

Ad Noctum

cleanwhiteroom

Chapter One

The sky was clear and cloudless over Pasadena, California.

Dr. Dale Volker threaded his way past the dusty construction site of Caltech's latest questionable decision in architectural design, jaywalked across California Boulevard, cut through a shadowed shortcut between two buildings, and passed through the graceful, solid arches on the eastern side of the planetary sciences building.

Once inside, he pulled off his sunglasses and dropped them in his shoulder bag before plunging a hand in after them to fish for his keys. His fingers passed over a myriad of pens, his VGA adaptor, his iPod, the tangled wires of two sets of headphones, scraps of paper, and countless other little objects of no consequence that made their home next to the sheaf of final papers from "Topics in Advanced Astrophysics."

He really needed a better system of shoulder bag organization.

Or something.

He also needed the caffeine that was in the coffee that was in his hand to actually just be in his bloodstream right about now. That would be good.

He noted absently that the door to his lab was already open and looked at his watch. It was only half past nine, a little early for academia, granted, but, then again, the grad students always seemed to be more motivated right before the holidays. It was the general ambiance of the season, he supposed. That, or the bone-crunching fear that seemed to accompany committee meetings and qualifying exams, no matter how much he tried to reassure them.

After nearly thirty seconds of simultaneous walking and coffee-drinking and key-fishing, his hand emerged, victorious, with the key ring in question, which worked out well because it gave him just enough time to detangle said keys from his iPod headphones before he turned down the narrow hallway that led to his office.

There was someone waiting for him.

Someone that wasn't a grad student.

That was weird.

"Hi," Volker said, cocking his head to take in his visitor, wondering frantically if it was his week to host the visiting speaker and if it was, which he doubted, who the heck had he invited.

"Hello," the other man said. "Dr. Dale Volker?"

The guy was giving off the familiar, uber-intellectual, artistically unkempt, jacket-jeans-and-incongruously-fancy-shoes type look that was just found nowhere other than in academia. His glasses pulled the whole look together, sharpening it up with the neat lines of their square black frames.

"Yup," Volker said, his hands full of coffee and keys. "That's me. Hi. And you are?"

"My name is Starr. John Starr." His voice was more than subtly accented. He sounded Scottish, but Volker wasn't one hundred percent sure on that one.

"Nice to meet you," Volker said, finally succeeding in getting his office door unlocked and then unstuck from the frame that was slowly warping. "You look familiar somehow. Do I know you? Are you on staff here?"

"No," Starr replied, giving Volker's doorframe a vaguely displeased look. "I'm not. I'm a professor of mathematics from UC Berkeley. I was visiting one of my colleagues here and I thought I might stop in and see you, if you weren't busy. I'd like to ask you about your work."

Volker made his way around his desk and dumped his bag on the journal-article-obscured surface. He pulled his laptop out of his shoulder bag, deftly separating it from the stack of final papers.

"Yeah," he said. "No trouble. I've got maybe an hour before I have to go to a committee meeting for one of my students. What's your area?"

"Applied mathematics," Starr said, his eyes flicking restlessly around Volker's office. "With a heavy emphasis on computational modeling. Lately I've become quite interested in modeling the cosmic background radiation. Amongst other things"

"Okay," Volker replied, still trying to wrap his mind around the reason the other man looked so damn familiar to him.

"I'm looking to collaborate with someone who has access to raw data on low-frequency EM emissions across the observable sky."

"Radio waves? I'm your guy, then," Volker said, downing the dregs of his coffee.

"Fantastic," the other man said, pulling out the word and breaking it off with an intensity that Volker found a bit appealing and off-putting all at once.

"Okay," Volker said, feeling a thrill of intellectual anticipation. "What's this new model?"

"It relies on integer programming to model topology of the universe based on input values from the publically available WMAP."

Volker stared at him.

"Integer programming?" he repeated, his brain a whirring mess of interconnecting ideas. Beneath them, however, he felt an echo of recognition and—something else.

Unease, maybe?

"It's not a—popular approach," Starr said quietly. "And I'm afraid I can't go into the details until we formally agree to collaborate."

"I understand," Volker said. "The topology of the universe is one of the most high profile questions in theoretical astrophysics."

Starr looked at him, utterly expressionless. "I'm aware."

"But—" Volker said, feeling slightly uncomfortable at the man's demeanor. "Maybe that's not where you're going with this."

"Perhaps not," Starr said, smiling faintly.

"But you want my data to plug into your model," Volker clarified. "A superimposed map of radio waves and microwaves?"

"Yes," Starr replied. "That would be ideal."

"Authorship?" Volker asked.

"Joint," Starr said.

"If I put one of my thesis students on this full time, they're going to need a first-author manuscript out of this."

"That's not a problem," Starr said, smiling faintly, opening his hands. "Whatever you prefer."

"Okay then," Volker said, surprised and slightly suspicious at how easy that had been. He was certain that he was not yet getting the full story. "Want to see the lab? I'll show

you the remote feed to our radio array, then we can take a quick look at the database directly."

For a moment, Starr looked wistful. "That sounds wonderful," he replied.

They walked together across the hall and into the open lab.

"Caltech is renovating the majority of its lab space, I hear," Starr said conversationally.

"Yeah," Volker said. "That's the plan. Apparently MIT is building some kind of new physical sciences center, so, you know how it goes. Can't let the competition get ahead. I'm not complaining though. I'm hoping I'll get an office that doesn't flood when it rains."

"Does it rain often?" Starr asked, looking faintly amused.

"No," Volker replied. "Thank god."

They made their way past the Faraday cages that the adjacent lab was constructing and rounded a corner to find Nupur, his third year graduate student, sitting in front of the live feed that monitored the desert radio array. She glanced up as they came in.

"Hey Dale," she said, clearly distracted as she watched the feed. "They've got some kind of damage at the eastern end of the grid. We're not getting any data at the moment. Apparently they've got some repair guys coming to fix—" she broke off as she got a good look at Starr.

"Nupur," this is John Starr. He'll likely be one of our collaborators—" Volker trailed off in the face of the intent stare that his thesis student had fixed his visitor with. "Um," Volker said. "Do you guys—know each other or something?"

"I don't think so," Starr said, giving Nupur a cool look.

"Hi," Nupur said, holding out her hand. "Hi. I'm so sorry. You must get this all the time—but you look exactly like that guy. Who disappeared? The mathematician? About six months ago?"

Starr cocked his head. "I'm afraid I don't know to whom you're referring."

"The Fields Medal guy," Nupur said. "Rush, I think his name was? Nicholas Rush? $P=NP$?"

Volker looked sharply at Starr, feeling again the same thrill of recognition that he'd felt when he first saw the man. He remembered the news stories at the time—his mind scrambled to latch on to any relevant detail.

"Yes of course," Starr said, his expression entirely unconcerned. "Quite a loss for the international mathematics community, or so they say." He smiled faintly at Nupur. "I never met the man himself, but I hear he was insufferable."

"Maybe. $P=NP$ though, eh?" Nupur said with an easy smile. "Cryptography will never be the same. Plus the drama keeps the undergrads in Comp Sci 101 interested, so hey."

Starr smiled back at her in a short, perfunctory way, his eyes flicking briefly toward Volker.

Volker looked away abruptly.

The three of them stood in silence for a moment.

"You mentioned something about a database?" Starr asked smoothly. Despite his casual stance, with one thumb hooked through a beltloop of his dark, denim jeans, there was something about him that seemed to suggest impatience.

"Yup," Volker said. "It's on an encrypted server that backs up to an external site, but the nice part about it is that it can be accessed from anywhere on teh interwebs."

Without looking at him, Nupur held up a hand, and Volker gave her a high five.

"Interwebs," Starr repeated, with a skeptical sort of disdain.

"Kids these days," Volker said with a rueful shake of the head, recovering nicely.

Starr narrowed his eyes at Nupur again. "Quite," he said dryly.

Volker turned and took a few steps to lean over the nearest keyboard. He navigated quickly to the server he was looking for. In his peripheral vision he could sense Starr go absolutely still. Volker spared him a quick glance while the data loaded.

Starr was watching the screen with a feverish, inappropriate intensity, as if maybe he thought he could light it on fire just by looking at it.

Volker fought down another surge of unease.

The guy was clearly really, really excited about science. Or math. Or both. And that was fine. Volker was excited about science too.

Science.

Yeah.

And speaking of which, there was something about the idea of 'integer programming' that was kicking around in the back of his brain, giving him a weird vibe.

He pulled up the database and offered Starr the chair that he'd been hovering over. "Check it out," he said mildly.

Starr slid into position and clicked through screens like he owned the damn thing, ignoring the largely uninterpretable spreadsheets of raw data and going straight for the algorithms, drilling down into the VBA code, examining functions briefly before moving on, scanning through the entire thing with more rapidity and intensity than Volker had ever seen anyone apply to endless pages and subpages of matrices.

Integer programming.

Integer programming.

Abruptly Starr stopped his rapid navigation through the dataset, his eyes fixed on the topological map of low frequency EM emissions that Volker had begun to assemble.

"How complete is this?" Starr whispered.

"Pretty darn complete," Volker said, shifting his weight forward onto the balls of his feet, unable to completely conceal his pride in his work.

"That's what it looks like," Starr said quietly, finally turning to look up at him, fixing him with the same fiery gaze that he'd just applied to the data.

"What do you think?" Volker asked. "Still interested in collaborating?"

"Very much so," Starr said, getting to his feet. "Shall we work out the details?"

Volker looked at his watch. "Sure. We can talk after lunch if we don't get everything hammered out by ten thirty."

"Ah yes. Your committee meeting," Starr said, with a smile that looked oddly amused. "Would you care to discuss this over coffee?"

"Sure," Volker said. "You don't want to keep looking at the—"

"Oh I'm quite satisfied that you are the correct choice as far as potential collaborators go," Starr said smoothly.

"You don't mess around," Volker said, smiling at him.

"Indeed not," Starr said, his gaze uncomfortably intense.

They walked out into the hall and something in Starr's pocket gave a soft electronic-sounding beep. The other man pulled a very odd looking phone out of his pocket.

"Terribly sorry," Starr said. "I need to take this. I believe it may be my—transportation."

"Sure," Volker said. "I'll meet you back in my office."

