyone been waiting for them. Fortunately there wasn't.

"Teal'c," Mitchell said behind the butt of his P-90.

The Jaffa stepped forward and disappeared from view beneath his Sodan cloak and went forward to scout the area.

Cam gave him a silent three count then cautiously proceeded down the squarish hallway up to the nearest door. He gently pulled down on the handle but found it firmly locked. There was no window in the door, just a small swipe card lock next to where the bolt would be.

The Colonel nodded ahead and the four visible members of SG-1 continued their slow, methodical steps trying to stay as silent as possible. The corridors were dead quiet, making even the slightest boot strikes echo loudly. Cam and the others were heel/toeing it awkwardly to try and eliminate that sound both to avoid detection and to keep their own hearing clear so they could detect others within the facility...or whatever it was.

Somehow Teal'c wasn't making a sound...whether it was the Jaffa's skill or some function of the Sodan cloak Mitchell wasn't sure, but right now Teal'c was a ghost.

Probably the cloak, he mentally concluded.

A narrow arch marked the junction with another corridor branching off to the right. Teal'c hadn't signaled them so Cam assumed it was clear and poked his head around briefly to confirm that fact.

Clear...long and clear, actually. The corridor stretched an unbelievably long way until it seemed to end in some heavy doors...or concrete wall. Mitchell wasn't sure which. He glanced back and forth between the two options, finally deciding not to turn. He waved the others forward.

"Ow!" Vala said when she suddenly ran into a force shield.

"What the hell?" Mitchell said as Hailey ran the tip of her P-90 across the invisible barrier separating them from Sam and Cam. It sparkled orange on touch, then vanished when she lowered her weapon.

"Oh, that's not good," Sam commented.

Suddenly the silence was broken by an ominous hissing sound.

"Get back to the rings," Cam told them quickly.

Vala hesitated but Hailey ran backwards the moment he issued the order.

"Go..." Mitchell yelled, prompting her to move as well. She looked ahead at the rings, wondering if there was even an activation button when Hailey reached the end of the hall and bounced off another shield that was blocking them from their exit.

"No good," Vala called back. "Maybe you can get out another way."

"Carter!" Mitchell ordered, pointing down the side hallway. He was already starting to feel faint as he slowly ran off the other way. His vision started to blur as he heard another shield impact and a high pitched grunt that he assumed was Carter.

The next thing he knew his knees buckled and he slumped against the wall. A few seconds later he blacked out.

"Sheppard," McKay said, surprised as he passed him in the hallway.

"Rodney," John said with a nod as he walked by.

"Haven't seen you for a while," McKay commented.

Sheppard stopped a couple feet past Rodney and turned around to face him. "Busy, busy," he replied.

"Yes, who isn't these days? Where are you off to?"

"Primary chair room," John said, seeming to be in a hurry.

"Primary?"

"We added three more," he said, half turning to leave.

"Wait a minute...what are you going there for?" he said quickly as the now snobby Alterran began to drift back down the hallway.

"It's time," John said, turning away and walking on.

"Time? Time for what?" McKay yelled after him.

"To return home."

"Home?!" McKay burst out and chased after him.

Seven minutes later Rodney stood in the doorway to the chair room as Sheppard slid into the blue/white seat. It lit up upon physical contact with his Ancient physiology and he leaned back comfortably.

"Are we sure about this?" Rodney asked.

"All part of the plan," John said, materializing a large hologram of the desert above the chair for Rodney's sake. Mentally he activated the city-wide intercom. "Attention citizens of Atlantis...and Asgard guests. In a few moments the city will be lifting off from the surface. Don't be alarmed if you start to see stars out the windows instead of sand. However, I recommend that everyone stay inside the city walls and not on the surface. The atmosphere will remain steady within the shield, but I'd feel better if you guys weren't hitting golf balls off the balcony while we're in transit. Other than that and the stargate being offline, normal operations will continue in all areas. Sit back and relax...this should be a smooth ride."

"Golf?" McKay asked.

John adjusted the hologram and zoomed in on one small section of the city. Four men and two women were picking up clubs and buckets of balls off the platform and retreating indoors.

"Oh...I thought we stopped doing that when we ran out of water."

"Nope," John said as he warmed up the city's stardrive, "now we send a replicator out to fetch the balls back."

"How ingenious," McKay dryly commented.