Trying not to look like he was obviously hurrying, Volker walked back down the hallway and turned off at the narrow little corridor.

"David," he heard the other man say into the device. "Yes. Yes, I understand that, but—"

As soon as he was out of sight, he darted through the door and Volker slid into his chair. He bent down and quickly dug through the pile of textbooks at the base of his bookshelf. He slammed the one he had been looking for down on the surface of his desk and quickly flipped to the index, his finger rapidly scanning down the page.

In the hallway, Starr had stopped speaking.

He found the page and feverishly flipped to it.

"Don't concern yourself with that," Starr said, sounding irritated.

He scanned down the page, his eyes flicking from line to line until, finally, he found what he was looking for.

Integer programming is NP-hard.

Meaning, of course, that in order to effectively render the WMAP data using integer programming, the man would likely need a computational system that was fantastically sophisticated and predicated on the idea that P did indeed equal NP, and not just the simple proof but the application of the principles behind it to render a previously intractable data-set in a manner that was amenable to computational manipulation in real time.

Crap.

Volker opened his laptop his heart racing; he should have done this first, god, what had he been thinking, going for the math instead of the man himself. He was in trouble. He was in trouble, probably, if this wasn't Starr and instead it was some vanished mathematician—

"Yes," Starr said. "You've made that very clear."

He opened his browser and began to type the man's name into the search engine, deciding to go with an image search first—

Starr appeared in the doorframe, and Volker looked up.

"Shall we?"

"Sure," Volker replied, unable to keep the hesitation out of his voice.

Starr stepped forward, resting his bag on the edge of Volker's desk.

"Let me just find my wallet," Starr said, beginning to fish around in the bag. He pulled out a textbook and handed it to Volker, with a short, "Hold that, will you?"

Volker looked down at the book he was holding. "Textbook of Medical Physiology?" Volker asked, looking up at him.

"My interests are wide ranging," Starr said, not looking at him.

"I guess they would be," Volker said, eyeing him carefully, "If you're capable of rendering large data sets with integer programming."

For a brief moment, Starr's hands stilled. After a pause, Starr looked up at him. They locked eyes.

"You're not married," Starr snapped abruptly, yanking the book out of Volker's hand.

"Um," Volker said. "No?"

"Children?" Starr snapped.

"Other than the grad students? No. I have a cat—" Volker trailed off.

"I'm afraid that's not good enough," Starr said, pulling something out of his bag.

"Good enough for what?" Volker asked with a vaguely alarmed perplexity.

"Catch," Starr snapped, tossing him a small object that looked very much like a flashdrive.

Without thinking, Volker reached out, his fingers closing around the little device. As his hand closed around it, the small blue light that had been visible on one end winked out of existence.

There was a strange, unfamiliar roaring in his ears and in his chest, in his head, in his hands. He felt as if he were being heated from the inside. His office faded to nothingness. Or, perhaps, it was him that faded.

When he came back to himself he found that he had his eyes screwed shut. He opened them abruptly and found himself standing in the cool semi-dark of a—

Well.

Actually, he had absolutely no idea where he currently was. He seemed to be in a small, mostly empty room of some kind. There was a strange vibration in the metal beneath his feet.

"Nick." A voice came out of some kind of speaker system.

Volker stared at the ceiling, utterly disoriented.

"Nick. I don't have all goddamn day."

"Um," Volker said in the direction of the ceiling. His eyes flicked rapidly between the ceiling and the door in front of him. "Hello?" He took a few steps forward, noticing that a circular pattern had been etched into the floor. There were electronic controls of some kind on the wall.

The door hissed open, revealing a man dressed almost entirely in leather. His hair was dark and his eyes were dark, as if he had materialized out of the dimness.

They stared at each other.

"What the fuck?" the other man hissed.

"Yeah," Volker said, trying to fight through a veil of shock. "I know how you feel."

The other man stalked forward, gripping Volker's wrist and prying the small device out of his hand. "Where is he?" The other man asked.

"Starr?" Volker asked.

"Starr. That's great. That's just great." The man glared at him. "Yes. Starr."

"Um," Volker said.

His hands felt numb.

"Come with me," the other man said, dragging Volker toward the door, one hand still closed around his wrist, one hand fisting in the back of his shirt.

"I think there's been some sort of misunderstanding," Volker said, rallying. "I'm not really sure what just happened or what you—"

"Where were you?" the other man said. "When I beamed you out?"

Volker half tripped over something left on the floor of the short, dark hallway but the other man steadied him, continuing to pull him forward.

"Um, I was in my office?" Volker said, blinking as he was dragged into a small room lined with what appeared to be instrumentation panels arrayed in front of windows,

covered by a metallic material. It looked like some kind of strange, futuristic cockpit that had somehow merged with the decorating aesthetic of King Tut.

The other man shoved him down into a chair away from the main panel and, before Volker realized what was happening, he found both his hands cuffed and looped around the arm of the chair in such a way that he could not get up.

"Hey—" he said, the reality of the cuffs around his wrists sending a pulse of adrenaline through his system, tearing briefly through the shocky feeling that clouded everything. "What the hell—"

"Don't touch anything," the other man said sharply. He sat down in front of the main panel and spoke into a small, odd-looking phone.

Yeah, or actually, considering the day he was having, it seemed like maybe 'phone,' was not the most correct way to describe whatever it was.

He was getting progressively more freaked out by the minute.

"Rush," the other man said. "Come in."

Well, it looked like he had a pretty good idea as to what had happened to 'the fields medal guy,' as Nupur had put it. Volker grimaced and clenched his teeth. Why had he not just trusted his instincts? Or, barring that, Nupur's instincts?

"Rush," the other man said again, clearly trying to keep a lid on his rising temper.

No response.

The other man shut his eyes and clenched his jaw.

Volker wrapped his fingers around the short chain of the cuffs and surreptitiously pulled up on the armrest of the chair, testing its durability. After a few seconds he gave up on the clearly useless and slightly painful effort.

"Rush," the dark haired man said, his voice betraying only a trace of the irritation that was in his face. "Come in or I will beam down there and so help me I will drag you back to this fucking ship if I have to."

"Um, did you just say ship?" Volker asked with a polite incredulity that, in his current situation, seemed somehow wildly inappropriate.

The other man glanced at him in irritation, but otherwise ignored him.

"There's no need for that, I assure you," Starr's voice—or, rather, Rush's voice, projected quietly from the device that the other man carried. "If you can contain your impatience for a few moments while I demonstrate my utter mastery of quantum cryptography, I will join you shortly."

"This. Was. Not. The. Plan."

"Yes well, as usual, my plan is better."

"Rush."

"Stop talking, please."

Volker flinched as the other man threw the communications device across the small room in obvious frustration.

"Um, hi," Volker began. "I think there's been some kind of mistake. My name is—"

"I don't care," the other man said, spinning his chair around to fix Volker with a hard stare. "I don't want to know your name, I don't want you to know my name—fuck. Fuck." He shot to his feet and paced out of the room.

"Okay," Volker said, into the empty air.

He tried to force himself to take a deep breath, but found it wasn't really working out for him. It seemed that he had been abducted by a previously-vanished-Fields-Medalist and a man wearing leather pants in what was, unarguably, a pretty impressive, high tech manner. He was also handcuffed to a chair.

It seemed likely that he wouldn't be making his committee meeting.

He swiveled his chair slightly and began to examine the displays in front of him. They were in a language he'd never encountered before, with letters and typography that were utterly unfamiliar.

Great.

There were a lot of multicolored triangles.

Also great.

There really weren't any keys, and everything seemed to be touch-screen based. There was a histogram display that had so many bins it approximated an analog style of monitoring—something. It was shifting moderately in real time. Power consumption maybe? There was also a schematic of something that looked like—well, okay. To be honest, it kind of looked like a ship.

Tempted though he was to chalk this entire experience up to too many episodes of the X-files in his formative years, the reality of the cuffs around his aching wrists said otherwise.

He needed to take a closer look at this system to try and figure out what the heck was going on. He swiveled his chair slightly, adjusting his hands, sliding one arm around and back through the looped metal armrest, trying to lengthen his reach as much as possible, his fingers stretching out, trying to get—

"What are you doing?"

Apparently, the guy in leather was back.

Volker jerked involuntarily in surprise.

"You people are all alike," he snapped, his voice crisp and hard.

"Um?" Volker said. "You people?"

"Scientists. Scientists. God." He turned away from Volker as he slid back into the seat he had vacated only a few minutes earlier. He pulled out the communications device that Volker had noted earlier. "Rush," he hissed. "Do you have it?"

"Nearly," Rush's voice came again. "Even with the augmented rate of data transfer, there are terabytes of material here, David."

'David,' or whoever he was, drummed his fingers on the console in front of him. After a few seconds, he turned to Volker.

"Is that true?" he snapped.

"Is what true?" Volker asked, still feeling more than slightly off balance.

"Is your database, or whatever," he said, spitting the word out with venomous precision, "Really terabytes in size?"

"Um, yes, but I don't think he can really be downloading it," Volker said. "It's encrypted and stored on a secure server. You can't write it to any kind of—"

The other man rolled his eyes, turning back toward the monitors in front of him.

"Can you?" Volker asked. "Are you guys stealing my data?"

"Not just your data, apparently," the other man said.

"There is no way that he is going to be able to break my cipher without my key," Volker said insistently.

"Got it," Rush's voice came over the communications device. "Just give me thirty seconds to—"

"No," the other man snapped. "Activating transport." He viciously entered some kind of command on the touchscreen console.

"Transport?" Volker said.

Unsurprisingly, the other man did not answer. After a few seconds, he half-turned in his seat, looking at the door, which swished open as Rush strode into the room.

"So help me god, Rush," the other man said through gritted teeth. "If you pull a stunt like that again—"

"You'll what?" Rush said darkly.

"Nevermind."

"Oh no," Rush said, making a sweeping hand gesture. "No. By all means, please continue."

"Forget it. Let's see it."

Rush held up something that looked like an external hard drive.

"And what's with this guy?"

"He'll be useful," Rush said.

"Excuse me, but what the hell?" Volker asked.

"Him?" the dark haired man asked. "You're kidding. And also no. Just—no."

"I agree," Volker said, looking at Rush. "You can just—send me back. I have a meeting—"

"I'm quite serious," Rush said, sliding gracefully into the seat next to Telford. "I need him. He's intelligent." He hit a combination of controls and the metal shield in front of the forward windows began to retract, revealing a breathtakingly sharp starscape with the earth spread out in blues and greens below them.

"This is a spaceship?" Volker confirmed.

"Not very quick though," Rush said. "Unfortunately. But you can't have everything."

"A fact that is driven home to me on a daily basis," the dark haired man said, shooting Rush a pointed glare.

"Scintillating," Rush said dryly. "But I can't fucking teach myself astrophysics within the requisite timetable. So. If you want this to proceed in an efficient manner—we need him."

"Do I get a say in this?" Volker asked.

Rush looked over at him.

"Of course you do," the mathematician replied, looking back at him. "You can choose to come with us, or you can go back to earth and watch the Lucian Alliance kill your graduate students."

"What?" Volker asked, horrified, feeling his heart rate increase. "Who is the Lucian Alliance?"

"Graduate students?" the dark haired man asked, looking at Rush. "Seriously? That's the best you can do?"

"He's somewhat of a loner," Rush said. "Apparently. No family."

"I have a family," Volker said, bizarrely affronted. "I just don't see them as often as I—look. That is not the point. You can't seriously be talking about kidnapping me. I'm a professor at Caltech for god's sake. People are going to notice."

"Indeed they will," Rush said, but he wasn't looking at Volker, he was looking at the other man.

"I cannot believe you did this. I literally cannot believe it. You are out of control, Rush. You can't just—" he broke off, his jaw visibly clenching. "He knows who you are. We can't send him back—if we do, the SGC is going to somehow get wind of this, and they —"

"Why do you fucking think I fucking brought him, David?" Rush hissed, leaning forward. "He figured it out."

Actually, Volker realized with a cold thrill of horror, it had been Nupur who had figured it out. He watched Rush fixedly, his hands curling into fists.

"Did anyone else see you," the other man hissed back. "Does anyone else know?"

"No," Rush said with matching intensity. "I interacted with no one else."

Volker stayed quiet.

"Fuck," the dark-haired man hissed, open hands smashing against the console in front of him. "I told you I should have gone."

"And when you become a fucking expert in cryptography, I'll happily cede such missions to you, but in the meantime," Rush hissed. "I suggest you just accept this."

"Guys, seriously," Volker said, his hands clenched into fists. "What the hell?"

"He's coming," Rush said. "And that's the end of it."

"Rush, you are walking a god damned fine line." The dark-haired man half turned, meeting Volker's eyes. "This is a terrible fucking idea."

"I agree?" Volker replied, trying not to appear as confused and intimidated as he currently felt.

"And I just want you to keep in mind that he got you into this. Not me."

"Um, okay," Volker said.

"Medical conditions?" the other man snapped.

"None. Er. Actually, hypertension?"

"Is that a question or an answer?"

"An answer." Volker tried for irritation but his voice seemed to die in his throat.

The other man glared at him. "And I suppose you need medication for that."

"Yes."

"Wonderful. And just how exactly are we supposed to get this medication of yours?"

"Beam into his fucking pharmacy, why don't you?" Rush said airily. "It's not exactly an unsolvable problem. But we probably should do this in a relatively expeditious manner."

"Yes. I agree," the other man said darkly, "How long before anyone notices you're missing?"

Volker looked at his watch. "Twenty minutes. Look, I can't just go off—wherever it is that you guys are going. I have a lab. I have a grant renewal coming up. I have graduate students."

"Not anymore you don't." The leather-clad man looked back at the display in front of him.

"Yes," Volker said insistently, trying to recapture his attention. "Yes I do. I'm not going to help you guys—"

"Yes you are," the other man snapped. "Otherwise, your graduate students are going to be systematically hunted down and eliminated by members of an elite, far reaching galactic cabal, do you understand me?"

"Are you insane?" Volker asked.

"Me?" the other man said. "No." He glared at Rush.

"Cast aspersions all fucking day, if you'd like," Rush said unconcernedly. "But until you cease to need me for this wee cryptographic problem you seem to be having, you can damn well give me what I require."

"You don't get to ask for people," the other man hissed.

"I don't recall asking," Rush said.

"Write down the name and dosage of the meds that you take." The dark haired man snapped his fingers in Rush's direction without looking, and the mathematician produced a pen and small notebook.

Volker wrote down his medication with a shaking hand.

'David' ripped it away from him and spun his chair around, hitting a button on the console and then typing something in.

Volker watched Rush watching the other man with narrowed eyes, his arms crossed over his chest.

"Take him to get his stuff while I get his meds," the dark haired man said, shoving the paper into his pocket and coming out with something small that fit in the palm of his hand. He was clearly trying to keep whatever it was out of Rush's line of sight.

Rush frowned. "You would trust me to—"

Like a striking snake, the dark haired man reached over and fisted both hands in Rush's shirt, dragging him bodily out of his chair and slamming him to the floor. Volker was too shocked to do anything but watch as the man shifted his weight forward, literally kneeling on the mathematician's chest. He yanked Rush's head to the side as the man struggled ineffectively, unable to get enough leverage to wrest away.

With a precision that Volker found horrifying, the leather clad man pressed the small device against Rush's neck.

Rush froze.

"Fuck you," he hissed at 'David'. "We discussed this."

"And when you abduct people," the other man said, managing to maintain a veneer of composure, "And when you go on missions that are supposed to take ten minutes and actually take almost an hour with no good explanation of what exactly you're doing," the other man broke off, adjusting his weight slightly as Rush made a sudden, heroic attempt to wrest out of his hold, "That reopens the door for negotiation."

"This is not a 'negotiation'."

"Thanks for noticing," the leather clad man whispered venomously. "Now hold still, and don't talk."

There was a quiet, pneumatic hiss and the man pocketed the device before running his thumb over the place he had injected Rush with—something.

"Fuck. You." Rush gasped.

"What the hell did you just do to him?" Volker half-shouted, his heart racing, half on his feet.

"Try to cut it out of your goddamned neck, next time, why don't you?" the other man hissed at Rush, giving the mathematician an unnecessary shake before backing off and turning to face Volker.

"Hold out your arm," he snapped.

Volker held his arm out.

He watched Rush, who was lying on the floor, rubbing his neck.

"This," the other man said, holding up the device, "Allows me to implant a transmitter beneath your skin. It means that wherever you are, wherever you are, you can be tracked and retrieved. You cut it out," the other man snapped, "And next time, it goes in your neck. And if you successfully cut it out of your neck," he said, half turning to take in Rush, who had levered himself up on one elbow and was shooting him a murderous glare, "Then next time, I hire someone to put it in your eye." He turned back to Volker. "Got it?"

"Yup," Volker said shortly, feeling a sickening twinge as the small device shot a small piece beneath the skin of his forearm.

"What's your name," the other man said, backing off slightly.

"Volker. Dr. Dale Volker."

"David," the other man said, extending a hand. "Colonel David Telford."

Volker did not shake his hand. "Colonel?"

"USAF."

"United States Air Force," Rush explained with a subtle eye-roll, pushing himself off the floor to glare at Telford. "What if you'd missed, and hit a vein? You could have killed me."

"Yeah. I'm really broken up about it," Telford snapped at him.

"You're with the military?"

"Yes," Telford said.

"Not really," Rush commented.

"Shut up, Rush."

"You fucking shut up."

"It's a complicated situation," Telford said, pulling out a set of keys and unlocking the cuffs that secured Volker to the chair. "Which, unfortunately, you are now involved in."

"Yeah," Volker replied, trying to conceal the shaking in his hands. "Apparently."

Volker stood next to Rush in the middle of his own sun-drenched living room.

Volker's calico cat, Mendelssohn, watched them curiously.

Rush stared back at it, cocking his head.

"So the whole beaming thing works—how?"

"Well," Rush said, his eyes quickly scanning over the contents of the room and the messy organizational style Volker had going. "It depends which of two stolen, aka, 'rightfully appropriated' technologies you're referring to. Fortunately I have organized things in such a way that we have access to both." Rush shook his hair back and paced forward, bending down to run his hand gently over the cat's head. "And I could," he continued, "Instruct you ad nauseum in their appropriate uses and modes of action, but—I don't particularly feel like it."

Volker watched the previous year's Fields Medalist, who he'd just seen get implanted with some kind of futuristic radio transponder, and who flew around in space ships, pet his cat.

"Please feel free to commence with the packing at any time," Rush said, absently scratching behind Mendelssohn's ears.

"Stop petting my cat," Volker said with a sort of pained incredulity. "You're in the middle of abducting me."

"The cat doesn't know that," Rush said, in a tone that suggested he thought he was being utterly reasonable.

"You are crazy."

"Less talking," Rush said, picking his cat up off the floor and settling it over his shoulder as he headed toward the kitchen. "More packing."

"What the hell am I supposed to pack?" Volker asked, trying to fight through a helpless sense of absurdity to focus on what was actually taking place. He brought a hand to his head. "Where are we even going?"

"If it were me," Rush said, brazenly rifling one-handed through Volker's cupboards, "I'd prioritize shirts, shoes, coffee, books, all the pain killers you have, and cat food. Possibly also cat litter. And leather pants. If you have them. Wearing other people's leather pants is less fun than you might think."

"Leather pants?" Volker repeated to himself as he walked into his bedroom, making a face that no one could see. "Cat food?" he shouted at Rush from the bedroom as he pulled out a shoulder bag. "You're going to let me take my cat into space?"

"Well," Rush said, sounding like he was throwing things onto the floor in Volker's kitchen. "What else are you going to do with it?"

"A good question," Volker said to himself, trying to break through the numbness that seemed to have enveloped him. He looked at his reflection in the full length mirror, and barely recognized his own bloodless face.

He dragged his bag, half full of a random assortment of clothes back out into the living room where he found Rush, cat still in hand, TV on, in the middle of drenching his living room floor with olive oil.

"Um?" Volker said, pausing momentarily in his frantic search for things to take.

Rush was paying no attention to him. He was watching the local news.

Holding Volker's cat. And a bottle of olive oil.

Volker ripped his computer charger out of the wall and shoved it in his bag.