"I thought so," John said mirthfully as the hologram reset to a citywide view overtop the sprawling infrastructure on the planet's surface. The single Terra built beneath the city had grown out into several hundred structures that housed the planet's mining infrastructure, all of which held back the blowing sand with thin protective shields. The structures themselves were hardy enough not to be damaged by the environment, but there was a very real possibility that over time they could be completely buried by the slowly moving dunes that the planet had been named after. The shields kept this from happening as well as covering the small spaceport that had been constructed just north of the Terra.

McKay crossed his arms over his chest. "Tell me that wasn't your idea?"

"Guilty as charged," John admitted. "You wouldn't believe how long I can drive nowadays."

"Ancient muscles and all," McKay guessed jealously.

"Alterrnan muscles," John corrected him. "By the way, how close are you to breaking 20 minutes?"

"24:57 if you must know," Rodney said grumpily.

"Eight minute pace?"

"I apologize," McKay mocked, "if my overwhelming intellect took the lion's share of the talent away from my body."

"That's just an excuse."

"Says the superhuman."

"If there's one thing I've learned from all the neural downloads, it's that you can customize your body an awful lot if you know how to train properly."

"I'm sorry," Rodney said with just a hint of desperation in his voice, "but I don't think I can handle more than 5 miles a day."

John lifted his head up off the chair in surprise. "You're running *five* a day?"

"Yeah," Rodney said sheepishly, "for what little good it does."

"Have you even read the training manuals?" John criticized him.

"Skimmed them, why?"

"You're training for 3.1 miles, not five."

"So?"

"You're not getting more speed because you're going too far."

"Meaning what?" Rodney said, perking up a bit, but also very confused.

"Use Hi/Lo training," John suggested.

"Never heard of it."

"High speed, Low drag," the Alterran explained. "Set the pace computer to...7min pace. Then see how far you can last at that speed."

"7min pace is 21:42 for 5k," McKay quickly calculated.

"Training and racing, Rodney."

"So what, I just keep at it until I can make 5k?"

"No, you get a mile in each day, or half a mile, or whatever it is you can handle right now and let your body adjust to the higher rate of turnover...then you start increasing the distance up to 2 or 2.5 miles. Once you get there," Sheppard continued, "you don't go farther, you go faster, and faster, and faster."

"Until I get up to 20min 5k speed," Rodney said, starting to catch on. "Then I, what? Take a leap of faith and hope I can stretch it out the rest of the way?"

"The adrenaline of a time trial will enhance your workout speed...not to mention taking a couple of days easy before you try. Easy by going shorter, not slower."

"Why hasn't anybody mentioned this before?"

John shrugged. "It's all in the database."

"Truth be told, whenever I'm in the unsecured section of the database," he said with mild rebuke over not having access to the more sensitive information, "I usually browse through the scientific stuff."

"You really ought to read more," Sheppard suggested.

"Yeah, well that's funny coming from someone who's downloaded most of his knowledge."

"Ok then, download more."

"You won't let me!" McKay protested.

"Sure we will," John mocked. "Right after you earn it."

McKay slumped back against the wall. "What is it with Ancients and rites of passage anyway?"

"It's just part of our mojo," John said, concentrating. "Star drive's ready. Here we go."

Up in the control tower Elizabeth felt a slight rumbling coming from deep inside the ship a moment before the horizon seemed to drop out of existence. On impulse, and in defiance of Sheppard's warning, she walked over to the nearest balcony and went outside.

She hung her torso over the railing and watched the surface of Dune and the settlement shrink away beneath them. It didn't matter how many times Atlantis moved through space from planet to planet...she was awestruck every time she witnessed the transition.

She was in a flying city...A FLYING CITY! Even though she now worked alongside the people who had built Atlantis in the first place she still marveled at the Ancient's ingenuity and power. She realized just how much of the Lantean's strength had come not from their own making, but from the Alterra and how the line between first generation Ancient and second generation Ancient had been blurred beyond recognition.

Well, now that she was an Ancient too, junior grade anyway, that difference stood out in stark contrast to her previous perspective and opinions. She was truly blessed to be in the position she was in now, and despite all the heartaches and tribulations that she'd endured since being called to the White House only a handful of years ago to be told about the stargate program, she wouldn't have done anything differently had she the chance again. She was living a dream...and had never been more content.

Suddenly her mind flashed back to her many failures and the ones that had been lost.

"Ok," she whispered as the city left the atmosphere and the stars began to shine in the blackness around them, "maybe some things I'd do differently."

Elizabeth waited on the balcony until Atlantis made the jump into hyperspace and the planet disappeared into a wash of blue/white, then she returned inside, back to the command platform and her duties as city leader.

It was good to be an Ancient.