"No outlets on a ship, Volker," Rush said peripherally. "Use your goddamned intellect in fucking polynomial time, will you?"

"So I don't really have a lot of experience with this sort of thing," Volker said, running a hand through his hair, trying to steady himself. "Are all our conversations going to be like this?"

"Like what?" Rush snapped.

"Um, you just, I don't know, harassing me?" He did his best to conceal and steady the shaking of his hands, but he needn't have bothered. Rush wasn't looking at him.

"Only if you retain this pathetic demeanor, and your poor choice permutations," Rush snapped, dropping the olive oil and going back to petting his cat, who, Volker could hear was traitorously purring away in his arms.

"I really don't like you," Volker snapped.

"Well," Rush said philosophically, "You're going to like me less shortly. Are you finished?"

"No, I—" Volker paused in the middle of shoving his boots into his bag to take in what it was, exactly, on the TV screen that had Rush so enthralled.

A building was on fire.

A very familiar looking building.

"Is that my lab?" Volker said, letting the half filled bag fall to the floor.

"I believe that it is," Rush said his voice affectedly smooth. He looked away.

"You—" Volker began helplessly. "I don't believe this. God. God. Who are you?"

"It's better for everyone this way," Rush hissed, his voice icy. Mendelssohn abruptly jumped out of his arms.

"Better?" Volker said, unable to keep the shock out of his voice.

"Your students are alive. You are alive. You owe me."

"I owe you? For what? For not telling the psychotic air force guy up there that my poor thesis student who is now completely screwed because of you, by the way, was smart enough to figure out who you were, so that he doesn't freaking murder her in her sleep?" Volker could feel his voice rising, his tone spiraling out of his control.

"In her sleep?" Rush said mildly. "That's unreasonably optimistic."

"What?" Volker asked. "What do you mean—"

"Never bring that up again," Rush snapped. "As far as I'm concerned I never met any of your fucking students."

"You—"

"Let's go," Rush snapped. "Your time is up. Find your fucking cat."

Volker took a deep breath and then another, trying to feel the ground under his feet and cool planes of the first aid kit in his hands. He knelt next to his bag, zipping it shut, bracing his hands against its canvas outlines. "Colonel what's-his-name had better not kill my cat," he said to Rush, trying to force a bravado he did not feel into his voice. "Otherwise—"

"David is not going to kill your cat," Rush said derisively. "That would make no sense."

"Yeah. Because this day has made so much sense so far," Volker said, as he crossed the room, glaring at Rush in a passably aggressive manner as he pulled a bag of litter out of the bottom of his pantry. "And 'David' seems like a really nice, reasonable guy. Where did you find him?"

Rush slipped a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and looked away.

"He found me," Rush said quietly.

Volker shut his eyes, pressing one hand against his mouth in the shadows of his disrupted kitchen. He stayed like that for one second.

Two.

Three.

He turned. Rush had an unlit cigarette in his mouth

"You really shouldn't smoke in here," Volker snapped, "With all this oil that you—"

Rush gave him a disdainful look.

"No," Volker said. "No. You're acting like I'm never—"

Rush's expression hardened. "Like I said. Bright," the mathematician murmured, "But not quick." He turned, stalking away toward the front door of Volker's small place.

"Crap," Volker murmured to himself, his voice breaking. "Can I at least call—" he began.

"No," Rush snapped, looking edgily out of Volker's front window.

"Okay," Volker whispered to himself. "Okay."

He crouched down and made a quiet clicking sound in Mendelssohn's direction. The cat was hiding behind his bookshelf. "Come on buddy," Volker said quietly, and after a few seconds, the cat took a few hesitant steps toward him. "Did the—" he had to work to keep his voice steady. "Did the insane pyromaniac scare you?"

Mendelssohn meowed plaintively.

"Yeah," Volker whispered. "Me too."

He coaxed the cat into his arms and walked back towards Rush, who was fiddling absently with a book of matches. At Volker's approach he lit one with obvious satisfaction and offered it to Volker.

Volker watched him for a moment, his eyes following the flare and subsequent steadying of the little flame.

"You want me to burn my own house down?" Volker whispered. He'd meant it to come out sarcastically, but instead his voice was utterly serious and unsteady.

"It's that, or watch me do it," Rush said, his voice dark and inescapable.

Something about the immediacy of the light, the darkening of the wood, and the slow, steady progression of the fire down toward Rush's fingertips tore through the fog of shock that had separated him from everything that had happened. No matter what he chose, whether he went with Rush or whether he tried to escape, whether he believed the threat to his graduate students or not—nothing would be the same. Everything he had built, his papers, his lab, his contributions to stellar dynamics and galaxy formation, his work on the radio array—

"Within the span of twenty four hours," Rush whispered, "The scope of your old life will seem unimaginably small."

"I like my life," Volker whispered.

"You liked it," Rush said.

"Yeah," Volker whispered. He shivered slightly, but he shifted his grip on his cat and took the match, watching it for a moment before tossing it in a burning arc to land squarely on a slick of olive oil that now irregularly covered the first floor of his house.

Rush struck a second match and lit his cigarette before sending the matchstick in a flaming parabola to a different section of the room.

They stood together in awkward silence.

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention to Telford that I set your lab on fire," Rush said after a moment.

"Um, okay. Sure."

"He prefers things to be a bit more," Rush paused to take a long drag of his cigarette. "Low-profile than I do."

"Yeah, I get that."

"Do you."

"Yup."

They were silent for a minute, watching Volker's living room begin to go up in flames as Rush smoked his cigarette. After about thirty seconds, Volker spoke.

"I don't really—" he said, doing his best to keep his voice steady. "I don't really need to watch this—so—" He made a helpless sort of hand gesture in the direction of his ceiling. He could feel Mendelssohn becoming restive as the flames began to grow.

"Yes of course," Rush snapped, flicking his mostly-finished cigarette towards a different portion of the room and coming to stand immediately next to Volker. He pulled a small remote out of his pocket and hit a button. The red-gold of the flames and the blackening of his carpet faded out in a flash of white. He found himself back in the same small, dark room that Telford had dragged him out of not half an hour earlier.

Volker looked at his watch.

It was half past ten in the morning, Pacific time.

"Where should I put this stuff?" Volker asked.

"Wherever," Rush responded, over his shoulder as he strode out of the room.

"Great," Volker said, scratching behind his cat's ears. He set Mendelssohn down and started dragging his stuff out of the center of the room, piling it against the wall. When he was finished, he dug a hand into his bag and pulled out Mendelssohn's plastic water bowl, still wet from the water he'd dumped down the sink in his haste to finish his shoddy packing job.

He looked at the small pile of items against the wall for a moment before turning away.

He stepped into a hallway that, if he'd had to guess, seemed to run the length of the small ship. On the floor were miscellaneous pieces of equipment, a few crates, and a rather hefty textbook with a red cover, which was open. Volker suspected that this had been the item he had tripped over earlier. To his right, the hallway ended in what he now recognized as the doorway that lead to the cockpit, or bridge, or whatever it was that they called it where he'd been handcuffed to a freaking chair no twenty minutes previous. Directly across from him was a closed door with an interesting looking keypad interface. To his left there were several other doors coming off the main hall, all closed. The hallway terminated in yet another closed door.

"Friendly place," Volker murmured to his cat, his voice admirably steady.

For his part, Mendelssohn seemed unperturbed.

"So you're taking this well," Volker whispered. "Were you meant to be a space cat?"

Mendelssohn just purred in a steady rhythm.

"Let's find you some space water," Volker said quietly. "What do you say?"

"Rush," he called into the apparently empty ship.

A door hissed open and a bright light spilled into the hallway.

"What?" Rush snapped, his voice echoing from what was probably the bathroom.

"Um," Volker said, hesitantly approaching the open door. To his relief when he drew level with the small room, he could see that Rush was angling a small mirror, trying to get a good look at his neck, rubbing at the skin a few inches above his collar bone.

"Do you know much about human anatomy?" Rush asked absently.

"No," Volker said, fighting down a wave of nausea at the memory of metal sliding its way beneath skin. "The neck has lots of important stuff in it though. I'm pretty sure about that."

"I think I could cut it out," Rush whispered. "If I had to."

"Okay," Volker said, striving for utter neutrality in both face and voice, trying not to imagine what that would look like. "I just need to get some water. For my cat."

Rush glanced over at him and put the mirror down, stepping away from broad, shallow gold basin that was clearly a sink, but with a design aesthetic that seemed a bit ostentatious for a space ship.

But yeah, maybe that was just him?

"There's an awful lot of—gold um, detailing?" Volker waved a hand at the ornate sink.

"Ridiculous isn't it," Rush said dryly as Volker flipped on the water. "That will be the Goa'uld influence," he continued, "Though, to be honest, the Lucian Alliance has a ridicule-worthy aesthetic all their own, as you'll discover soon enough."

"You realize," Volker said, filling Mendelssohn's small water bowl, "That I have no idea what you just said."

"Does your cat have a name?"

"Mendelssohn," Volker said.

Rush said nothing. He looked away, his shoulders clearly tensing, his hands coming to grip the edge of the sink.

"Um," Volker said uncertainly. "Is there something wrong with—"

"That's a fucking terrible name for a cat," Rush hissed and brushed past him back into the dimness of the hall.

Volker said nothing. He set the bowl on the edge of the sink and turned off the water, then picked it up, maintaining his one-handed grip on his cat as he walked back into the hallway.

Rush was standing at the door at the end of the hall, his head bowed. At Volker's appearance, he pressed a button and the metal panel swished back.

"You can put your things in the cargo bay," Rush said, not looking at him, and motioning vaguely at the room that had just opened. "I'd leave your cat in there for the time being. Give David some time to adjust to you before we tell him you brought a pet."

"You said he would be fine with it," Volker said uncertainly, walking slowly toward the end of the hall.

"No," Rush said. "I said he wouldn't kill it."

"Rush," Volker said, unable to keep the panicky rise out of his voice.

"He's not going to fucking torture it either," Rush said, rolling his eyes, "Jesus Christ, Volker, try to hold it together, will you?" He waited a few seconds with increasing impatience. When Volker finally reached the door, Rush pointed to the small, glowing control panel. "Unsurprisingly, blue opens the door for a twenty second interval. Holding the button down until it lights up will lock the door in an open position, shut it again by hitting the red button. Hold the red button down and it seals the door. Opening it again requires a CPU override and an 8-digit numeric command code, which I am not supposed to know. It's 16180339."

"You're kidding," Volker said uncertainly.

"No," Rush said. "I suspect it's purely a mathematical ostentation. The Goa'uld are heavily invested in iconography and semiotics and not so invested in effective cryptography. I suspect David has no idea of its significance, or he would have altered it by now."

"So you just guessed the command code?"

"It lends itself to that, does it not?" Rush raised his eyebrows.

Volker wasn't sure if that was a yes or a no, but before he could marshal his thoughts, Rush had turned and headed back toward the front of the ship. Volker made short work of moving his things into the cargo bay. He spread a handful of cat food on the shiny metal floor next to the water dish, set up the litter box as fast as he could and then stepped out of the cargo bay, shutting the door behind him.

He entered the bathroom, letting the door swish shut behind him, and turned on the water, splashing his face several times with cold water, trying to settle himself before venturing back out and heading in the direction of the bridge.

Rush was sitting in the same seat he had slid into earlier, one foot propped on the control panel, tapping a pen against the pages of a small, handheld notebook.

Volker sat down in the chair he had previously been handcuffed to. He took a deep breath and tried not to think about the fact that miles below him both his home and his lab were currently on fire.

"So," he said after it became apparent that Rush was not going to talk to him without prompting. "Did you get, um, kidnapped as well?"

Rush gave him a withering look.

Volker really wasn't sure how to interpret that. Was that a clear 'yes'? A clear 'no'? Was it supposed to convey disdain for his choice of conversational topic? An indicator that Rush had absolutely no interest in finding any kind of common ground between them? A demonstration that Rush had no interest in making small talk?

Volker had no idea.

"Okay," he said, mainly to himself.

Rush wrote something down in his notebook.

"What are you working on?" he asked, trying a different tack.

"I'm waiting," Rush said, unhelpfully.

Volker gave it up. He returned his attention to examining the displays in front of him. In addition to the vacillating histogram and the schematic of the ship he had noticed earlier, there was a touch-screen based menu that featured blocks of text in different colors. Too bad he couldn't read any of it.

He started to look for repeating characters and soon his eye became practiced at picking out the unfamiliar arrangement of lines that seemed to approximate letters. He began the attempt to name and count the symbols, trying to get a sense of whether the alphabet was phonetic or not and as he did so he realized that some of the "letters" he was beginning to pick out looked like shapes—some of them vaguely suggestive of birds or eyes, almost as if they were stylized, streamlined versions of hieroglyphics.

"Huh," Volker said under his breath.

With that observation under his belt, he started to notice repeated patterns. There was a "word" that appeared to be a header on the graph he had tentatively decided was a graphical representation of available power that also appeared on the touchscreen menu.

He touched it.

With a satisfying little trill the display changed to a series of graphs that displayed in gradients of green and red, one of which matched the subtly fluttering histogram of the adjacent console.

He felt a thrill of excitement despite his current situation. There was flatlined graph that he guessed was probably total power consumption vs time, several more histograms that likely represented power reserves and various smaller graphs with associated submenus, which, if he'd had to guess, he would have pegged as power consumption

by different systems. The word for power appeared all over the screen. Volker tried to fix it in his mind. Rectangle. Bird. Other bird. Feather. He also had the feeling that the word 'time' was something like—rope, sail, birthday cake, feather.

It probably was not actually a birthday cake.

There had to be a way to get out of the "power" submenu and back to the main interface. He looked around for a likely looking set of symbols, but didn't see one.

A colored triangle maybe?

He looked at them, chewing his lip.

"The purple one," Rush murmured.

"Thanks," Volker said, looking up at him.

Rush looked at him steadily for a moment. "Purple takes you up a level, yellow drills you down. Red terminates and blue indicates movement ahead."

Volker looked at him uncertainly.

There was a soft mechanized beep and Rush looked away over to the console. He grimaced slightly and hit a button.

"David," he said.

"Rush." Telford sounded like he was trying to speak quietly. "I'm having a problem with activating a remote beam out."

"That's odd," Rush said, looking like he did not find it at all odd. His expression was intent and he shifted his gaze toward the floor on his right, drumming his fingers rapidly over the console.

"It is, isn't it?" Telford hissed.

"Are you attempting to imply something, David?" Rush asked. "You know that subtle social cues aren't my strong point."

"Knock it off," Telford said. "And beam me out."

"Stand by," Rush said. He leaned down and unhooked a device from the main panel, which looked like it had been cobbled together out of circuit board and various connectors. Rush pulled a flashdrive out of a USB port that connected somehow to the tangle of wires and slipped it into his pocket. He put the device back on the floor and then pressed down on the touchscreen interface.

"What is that?" Volker asked.

"No USB ports on cannibalized Goa'uld vessels," Rush said.

"But why do you—"

"Drop it," Rush snapped abruptly.

"Fine," Volker said nearly silently.

Half a minute later Telford stalked onto the bridge. He shot a fleeting glance in Volker's direction. "Your meds are in the bathroom."

"Thanks," Volker said.

Rush rolled his eyes.

"You're welcome," Telford said, giving Rush a pointed look. He sat down in the empty seat next to the mathematician.

"Get your shit off the bridge," Telford added.

"This," Rush said, picking up the messy-looking circuit board, "is a mechanically sophisticated and ingeniously designed adapter that interfaces two technologies with

essentially no commonalities beyond making use of the flow of charges. It cannot, in any way, be classified as 'shit'."

"Well it looks like shit," Telford said through a clenched jaw. He didn't look at Rush.

Rush handed the device to Volker.

"Did you explain anything to him?" Telford asked, pulling up a display that turned the monitor in front of him into a set of what looked to be three paired controls arranged in a radial manner.

"He can pick it up as he goes along," Rush said. "There is no way to explain any of this in a time efficient manner."

Telford sighed and then spun his chair to face Volker.

"This ought to be good," Rush said, bracing one foot against the console. "Give him the three minute version, why don't you?"

Volker watched Telford's jaw clench and couldn't help the slight jump in his own heart rate at being the focus of the other man's attention.

"You're in a space ship built by an alien race known as the Goa'uld," Telford said. "They're parasitic snakes that cut their way through the skin in the back of your throat and wrap around your spinal cord and attach to the base of your brain, allowing them to control your actions."

Volker really wasn't sure how to respond to that.

"Apparently they really liked Ancient Egypt or Ancient Egypt was based on their culture? Whatever. It's not really my area. Anyway, the point is, that they have historically been the dominant power in this galaxy but within the past ten years, we've pretty much destroyed their power base through a series of tactical and ideological victories. Unfortunately that's left a power vacuum which has subsequently been filled by an association known as the Lucian Alliance, an ambitious, powerful group of humans with the vision necessary to step in and provide the leadership that countless broken, damaged worlds require."

Volker's eyes flicked to Rush as he saw the other man bring his hand up, running his fingers absently over the subcutaneous tracking device. The mathematician's expression was pained.

Telford paused briefly, noting the trajectory of Volker's gaze. "Or at least," the other man amended, "That's what they'd have the citizens of those worlds believe."

"And you work for them?" Volker asked.

"No," Telford said. "I am infiltrating their organization, as part of a covert operation launched by the USAF."

"And Rush and I?" Volker asked.

"That's a little more complicated," Telford said, looking away. "Technically, I recruited Rush to do some work for the LA."

"Recruited," Volker said, trying for sarcasm but not quite making it there. "Is that what they're calling it these days?"

"Shut up, both of you," Rush snapped abruptly, pulling his foot off the console and sitting forward. "We have to break orbit now or we're not going to make the fucking rendezvous to get your fucking precious intel."

"Nick," Telford said forcefully, swinging back to fix Rush with an intent look. "Can you just—calm down?"

Something seemed to pass between them, and Rush looked away after a few seconds, his posture relaxing marginally, his hands coming out to rest on the panel in front of him.

For a moment, no one said anything.

"Want to give me ten percent?" Telford asked quietly.

"You have it," Rush said.

They began to slowly break orbit, their position rotating until the blues and greens of the earth were no longer visible as Telford controlled their axis deviation with the pressure of his fingers against the screen in front of him. Finally they were oriented away from their planet, away from everything Volker had ever known, the trajectory that Rush was plotting taking them out of orbit, out of the solar system, out into darkness.

Chapter Two

Volker tried not to appear too impressed at the spectacular Neptune fly-by on their way out of the solar system, as neither Rush nor Telford seemed particularly interested in the gorgeous blue cast of its methane-rich atmosphere, or the shadows cast by ridges of high altitude clouds. The sight of the planet certainly contributed to the air of unreality that he found himself battling on minute-to-minute basis.

"What's our current velocity?" Volker asked, unable to completely contain his curiosity.

"Relative to what?" Rush snapped. "Aren't you an astrophysicist? Aren't frames of reference fucking fundamental to every waking moment of your professional life?"

"Um," Volker said, taken aback. "Relative to whatever convention is used by space-faring people, okay? Or space-faring Goa'uld? I don't know."

"Our current velocity is ninety percent of the speed of light," Telford said shortly. "What the hell did you bring him along for if you're not going to tell him anything?"

"Ninety percent of the speed of light," Rush said disdainfully, "That means fuck all to anyone."

"It's a universal constant," Telford snapped back.

"Exactly."

"You're making some kind of subtle semantic argument that you're not even going to bother to explain just because you're pissed about the fact that I put a transmitter in your neck."

There was an awkward silence.

"Displacement from a common source was implied," Volker said mildly. "So almost 186,000 miles per second relative to the sun, probably."

"Yes," Rush said tersely. "Stars are generally chosen as the relevant point of reference."

"So we should be experiencing relativistic effects," Volker said, trying to sound confident. Because he was confident, at least when it came to relativistic physics.

"And we are," Rush replied. "An unfortunate necessity when leaving the solar system. We'll jump to hyperspace shortly, at which point the time dilation will cease."

"Hyperspace?" Volker couldn't help himself.

"Are you sure he's going to be useful?" Telford asked.