O'Neill woke to someone shaking his shoulder.

For a moment he was groggy, but when his mind transitioned from the dream realm back into the current situation he sat up bolt straight and recognized Landry's face.

"How long have I been out?"

"Eight hours."

Jack frowned. "I said wake me in TWO HOURS!"

Landry shrugged. "Technically you're no longer my commanding officer. I can do what I want."

O'Neill narrowed his eyes as his mind fully defogged. "What's happened."

"Nothing until three minutes ago. You better get dressed and see this for yourself."

Four minutes later a fully uniformed General O'Neill ran up the steps into the control room where Landry and Colonel Larson were waiting for him.

"They're cutting through the main door," Larson said, pointing at a small video screen.

"I thought we lost all surface telemetry?" O'Neill asked.

"We did," Landry confirmed. "It came back on when they started cutting."

"Accidently?" Jack said, not believing it.

"Probably hoping we'll get the message and surrender," Larson commented.

"Fat chance," Jack said under his breath. "How about the phones?"

"Still out," Landry confirmed.

Jack tilted his chin toward the screen. "How long?"

"Siler?" Landry barked.

"Based on conservative estimates," the technician said, appearing from the background, "at least twelve hours."

Jack nodded. "Then we give Hammond another twelve hours."

"Hammond?" Landry asked.

"I talked to him before I came here. He promised he'd do his best to get the word out...and right now he's our only mouthpiece."

"Good thinking," Landry said in approval.

"And in twelve hours?" Larson asked.

"We'll jump off that bridge when we come to it," Jack answered.

"Yes, sir."

"In the mean time, see what kind of barricades we can put up over the main door. Maybe buy us a few more hours."

"Siler," Landry ordered.

"Yes, sir. Already on it," he said, disappearing from view.

"Feeling better," Landry half whispered.

Jack thought for a moment. "Hungry, actually."

"Walter," Landry said over his shoulder. "If anything happens we'll be in the commissary."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm hungry too," Hank said. "Plus, all we can do right now is wait."

"Be glad for the company," Jack admitted.

"You know," Jack said over a piece of pie, "sometimes I wonder if things wouldn't be different if we just told the planet about the stargate."

Landry looked up from his own dessert, a piece of chocolate cake. "You can't be serious?"

Jack gulped another piece. "Why not?"

"Riots, for one."

"Over what?" Jack argued. "In my *vast* experience people usually riot when they're being screwed over in some way."

"You don't think being lied to counts as being screwed?" Landry asked.

"Not to that level, no."

Landry shook his head. "I think you're being a bit optimistic of human nature...besides, politicians would still run the show either way. Not sure what we'd gain from the revelation."

"I know..." Jack admitted in defeat. "It just feels disingenuous somehow."

"Big word..."

"Yeah, well, my desk has one of these word-a-day calendars..." Jack said, shrugging.

"You can save the world from destruction," Landry said, taking a guess, "but you can't be honest with them."

Jack's head came up slightly. "Exactly."

"It's crossed my mind too," Landry said, slicing off another piece of chocolate fluff.

"And?"

"I try not to dwell on it," he said, putting the piece into his mouth. "Na-ture of the business we're in."

"Rookie," Jack said, eating another piece of pie.

"Rookie?" Landry said, taking slight offense. "How much longer do I have to be in command of the SGC before I lose that moniker?"

"How many times have you saved the planet?"

Landry laughed. "You have a point."

A crackle of static broke through the din followed by Walter's voice. "General Landry to the gateroom. Repeat, General Landry to the gateroom."

Both Generals dropped their forks and left the remains of their desserts on the table.

"What have we got, Walter?" Landry asked, two steps ahead of O'Neill.

"Sir, SG-3 just returned from offworld."

"I've got it," Jack said, turning around. He met Colonel Reynolds and company at the door exiting the gateroom.

"General," Reynolds greeted him as O'Neill stopped their forward progress with an upraised hand.

"Long story short...President tried to steal the gate...we're in lockdown buying time for the politicians and brass to chew his head off."

"Did you say 'steal' the gate, sir?" Reynolds said carefully.

"I did...they've already tried to breach security in two locations and are in the process of cutting through the main door right now."

"I don't believe it."

"Believe it or not, it's happening. Get cleaned up and rearmed with intars. We need you on the line."

"Yes, sir," Reynolds said, snapping into action mode. "Let's go," he said over his shoulder to the other members of his unit.

"General," Landry's voice echoed through the gateroom. "We've had communications reinstated."

"Odd," Jack whispered to himself as he reversed direction and climbed back into the control room.

"The phone lines just opened up...all of them. This came through first," Landry told him warily as he handed him a printout. On it was a message from the President.

Your attempted coup has failed, General O'Neill. The Congress has chosen not to oppose my decision to move the stargate and the military leaders you tried to woo to your side have capitulated as well. Surrender the SGC immediately and I'll let you retire without penalty. Continue this siege and you will be going to jail for the rest of your life.

- President of the United States Frank Cornwallis

Jack chewed on his cheek for a moment then crunched the paper up into a wad, threw it on the floor, and stomped on it several times in comical frustration. Eventually he stopped and looked around at the gazes he was getting from the control room staff.

"Feel better?" Landry asked, sensing O'Neill's thespianism.

"A little," Jack admitted. "Get on the horn and check this out."

"You think they're bluffing?"

Jack pointed to the viewscreen of the troops on the surface. "If it was a done deal would they still be cutting through the door?"

"Good point," Landry said, not having considered that. "I'll see what I can find out."

4

"Well?" Jack asked Landry as he stepped out of his office.

"Not exactly what the President said, but still bad news. The Congress ordered him to stand down and he refused, but short of removing him from office there's nothing they can really do...and they've made it clear that option's off the table. They'd have to inform the public about the details if he was kicked out of the White House, and that's something they unanimously said couldn't happen."

Jack suddenly felt sick to his stomach. "They're balking?"

"No...the President is holding his ground, burning any and all bridges in the process. His influence and power are gone, but so long as he is in office he can't be overruled. He's falling on his sword for this...somebody out there must want the stargate in a bad way."

"What about the rest of the military?"

"Ready to roast him alive, but they won't act without Congress's blessing. Personally, I don't see any way out of this, Jack. You might want to consider the retirement offer while it's on the table."

"No..." O'Neill said firmly. "If Congress won't act because they'd have to tell the public what's going on, then we'll save them the trouble and do it ourselves," he said standing up and walking down to the control room in a hurry.

"Jack...you can't," Landry argued from behind him.

"Watch me."

Teal'c woke with a headache and blurred vision, lying prone on the floor. His staff weapon was pinched under his chest, resulting no doubt in the ache coming from his shoulder. He must have been lying unconscious on it for many hours.

The Jaffa focused and blinked away the grogginess enough to sit up. There was a wall inches away and he pulled himself over to it and leaned his back against the smooth stone. A moment later he frowned as he realized where he was.

He was sitting in the hallway where he had fallen, and everything around him seemed a bit off...

The cloak, he thought, checking the device on his wrist.

It was still active.

The realization that the enemy had made a vital mistake flushed the remaining sedation from his mind and he stood up, staff weapon in hand. He walked back down the hallway he'd come from and checked the previous intersection. One lone person was walking down the long corridor and ducked inside an adjacent door, but no one else was in sight. SG-1 was gone, probably captured, but they'd missed Teal'c...and they were going to pay for that oversight.

Slipping into his well honed tracking mode, Teal'c began to search the facility, looking for both his friends...and the enemy.

"He ordered what?" Dan asked, aghast.

"Full disclosure," Mark told his fellow scientist. "They're putting together an information packet now. We need to find as many ways of disseminating the information as we can."

"This is nuts," Dan whispered.

"I think 'nuts' is the General's middle name," Mark said as he started to work on his laptop. "We can't just use civilian links, we need to send it to every government agency around the planet. Start compiling a list of likely candidates in Asia, will ya?"

"Sure," Dan said as Mark's mind went off into academic mode, dismissing all else around him. He was going to follow O'Neill's orders and blow the top off the whole shebang just to get back at the President. Dan didn't know what kind of riots and civil unrest would result from the revelation, but he figured it wouldn't be pretty no matter how it went down.

One thing was for sure...the days of the SGC were over if the secret ever got out, as was his job. Bring the civilians into the equation and he'd be squeezed out overnight by people deemed 'more qualified' just because of their pompous citations. The covert aspect of this assignment was the only reason Dan, a former CIA software analyst, had been pegged for consideration. Bring in the masses and he'd be relegated to fixing office laptops...

No, this had to stop now before it went too far. The President was the ranking officer, not General O'Neill. Granted, he didn't think moving the stargate was a good idea either, but the General had gotten way out of line and it was the responsibility of those serving in the SGC to obey the orders of the commander and chief...let alone defend national security.

It was going to be a few hours before they could assemble a full list of routing codes so Dan had time, he hoped, to stop this catastrophe from happening.