"Hyperspace has been neither detected nor studied by terrestrial physicists," Rush snapped at Telford. "Just because you spend most of your time there doesn't put it or its properties inside the sphere of common knowledge."

"Fine," Telford said, managing to sound both offended and placating at the same time.

"So if our perceived time for transit from earth to Neptune is a bit over five hours—" Volker trailed off, doing some mental math, "Then time seen by a stationary observer would be less than ten hours."

Rush sighed in a manner that suggested that something about Volker's approximation had personally offended him.

"You think my math is wrong?" Volker asked.

Telford rolled his eyes.

Rush lifted his hands away from the controls, clenched them once, quickly, into fists and then opened them again, his expression frozen, as if he didn't trust himself to

respond. After half a second, he shot to his feet and stalked away, his hand slamming against the door controls.

"Change your fucking clothes," Telford yelled after him.

"Um—can he just—" Volker began, trying to fight down the uncertainty in his own voice. "Walk out of here?"

"Ideally?" Telford snapped, "No. But he already plotted our course."

"Oh." Volker said. "Do you need me to—" he wasn't really sure how to continue, uncertainty warring with his natural tendency to offer help, warring with the fact that he didn't particularly want to be helping Telford. Or Rush either, for that matter. "—do anything?"

Telford glanced back at him briefly, his expression closed. After a few seconds he jerked his head. "Get up here."

The display in front of Volker was significantly more complicated than the one at the lateral station he had just vacated. He didn't have much of a chance to examine it before Telford spoke.

"You'll need to learn Goa'uld," Telford said shortly. "And possibly Ancient as well."

"Ancient?"

Telford sighed. "Look, there are a bunch of training videos that I illegally copied that you can watch, presuming Rush didn't erase them or somehow convert them into some ridiculous piece of circuitry, but until then, just try to pick this stuff up as you go. You're a smart guy, right? Or is he bullshitting about that as well?"

"Um, no," Volker said, trying not to sound as utterly out of his depth as he felt. "I have a PhD in astrophysics."

"Do you have any idea how many god damned astrophysicists I know?" Telford asked.

"None?" Volker guessed.

"At least fifty. That's a low estimate. And only two of them are really outstanding."

"Okay," Volker said, not really sure where the other man was going with this.

"And you," Telford said, "You had better be number three."

"You abducted me, you know," Volker felt compelled to point out.

"Wrong answer," Telford snapped. "The correct answer, is 'you're damn right I'm number three'. And, as I explained, I did not abduct you. Rush did that."

Volker stared out the forward window, his jaw locked.

"For what it's worth," Telford said, "I'm sorry you got dragged into all this. That was—not the plan. He was supposed to break into your office and take your data. Not talk to you. Not abduct you."

"So why did he do it then?" Volker asked through clenched teeth. "Why destroy my life?"

"He needs your help, apparently," Telford said, his expression guarded. "With one of the greatest mysteries—one of the greatest potential discoveries that mankind has ever made. He's attempting to unlock one of the last remaining frontiers that our species has yet to conquer."

"Rush." Volker said dubiously.

"Yes." Telford said shortly. "Rush. Rush and I."

"If you say so," Volker replied, fighting to keep his face and his voice neutral.

Privately, he was fairly convinced that whatever Rush and Telford were up to, it was very unlikely that the acquisition of knowledge was their primary goal.

"You're part of something greater than you could possibly imagine," Telford said quietly. "Whether you realize that yet or not."

"I'll keep that in mind," Volker replied, hearing some of his doubt creep into his tone.

Something about his reply seemed to irritate Telford. The other man's expression darkened and closed. "Tap the flashing text," Telford said shortly, with a quick glance at the screen in front of Volker. "We're beyond the range of earth-based sensors. We won't be detected if we engage our hyperdrive."

Volker tapped the string of hieroglyphics. The mostly empty darkness of space in front of them blurred and brightened into linear streaks of what he could only assume must be starlight. He jerked in surprise, in spite of himself.

Telford pulled his hands away from the controls, hit a depressible part of the console and then turned to face Volker. "You're going to need a new outfit. Which is a pain in the ass by the way."

"So sorry to inconvenience you," Volker said.

"Go put on whatever you have that looks as close to what I'm wearing as possible."

Volker gave Telford a dubious look, eyeing the black boots, the black leather pants, and matching black leather jacket over a dark shirt of an unfamiliar cut. The overall aesthetic was—extremely intimidating.

"Um, it's not going to be very—" Volker trailed off as Telford stood and walked off the bridge without giving him a second glance. The door to the bridge swished open and then shut.

"—close," Volker finished in the empty room.

Four hours later found Volker eating a power bar as he sat alone in a room that seemed to be something between a workspace and—well, he wasn't sure what. Plastic containers and crates were stacked, low and irregularly against the walls, leaving a clear space for a central table that was mostly covered with a variety of electronic equipment, a bottle of alcohol, several small notebooks, and what appeared to be a modified version of a terrestrial soldering gun.

Terrestrial. Yup. He was pretty sure he'd never really needed to add that adjective to anything before.

It was difficult, with starlight streaking in a linear manner past the room's only window, to keep his attention focused on this—training video. Or whatever the hell it was.

"—Shol'va. This is the Goa'uld word for 'traitor,' but in a broader cultural context it came to be applied to not just individuals, but entire scientific, philosophical, and theological disciplines that defied Goa'uld convention. Methods to ensure conformity have historically been and currently are extreme. After failure of conventional methods, such as physical and psychological torture, the Goa'uld have been known to employ methods of coercive persuasion, more commonly referred to as 'brainwashing'."

"You're kidding," Volker said to the image of one Dr. Daniel Jackson that he was watching on someone's borrowed laptop.

"In order to gain a greater understanding into the physiology behind this technology, please refer to Dr. Carolyn Lam's video 'Recognizing thought control in its various manifestations,'" Dr. Jackson continued. "The concept of Shol'va, can be first traced back to Ra, who introduced the term in—"

Volker jumped as the door slid open. It was Telford.

"We're going to drop out in a few minutes," the other man said shortly. "Get ready."

"For what?" Volker asked, but Telford had already disappeared.

He shut the laptop and looked down at himself critically. He was wearing black jeans, black dress shoes that Telford had done his best to beat the hell out of, a black T-shirt, and a black dress shirt that was unbuttoned and untucked, giving the vague impression of a jacket.

He did not look badass. In any way.

Volker spent a few seconds wondering what the hell he should be doing to 'get ready,' to go to an alien world, but couldn't think of anything in particular except to focus on the nervous sense of anticipation that seemed to flutter somewhere around his rapidly beating heart.

An alien planet.

An alien planet?

Yeah. Apparently.

A brief sense of deceleration and the suddenly stationary nature of the stars let him know that they had dropped out of hyperspace. Volker had a difficult time thinking of 'hyperspace' as a real thing. Same problem with 'hyperdrives', and god forbid, 'hyperspeed'? Hypervelocity?

That sounded idiotic.

He went to the window and looked out. Below him, closer than he'd been prepared to expect, and growing closer all the time was a green and brown world, cloud covered, and very much, very much like earth. It was hard to tell the scale of the planet, as he didn't have a good way of judging how far from it they were, but if he'd had to guess, he would have put it at maybe 1.3 times the size of the earth. The refractive index of the clouds was such that he was fairly confident they were water vapor.

They began their descent through the atmosphere, with only a hint of any pressure against their ship by the airflow attack. He wondered how that worked.

If there were clouds, and there were, most certainly, clouds, it seemed likely that the planet had a strong enough magnetic field to protect it from the solar wind of its parent star, which Volker could also see, shining a yellow-gold a great distance away. If there was a magnetic field the core of the planet was likely still liquid and hot and rotating—

His mind continued to race, cataloguing as much information as it could about this place before the ship came to rest on a disappointingly normal looking patch of bare earth.

He left the room, and stood for a moment in the central hallway, waiting for the other two to appear. Rush showed up a few seconds later, stepping out of a door next to the transportation room. Volker hadn't seen him since he left the bridge four hours previously. The other man was dressed in a fashion that was similar to Telford—almost entirely in black leather, but he was wearing his glasses, which gave the entire picture a somewhat bizarre accent.

"You're fucking kidding me," Rush said, taking in Volker's outfit.

"Yeah," Volker said. "Nice to see you too."

The door at the end of the hall hissed open and Telford stalked out.

"We're in powered down," he said, "And cloaked."

"Cloaking?" Volker said as Telford brushed by him. "Seriously?"

"You couldn't do any better than that?" Rush asked disdainfully, flinging a hand in Volker's direction. "He looks terrible. By any standards."

"You're one to talk. Take off your fucking glasses, Nick."

"Fuck off," Rush said, but pulled his glasses off and tucked them somewhere inside his jacket.

Telford said nothing, just glared at the pair of them as he jabbed the blue button on the door controls to the transport room with one vicious finger.

"So," Volker said. "Where are we?"

"Rolan," Telford said shortly. "It's a planet under the control of the Lucian Alliance."

"And what are we doing here, exactly?"

"I am meeting my contact. You are going with Rush."

"Great," Volker said, eyeing the mathematician skeptically as they followed Telford to the circle etched into the floor. "And we're supposed to do what, exactly?"

"Find you some clothes."

"I'm unsure we can handle that level of danger and intrigue," Rush said dryly.

"Do not," Telford said, glaring at Rush. "Light anything on fire."

"I would never," Rush replied, managing to look affronted.

"Didn't you guys like—kidnap me to do astrophysics for you? Why are you taking me to a planet?" Volker asked, genuinely curious about their motivations. Despite his best efforts, he felt like the question came out more excited than suspicious.

"First of all," Telford said, "We did not kidnap you. Rush recruited you."

"Oh. Thanks for clarifying that one," Volker said.

"Second, I can't just have some untrained earth-based astrophysicist on my hands, so you're going to need enough experience to pass for a member of the LA. At least at first glance."

"Um, why?"

"Many reasons," Telford said shortly. "For one, the initiation procedures for outsiders are—extreme."

"Extreme." Volker couldn't help the sudden chill any more than he could help glancing at Rush. The mathematician's expression was utterly neutral, his stance uncharacteristically still. He did not look back at Volker.

"Let's leave it at that," Telford said. He hit a button on a small device he carried in his hand.