He glanced over at Mark and saw he was fully enveloped in his work. Dan pulled his own laptop screen slightly askew from Mark's view next to him just enough for the security filter to make the image unreadable. He waited a few minutes, going about his assigned tasks without incident, before writing a brief text message and sending it off to the terminals above the base where the President's men were now stationed.

Dan glanced at his fellow scientist again, but Mark hadn't noticed. Dan closed the communications prompt and went back to work with the knowledge that he'd done his duty...and most likely saved his job.

"General O'Neill!" Walter called out suddenly. "All communications have been severed again."

"What?!" Jack yelled from a few dozen feet down the hall where he was talking with SG-19.

"I'm sorry, sir. Everything just went down," the technical Sergeant confirmed with a softer voice when Jack came into the control room.

"We've got nothing then?"

"No, sir," Walter said apologetically.

"That doesn't make any sense," Landry interjected. "Why would they cut it off now? They've already won."

"Have you been making more phone calls?" Jack asked.

Landry shrugged innocently. "Haven't needed to. That's why I don't understand this, unless it's just out of spite."

"Or someone snitched," O'Neill growled.

Landry's eyes narrowed dangerous. "If they did we'll find out. There's nowhere they can run."

"Yeah," Jack said, his eyes drifting to the stargate. "Any word from our offworld teams?"

"Not since SG-2 radioed in an hour ago, no," Landry told him.

O'Neill was silent for a long minute, looking out the window at the gate. No one dared interrupt him. Everyone knew that the hammer was going to come down on him the hardest. These were probably his last few private moments before being hauled off to a jail cell for the rest of his life.

"Keep working on the info packet," he finally ordered. "We need to be ready if the lines open up again. And have Siler keep trying to find another way of getting the word out."

"Will do," Landry confirmed. "In the mean time I'll do a little checking to see if we have a rat on base."

"I'll be around," Jack said half sarcastically as he left the control room and headed farther into the base. He wasn't headed anywhere in particular, but he felt like he needed to get away so he began a quiet little tour of the facility.

He checked on the SG teams guarding the auxiliary exits...the guards put on the beaming jammers...the prisoners in the holding cells...the scientists working on his plan, which he'd belatedly nicknamed Project: Facepalm.

After that he walked through the less populated areas...through the storage rooms, power generation, empty personnel wings...he didn't know what was going to happen, but he had an eerie sense that he wouldn't be seeing the SGC again and felt compelled to say a personal goodbye while he still had the time.

Jack spent the next four hours wondering about but eventually ended up back in Landry's office.

"Any change?" he asked.

Hank shook his head. "None...but we did find the rat. One of the scientists working on the project. He sent a text message to the surface...we assume the President's men relayed it from there. We've got the man, a Dr. Dan Irving, in a holding cell if you want to take a poke at him," Landry said, meaning every word.

"Wouldn't do any good now," O'Neill said, his last hope gone. If the President had been informed there was no way they were getting communications back. "How much time is left on the clock?"

"A little over five hours..."

O'Neill nodded. "I need to borrow your computer."

Landry was silent for a moment. "Falling on your sword?"

"None of you asked for this," Jack said quickly. "I'll try and clean it up best I can. Pick out one of the prisoners to deliver a message to the surface."

"We'll have to cut the doors back open," Landry noted, his tone sullen.

"Better get started. We need to beat their cutting teams to avoid a firefight."

"Alright, Jack," Landry said, standing up and spinning his seat around. "The chair's all yours."

"Thanks," O'Neill whispered as he sat down. Landry looked at him sadly then turned to leave.

"Hank."

"Yeah?" Landry answered, turning back around.

"Deprive the rat of his clothes."

Hank half smiled. "Will do."

After O'Neill finished typing up his letter, addressed to the people of the United States and not the treasonous, backstabbing President, he printed it out and signed it. As he set the pen down beside the paper he felt a pang of separation. It was the last signature he'd ever write on this desk. Part of him was ok with that...he'd always hated paperwork...but it also stung with the bitter taste of defeat.

He'd done his part...stopped the quick, devious transport of the stargate and gave the American government the time to act...but as politicians always do, they'd screwed it up. Jack knew he wasn't at fault, but that didn't make him feel any better. After all that had transpired over the past two decades it was politicians that were going to do them in.

Somehow that seemed appropriate. Jack and the other few good men and women in the stargate program couldn't carry the planet forever. They'd bought them time to grow and learn to defend themselves, but Earth seemed hell-bent on its self destruction...at least Jack wasn't going to be around to see it happen.