Volker had been expecting the white flare of the beaming technology but he jerked in surprise as they were surrounded by a strange, rushing set of what looked like metal rings. His ears filled with a tone that was really almost more of a vibration than a sound. The loops of metal or—whatever the hell they were, collapsed down and then lifted back up, and when they did so, he found himself squinting in the brightness of natural daylight.

The sky was white, obscured by a homogenous cloud cover of low elevation. It looked like it might rain at any moment. A cold wind sliced through the thin material of his shirt, and tore at his hair. Ahead of them was a small settlement.

He looked straight above him at the overhanging hull of the ship, trying to figure out where the rings had gone. There was a circle etched into the metal above them.

"It's a reverse platform built into the exterior hull," Rush said, tracking the direction of Volker's gaze.

"Go into town," Telford said, "Buy him some clothes, and get the hell back here. Don't talk to anyone you don't need to talk to." With that, the other man started away from the ship, heading away from the small town, and out into what looked like endless fields of corn.

Rush watched him for the span of about twenty seconds, his expression tense and unhappy.

"Isn't he worried that we'll escape?" Volker asked, trying to resist the impulse to cross his arms against the cold wind.

"On a planet like this?" Rush asked, fixing Volker with an almost intolerable stare. "There's nowhere to go."

"Ah," Volker said quietly.

"This is not going to work," Rush said, still looking at him.

"Which part?" Volker asked.

Rush stepped forward and started ripping the small white buttons off Volker's dress shirt and dropping them on the ground. After a few seconds of surprise, Volker tore them off the cuffs of his sleeves with some difficulty. When they had gotten rid of the buttons, Rush bent down and came up with two handfuls of loose, dusty earth, which he proceeded to smear over Volker's shirt.

"What the hell?"

"You're too clean," Rush explained. "And this kind of material?" he said, yanking on the loose fabric at the shoulder of Volker's shirt, "Is useless in this kind of environment and consequently is worn by people of the lowest rank. And no offense, but I think we'd have a hard time passing you off as a prostitute."

"Um, thank you?" Volker said.

Rush rolled his eyes. "So we'll go with liberated slave or other person of dubious origins."

"Great," Volker said. "Just when I thought my day could not get any worse."

"I wouldn't say that if I were you," Rush replied, grinding dirt into Volker's back.

The wind whistled around the corners of the ship.

After a few more minutes, Rush was satisfied and they set off toward the small town. Well, "town" was perhaps a bit too ambitious a term for whatever this was. There couldn't have been more than twenty or thirty buildings, and none of them were more than a single story. Gray dust clung to everything.

"How do they get the corn to grow?" Volker asked.

He was more thinking aloud than actually addressing Rush, but he got a glare in return.

"I'd imagine in the usual way," Rush said testily.

"The soil just seems—really crappy," Volker said mildly.

The mathematician's irritation seemed to fade and he stopped abruptly, dragging the edge of his boot through the fine, dusty earth that made up the only road into the settlement.

"Agreed," Rush said finally. The other man grimaced faintly.

"What?" Volker asked.

"It's probably nothing," Rush murmured, and began walking again.

"What's probably nothing?" Volker asked pointedly.

"I doubt that's ordinary corn."

"Seeing as we're on an alien planet, yeah, I'd agree."

Rush shot him a glare. "You need to learn when to shut up and absorb information."

"Well, you're not the most communicative guy," Volker said, frustrated. "So far all I know is that you think the corn on this planet is weird. Which, by the way, I pointed out to you."

"The Lucian Alliance," Rush said, hissing the words, "is very much invested in the idea of behavioral and thought control. Some of their food is genetically engineered to contain psychostimulants, or worse."

"And you think this corn—"

"Possibly."

"Creepy," Volker said after a significant pause.

"Yes," Rush whispered. "I recommend not letting anyone know that you have this information."

"What about Telford?" Volker said.

"Especially not Colonel Telford," Rush replied darkly.

They had nearly reached the edges of the settlement.

"Why not?" Volker whispered urgently. "What is going on with you guys?"

Rush just shook his head, and indicated the settlement with his eyes. The warning was clear enough, and Volker dropped his line of questioning with a frustrated sigh.

As they wound their way through the low buildings, Volker was surprised to notice that the entire place seemed to be a bizarre mixture of high and low tech—with dirt roads trafficked primarily by people on foot as well as by supplies loaded down on hovering platforms. They passed what seemed to be shops of various kinds until they came to an open-air market that clearly was the kind of place that would be selling the kind of outfit Rush was wearing.

They quickly perused the stalls, but there wasn't much available. They managed to purchase a likely looking pair of leather pants, from a raggedly attired, nearly emaciated man, but could not find much else.

After a brief time, Rush put an end to their shopping with terse, "Let's go."

Volker peeled himself away from examining a small metal device of unknown function. To his surprise, they did not head back in the direction of the ship, but instead continued on, crossing the settlement almost completely, navigating away from highly trafficked areas.

"Rush," Volker hissed as they turned down a dubious-looking alleyway. "Where are we going?"

"There's something I need to do," Rush murmured.

"Telford said—"

Rush stopped abruptly and turned the full force of his furious gaze on him.

Volker flinched, involuntarily.

"You and I have a set of skills that Colonel Telford lacks," Rush said in a low hiss, "And until such a time as he manages to acquire said skills or we, through some means, lose them, his power over us will always be limited by the fact that he requires our ability to perform certain tasks."

"Um," Volker said, holding up his hands as Rush stepped forward.

"Don't allow him to dictate your agenda," the mathematician murmured. "Develop one for yourself."

"Kinda hard when—"

"It's always hard."

They stared at each other for a few minutes, until Rush turned and continued down the narrow alley. Volker tried to ignore the closeness of the buildings, the way they seemed to press in and down and heavy upon him. He held his leather pants to his chest. When they reached the end of the narrow passage, he was surprised to note that they had crossed the settlement entirely. Beyond the buildings was a dry empty patch of dust before a wall of the strange, threatening corn sprung up, dark against the sky.

"Stay here," Rush whispered, pressing him back against the rough wood of a building at the end of the alleyway.

"But—" Volker wasn't entirely sure whether he was protesting for his own sake or for Rush's. In either case, splitting up did not seem like a good idea.

"I have to go alone," Rush whispered. "I'll be back shortly. If anything happens, go back to the ship."

"What do you think is going to happen?" Volker whispered, the words tripping over each other in urgency.

"Probably nothing," Rush whispered, his eyes flicking restively out into the empty space beyond the settlement, where the open swath of dusty land gave way to alien corn, where anything could be concealed.

"I don't think this is a good idea," Volker whispered.

"Neither do I," Rush replied, giving him a half smile that looked more rueful than anything. He stepped back a pace and then turned, heading out into the dusty, windswept ground behind the buildings.

"Rush," Volker whispered. "Rush."

The other man did not turn.

"Damn it," he mouthed silently.

The wind was picking up, swirling the dust up into small eddies. There was no one in sight.

He couldn't just stand here, hoping Rush would come back. That much was clear. Peering around the edge of the building seemed unreasonably risky. He bit his lip, pressing back against the rough wood, trying to force his brain to come up with some kind of practical solution.

Too bad he didn't have a mirror.

What did he have? A pair of leather pants, his own dirty outfit—and in the pocket of his jeans, slipped in by habit, was his iPhone. Volker pulled it out. The reflective black surface of the touchscreen reflected the gray-white of the sky.

Excellent.

Pressing himself back against the building, he angled his phone, extending it out past the corner. He could see Rush's silhouette—an unmistakable energetic darkness against the sky. The mathematician was approaching another man, a lone, broad-shouldered outline.

Rush stopped several feet away from the other man.

Volker could hear the indistinct sound of their voices over the whistling of the wind. He couldn't pick out any words.

Rush pulled something out of his jacket and held it up. Whatever it was, it was too small for Volker to make out.

The other man reached into his own jacket and removed what looked like an envelope. Neither of them moved. They appeared to be talking. Volker glanced nervously to his right, down the empty deserted alleyway. He shivered at a particularly strong gust of wind.

A few, raindrops began to fall, hitting the earth and beading in the dust.

On the screen of his phone, he watched Rush take an abrupt step back.

As if that had been some kind of catalyst, some kind of unspoken signal, the pair of them exploded into sudden, violent motion. The taller man drove forward, landing a glancing blow to Rush's face as he ducked out of the way, using his momentum to half-avoid the punch and back away again, his hands open, as if he were trying to talk the other man down.

Crap.

Abruptly, Rush's hands snapped shut.

Both combatants came forward at the same time, darkened silhouettes merging. For a few seconds, they were still, locked together against the cold sky, and then Rush was taken down. Hard.

Not surprising. The other guy must have at least four inches on him.

Volker bit his lip, uncertain. On the small, dark screen that he held, it was impossible to tell who had the upper hand. But in many ways, it didn't really matter, because there was no way, no way that Rush was going to win this fight.

The guy was a mathematician for goodness' sake. And, arguably, Volker's best chance for successfully navigating his new life as a space-pirate. Or whatever it was that he was now.

He shoved his phone back into his pocket, dropped the leather pants and flung himself around the corner.

They were only twenty feet away, struggling in the dust—immediate and intense and more vicious than Volker had been prepared to imagine. They were fighting over something. Something that flashed silver in the diffuse, gray-white light of the afternoon.

A knife.

It was a knife and Rush was already half pinned and that was the only thing he had time to think of before he was there and dragging the other man back, off of Rush with all his strength, dragging him up and away and—

He hadn't really thought this through very well.

The man turned on him with a furious roar, the knife that he held coming down in a fast arc that Volker managed to dodge only partially.

He felt it slip along beneath his collarbone as he turned away from the full force of the blow, but the other man was turning too, pressing his advantage, driving the blade down into his outer shoulder. His eyes flicked to it, glinting in the soft light.

A shadow passed across the blade.

His attacker abruptly fell away, down into the dust.

Rush stood next to him, a flat, wide stone in his hand.

For a moment was no sound other than the labored gasps of both their breathing.

Rush dropped the rock.

"Don't look," he snapped.

Volker was having a difficult time focusing on anything except the sight of a knife buried in his shoulder.

"Volker," Rush snapped. "I said, don't look."