As he stared down at the single piece of paper O'Neill's mind flashed back to the first time the politicians tried to shut down the stargate program...and how they'd had to defy orders and go through the gate in order to try and defend Earth against a Goa'uld attack.

Jack was tired of working with backstabbing, greedy, unscrupulous morons. At least that part of his life was coming to an end...he just hadn't wished it'd be this way.

None the less, he was finally cutting that cord. A small part of his inner self relished the moment for what it was as he left Landry's office and headed back to his quarters, but the overwhelming sense of sadness persisted.

He opened the door to his quarters and gratuitously slammed the door behind him. The bang felt good and jolted him from his stupor. He was in danger...and he had to get out of here while he still had the chance. If the forces outside got their hands on him...or his own men decided to act in their stead...he was a goner. He'd done the prison thing before and silently steelled himself to never letting that happen again.

Jack pulled open his closet and looked at the half dozen uniforms hanging up there. All were variations of his dress uniform...save one.

He started to peel off the dress uniform he wore now and let the pieces of the bureaucratic monkey suit fall to the ground where they belonged. Wearing nothing but his underwear Jack pulled out the field uniform that he'd kept around for the off chance of needing to go offworld as much as for old times sake and began to pull on the dark green fatigues.

As he laced up his combat boots the sadness of the situation faded away as old memories flashed back to the surface. He was a warrior, not a paper pusher. He never should have accepted the promotion to General. He belonged in the field, not an office. He'd figured he could do more good for the stargate program and Earth as a General in the shiny upper brass...

He silently kicked himself for his naivety. He should have known better. The politicians were always in charge. The only thing he'd accomplished was to stall the downfall of the planet. He couldn't stop it.

Well, if it was an alien invasion, sure...but when it was Earth's own doing the damage there wasn't anything he could do about that. Earth was going to survive or fall based on the actions of its people, and if they wanted to self destruct that was their business now. Jack was glad to finally wash his hands of the mess. He liked the planet well enough, but he liked sanity more...and now it was time to go.

O'Neill finished lacing up his second boot and stood up in front of the mirror.

"Where have you been?" he asked his image as if he were Peter Pan talking to his shadow.

Jack patted down the uniform on his chest, visually acknowledging his lack of gear. He didn't have any stashed away here...he'd have to stop by the armory.

"Here goes," he said to himself as he stepped out of his former quarters and walked casually down the hallway. He felt both scared and excited at the same time. He didn't know where he was going or what he was going to do, and that prospect was unnerving, but it was also exhilarating. He felt *alive* for the first time in years...

Maybe Daniel had the right idea after all.

5

Vala laid crumpled up in a ball in the corner of a cell when she finally awoke. Her groggy eyes struggled to focus in the dim light, but the Human style prison bars were clearly visible in front of her. She shook her head clear and glanced around...she was alone in the cell.

"Wonderful," she muttered to herself as she got to her feet, though a bit wobbly.

"Now...what do we have to work with," she said, inspecting the bars. The hinges were well oiled, the latch solid, and the locking mechanism on the outside of the cell. Her fingers reached around and felt for the keyhole.

"Damn," she whispered, feeling a card swipe slot. Vala turned around and looked at the rest of the cell...four bare walls, a floor, and a ceiling.

"Well...this is going to be a challenge," she declared. "Guard!"

"Guard?" she asked in a more subdued voice when no one responded. She pushed her face up against the bars and tried to look down the hallway. "Anybody?"

Vala pulled back and sighed. "Well it doesn't seem like I'm going to be using my wits to get out of this...or my charm...guess that leaves waiting to be rescued," she said experimentally.

"Right," she whispered. "What other options do I have?"

Vala looked around at the empty cell. She didn't have anything other than the clothes on her back.

She rubbed the loose collar of her uniform shirt and raised an eyebrow. "Hmnn."

Half an hour later Vala heard someone approaching and smiled to herself, but held perfectly still. When the guards came into view of her cell she heard one of them gasp.

Lying with her face towards the wall opposite the bars, but with the rest of her body face up on the *very* cold floor, the completely nude Vala had quite an effect on the two male guards that had come for her...but she dare not move. Not yet.

A sick, creepy feeling manifested in her gut but she pushed it aside...she needed to appear as serene and helpless as possible so the guards would come in close where she could kick them in the head and take whatever weapons they might be carrying.

"Well, this is an unexpected treat," a third individual said, whose footfalls sounded a couple of heartbeats later.

Vala didn't recognize the voice, but it had a distinctive accent. She assumed it was Chinese, but to be honest she hadn't studied that boring branch of Earth's culture in much detail. She'd dealt with Honor-centric societies before and found they gave her a headache.

That creepy feeling wouldn't abate, and even as Vala heard the door to her cell open and the moment of opportunity presented itself she couldn't shake the sense that something was terribly wrong.

The guards had come to remove her to another chamber and, in lieu of her actually walking, they were more than pleased to manhandle her naked body and moved in to pick her up.

There was a brief dispute as to who got which end, but one groped her chest as he got a grip on her torso and began to lift her up. Before the other could grab her feet she pulled her left

knee up and, flexing backwards, gave her joints enough range to smash her kneecap into the man's forehead.

He staggered backwards in shock, but Vala didn't hesitate. She quickly kicked the other guard in the groin and got to her feet in a fighting stance, looking for weapons...but there were none. She noted the presence of a man in the hallway but he was out of reach so she hit the first man in the throat with stiffened knuckles and dropped him to the ground. She turned around and punched the other man, still struggling with her hit to his groin, in the face one, two, three times.

She finished him off with a heel kick to the face then ran to the open door to attack the remaining guard with a double-legged jump kick to his midsection.

The third man saw it coming and easily knocked her legs aside. Vala fell hard to the floor but tried to leg sweep the man despite knocking her head pretty good. She managed to knock one leg out from under him, but the other held firm and he caught his balance.

With a super-humanly strong grip the man reached down and picked Vala up off the floor by the throat and brought her face up near his. "Nice try," he said amicably.

The creepy feeling inside Vala finally clicked in place and her eyes widened with recognition. The man noticed her reaction and frowned...then his eyes widened with realization. He glanced back in the cell, confirming that both guards were unconscious on the floor, then shook his head at Vala.

"*Now what am I going to do with you, Human,*" he said in an altered voice, finishing the last word off with a very familiar eye flash.

"General O'Neill," Walter called out excitedly as Jack neared the gateroom. "Your list, sir," he said after he caught up with him and handed him a thick stapled set of papers.

"Thank you, Chief," O'Neill said, pulling his equipment pack off his shoulders and stuffing the papers inside.

"Sir...", Walter continued, "it's been an honor," he finished with a salute.

O'Neill lazily returned it. "Thank you," he said, pulling his overstuffed pack back on.

"The others are waiting for you in the gateroom," Walter added.

O'Neill clapped the technician on the shoulder and moved on.

"Sir?" Walter asked quickly.

"Ya?" Jack said, hesitating.

"Where do you want to go?"

O'Neill walked on then shouted back over his shoulder, "Somewhere with trees."

"With trees?" Walter whispered to himself, trying to process the General's meaning. After a moment he walked back up into the gateroom and starting to sift through all the addresses in the database and pick out a safe one that 'had trees.'

"Attention!" Landry barked when the doors to the gateroom opened.

All the SG teams on base stood in a tightly packed formation in respect for O'Neill with only a thin path to the gate remaining between the green uniformed mass.

Jack nodded to them as he walked through their ranks to the foot of the ramp heading up to the stargate as the inner track spun as Walter dialed an address.

"I guess this is goodbye," Landry said.

"All good things..." Jack noted.

"Unfortunately," Landry echoed, catching his reference.

Jack turned to address all others present. Even those in the control room were standing at attention, visible through the safety glass.

"I'm sorry things had to go down this way. I hope the powers that be don't take it out on you guys, and I've written a letter to the suits taking full responsibility for this botched operation. From here on out I honestly don't know what's going to happen...for me or for you, but I want you to know that I don't regret my actions, or my decision to oppose the President. It was the right thing to do, and like the cliché clearly states, now comes the punishment."

"I've never been prouder of any group of men under my command. The work you've done in the SGC over the years makes you all true heroes...and your recent behavior has once again confirmed that fact. It's been an honor serving with you all...good luck."

The stargate activated with a kawoosh over the ramp then settled down into the typical event horizon.

"Hank, I'd like to ask you a favor."

"Anything," Landry said.

"Tell Hammond this was the only way it could have gone down. I couldn't have sat on my hands and done nothing."

"Sure thing, Jack."

O'Neill stepped up onto the ramp and took a few steps. He unclipped the P-90 from his vest and held it ready in both hands across his chest. He felt like he should say more, but couldn't find the words. He turned his head back and nodded to everyone once more beneath his green cap then walked the last few steps up the ramp and into the event horizon.

Landry watched him disappear into the blue glow then checked his watch. It'd been ten minutes since they'd dispatched the prisoner with the letter up through the emergency hatch. It should have reached the commander on the surface by now.

"Walter," Landry yelled back up to the control room. "End the lockdown."

As soon as the lockdown ended and the beaming jammers retracted to only cover the stargate, a small team beamed down into the SGC in the equipment rooms where the beaming jammers were kept. With the guards now gone, the three man team quickly accessed the equipment and bypassed the control room link. They completely deactivated the jamming devices then activated their transport coils, returning back to orbit before anyone was the wiser.

"Yes, sir," the technician's voice came back over the intercom, acknowledging the order as he activated the controls and ended the lockdown.

"Alright everyone," Landry said to the SG teams still standing at attention. "Return to your quarters and stay there until called for. There are probably some angry people up top...let's not give them an opportunity for a confrontation. Once I receive orders I'll..."

Suddenly the stargate disappeared from behind Landry, whisked away, no doubt, via one of the orbiting 304s.

"Son of a bitch," Landry grumbled. "We've still got teams offworld."

"Sir?" Reynolds asked, ready to do something.

"Fall out," Landry said with a sigh and a shake of his head.

"Yes, sir," Reynolds said dejectedly. "You heard the General. Back to your bunks."

The gateroom slowly emptied, with Landry the last person out. He looked back at where the stargate had been and shook his head. "Dear God, what have we come to?"

Three days later Landry sat in Hammond's backyard with a beer and a hotdog in his hands as the former Generals sat and looked at the campfire before them and the stars overhead.

Landry and the others had been spared official reprimand, but the President had shut down the SGC and permanently closed Cheyenne Mountain. Landry had opted for retirement rather than reassignment...not that he'd been offered one. Most of the SGC personnel hadn't been pegged for reassignment to the new I.O.A. SGC in Egypt either, and Landry felt it best not to try and ride a dead horse.

"I wonder where he is now," Hank said, leaning back in his lawn chair.

"I don't know," Hammond said, the only other person seated around the campfire. "I don't think he'd ask the Tok'ra for help."

"No, I don't think he would either," Landry echoed. "Maybe he went to Dakara."

"What's on Dakara?" Hammond asked.

Landry glanced over at his fellow retired General. "That's right, you don't know. Bra'tac's new Jaffa Empire is based on Dakara."

"Bra'tac's always been a close ally," Hammond said evenly. "But I have a feeling Jack's not going to be in the mood for company right now."

"I wouldn't blame him," Landry agreed. "He got the rug pulled out from under him pretty hard."

"That he did," Hammond said, raising his beer bottle up towards the stars. Landry mirrored the informal salute.

Hammond picked a star and looked up in its direction. "God speed, Jack."

Atlantis emerged from hyperspace with a flash and immediately throttled up its realspace engines to counter the drift speed between the Dune system and the water-world beneath them. It amounted to only a few thousand miles per hour and a few long seconds of thrust, but it brought them down towards the planet's atmosphere quicker than usual.

"We're here," John noted to himself from the control chair. He'd slid back into the seat only moments ago and found himself experiencing a sense of *déjà vu*, realizing this must have been the same approach the Alterrans had originally made when they brought Atlantis to the Pegasus galaxy.

The atmosphere began licking at the city's shields as Sheppard searched for the previous landing coordinates not far off the mainland that was just now coming across the horizon. The city's computer highlighted a specific patch of ocean and John set course to put them down in the same spot where they'd first found the city.

The descent was easy enough. John didn't rush it and lazily brought Atlantis down over the ocean, hovering in place over the surface before gently letting it sink into the waves. The city's buoyancy brought it back up after a brief moment below the water line and Sheppard let it settle for a full minute before disengaging the shields and powering down the chair.

"*Home sweet home*," he said as he walked out of the chair room.

"*We all set?*" he asked when he got back to the control room.

"Yes," Elizabeth confirmed alongside Ryan, Kyle, and Matt Stevenson. "*We were just waiting for you. Care to give the order?*"

"*Thank you, I think I will*," John said, stepping up behind the control room technicians, most of whom were Asgard.

"Activate the beacon."

One of the Asgard meekly toggled the glowing Ancient controls, seemingly unconcerned with what they were doing.

A small icon began to pulse on one of the consoles, indicating that Atlantis's emergency beacon was active. The rest of Atlantis's allies had already been informed of the plan so they wouldn't respond to the beacon and rush to the city's aid. The only ones Atlantis wanted to come were the Wraith...and come they knew they would. En masse.

Sheppard glanced up at the ceiling and whispered. "*Come and get it.*"