He looked at Rush.

"Better," Rush said. In one smooth, abrupt motion, he stepped in and carefully pulled the knife out of Volker's shoulder, clamping a hand down over the injury as he did so.

And that—

That really hurt.

A warm gush of blood flowed down his arm, hot and wet and soaking through the filthy material of his shirt. Reflexively he pressed his right hand down over Rush's grip on his left shoulder.

"Got it?" Rush asked.

"Yeah," Volker managed, feeling his pulse throb painfully beneath his hand.

"Alright," Rush said, withdrawing his hand and moving to lean over the man he'd hit with a rock.

"Did you kill him?" Volker asked.

"No," Rush said, his fingers at the other man's neck.

"Let's get out of here," Volker said, his entire body trembling with cold or with nerves, or with shock.

"Thirty seconds," Rush whispered. He was searching through the other man's pockets. He pulled out an envelope and tucked it inside his jacket. His eyes flicked back and forth several times between Volker and the unconscious man.

"Rush," Volker hissed insistently.

The scattered drops of rain began to fall faster.

With one efficient movement, Rush peeled the other man's leather jacket off and stood to half wrap it around Volker.

"Rush, let's go," Volker murmured. "What if he wakes up?"

"I said thirty seconds," Rush snapped, "And thirty seconds is what I meant." He knelt and, unbelievably, began to unlace the other man's boots.

"Rush you can't take this guy's boots."

"He stabbed you," Rush said. "And you also need boots. It's just and practical."

"Rush," Volker hissed, trying not to sound as hysterical as he felt as Rush cleaned the knife off on the fallen man's jacket, and slipped it somewhere inside his jacket. The mathematician picked up the boots and stood, his hand closing around Volker's good arm.

"Let's go," Rush snapped. "We'll keep to the outskirts."

Volker was having a hard time getting his feet moving.

Rush dragged him left, back toward the buildings. They stopped to retrieve the leather pants before taking a different, less trafficked route through the town.

It began raining in earnest.

"Do not pass out on me, Volker," Rush snapped, giving him a barely perceptible shake as he stumbled. "I do not want to carry you back to the damn ship."

"I" Volker said, despising the unsteadiness in his own voice, "Really hate you."

"Not unreasonable," Rush said quietly. "But fucking hold yourself together, won't you?"

Volker gritted his teeth and tried to stay focused on putting one foot in front of the other, trying to stay steady as they walked through the increasing downpour, the dust of the road settling and turning to muck as they made their way back to the ship. It took them twice the amount of time it had taken them to walk into the small settlement.

"So no one cares that you hit that guy with a rock?" Volker asked, managing to shake himself out of a haze as they passed the boundary of the cloak and the ship became visible. The rain seemed to abate somewhat inside the invisible barrier.

"Well," Rush said, "I would imagine he cares a great deal."

"What kind of world is this?"

"One that has known very little other than rule by force."

"We're academics," Volker said as they staggered beneath the limited cover of the ship, aligning themselves with the rings. "We're not meant for this sort of thing."

"You'd be surprised," Rush replied.

"What did you take from him? What was in that envelope?" Volker asked, realizing belatedly that his window of opportunity to question Rush about what had just happened was rapidly closing.

"I'm sure you'll find out soon enough," Rush whispered. He hit a button on the small device he carried with him, and the rings descended. A few seconds later they were standing in the transport room.

Volker felt his knees begin to buckle.

"No," Rush snapped. "Don't you dare."

Rush dragged him forward, hit the door controls, and pulled him into the hallway.

"Rush," Volker heard Telford call from the bridge. "Where the hell have you been?"

"We ran into some trouble," Rush called back evenly, dragging Volker toward the room with the laptops and crates.

"What kind of trouble?" Telford said, appearing in the doorframe.

"There was a minor disagreement over the reasonable price for a leather jacket and boots," Rush said.

Volker was having a hard time keeping the floor from spinning inappropriately.

"You got him knifed?" Telford sounded like he was underwater.

"I hardly think your phrasing is accurate," Rush snapped back. "Give me a hand here, will you?"

The blood was roaring in his ears.

"I cannot believe you got him fucking knifed. You are a fucking disaster of a human being."

His fingers were tingling.

"Fuck off. You're not being constructive."

His vision was fading out.

"Constructive. Constructive? You. You are talking to me about being constructive?"

He came to a few minutes later, lying on the same table that he'd been sitting at earlier.

"Well how long are we supposed to let the iodine sit?"

"I don't know. How long does it say?"

"It doesn't say. There aren't any instructions, Rush."

"Don't you have an Air Force kit?"

"No. That doesn't make any sense."

"Well, you have an Air Force uniform, do you not?"

"That's not the same thing. I need that."

"Well I need fucking instructions in my fucking first aid kits, alright? I'm a doctor of mathematics, not medicine, David."

"I think he needs stitches."

Volker tried to sit, but immediately two pairs of hands were holding him down.

"Hold still," Rush snapped.

"Are you alright?" Telford asked him, shooting a glare at Rush.

Volker tried to clear his head, gritting his teeth against the pain in his shoulder.

"You tell me," he said, trying to get a good look at his shoulder.

"You're going to be okay," Telford said. "You didn't lose too much blood. Fortunately. As stabbing wounds go, you got off pretty light."

Volker could feel his expression warp briefly into utter incredulity.

"I'm sure it hurts like a bitch though," the other man said.

"Yeah," Volker said through clenched teeth.

"Rush," Telford snapped. "Go sterilize the suturing equipment."

"Oh no," Volker said. "No, I don't think that's—"

"Yes it is," Telford said.

Rush narrowed his eyes, but he picked up the instruments and the small bottle of alcohol and stalked toward the door.

"Don't forget to heat them," Telford snapped.

Volker pressed a hand over his eyes. He heard the door hiss open and then shut again as Rush left the room.

"Is he really reliable enough to be—oh, I don't know, sterilizing things?"

"I hope so," Telford said, his gaze fixed on the closed door. "At least lighting the alcohol on fire will put him in a better mood."

"Great."

"What happened?" Telford asked, looking down at him.

Volker chewed his lip.

"It's okay," Telford said. "You can tell me. I know he's not—entirely stable."

Volker stopped chewing his lip.

He had seconds to decide on a course of action. Seconds, based on his limited experience with the pair of them to determine whom he was going to side with.

No thanks.

He might as well play the middle for as long as he possibly could.

"There was an open air market," Volker said, watching Telford carefully, "And Rush and this guy disagreed over a fair price for boots, a jacket, and a pair of pants. They started arguing."

Telford's expression was entirely neutral.

"Things were getting a little heated," Volker said. "But then, this guy tackles Rush. I guess I just instinctively pulled him off, but he comes up with a knife and stabs me in the shoulder. Things got a bit hazy after that, but Rush—ended up ah, knocking the other guy out—"

"Rush." Telford repeated, clearly skeptical.

"Yup," Volker said shortly. "He used a rock."

"I see," Telford said, his expression still unreadable. Volker had no idea if the man believed him or not. It was certainly no coincidence that they were having this conversation when Rush was outside, flame-sterilizing the metal suturing equipment.

"He's really, um, volatile?" Volker said, finally succeeding in levering himself up on his good elbow.

"Yes," Telford said shortly.

"What's the deal with that, exactly?" Volker asked.

"I suggest you find a way to handle him," Telford said, looking away. "Because I don't see the current situation improving much."

Volker said nothing. From the hallway, they heard the hiss of an opening door. A few seconds later Rush walked back into the room, gingerly holding a pair of forceps and something that looked like an oddly-designed pair of scissors but, from what Volker could see, was likely to actually function as more of a clamp of some kind.

"Where do you want these?" Rush snapped.

"Just hold them until I find the sutures." Telford was digging through the kit.

"You're serious about this?" Volker asked, the pitch of his voice rising slightly. He had been fairly convinced that the 'sterilize these instruments' line had been an excuse for Telford to question him without Rush being in the room.

"Yeah," Telford said shortly, emerging with a packet that contained surgical thread attached to a curved needle. "It's not going to heal properly unless I stitch this up." He looked over at Rush. "You're going to have to hold him down."

"Right," Rush breathed, sounding like he didn't relish the prospect any more than Volker did.

"Any time now," Telford said dryly.

Volker tried not to wince as Rush carefully handed the instruments over to Telford and then leaned over him, pressing down, his hands braced on Volker's good shoulder, and the bicep of his injured arm.

"Try not to move," Telford said shortly to Volker. "Unfortunately, we don't have any local anesthetic."

"You have a spaceship," Volker said incredulously, "But not anesthetic?"

"Be glad we have sutures," Telford said. "I'll be quick. This looks like it was kind of a slash-and-stick type of thing. You're going to need maybe three or four stitches in order for it to close up properly. I can be done in under two minutes."

"They teach this kind of thing in the Air Force?" Volker asked breathlessly.

"No," Telford said. "Don't talk." He met Volker's eyes. "Don't look."

Volker shut his eyes, grimacing. He felt the full force of Rush's weight pinning him to the table.

He felt the nearly intolerable sensation of sensitive, abraded flesh being apposed by the metal of the small clamp, the worse pain of a needle puncture and the draw of the suture material through his injured skin, then a sharp pull as Telford tied off the knot.

"Breathe," Rush snapped. "You're going to pass out."

Volker made an effort to try and breathe through the pain as the sensations repeated.

"Did you get that?" Telford asked quietly.

"Yes," Rush replied, his voice tight.

"Pinch," Telford murmured, "Puncture, pull, twist, and tie." There was a short jerk as he pulled to finish the knot. "Never touch the suture material itself with anything other than sterilized instruments."

"Obviously."

One more painful iteration, and it was over. Volker opened his eyes, blinking the reflexive moisture away. Rush rapidly backed off and Telford began taping a bandage down over the stitching. "Take it easy with that shoulder," Telford said.

"Yeah," Volker said weakly.

"Good man," Telford said, clapping him once on his good arm before beginning to repack the first aid kit.

Slowly, Volker pushed himself into a sitting position. He felt weak and shaky. "I'm going to go find a shirt," he said, feeling half-dazed.

"That's a fucking terrible idea," Rush snapped, looking at him with crossed arms before spinning on his heel and leaving the room.

They stared after him until the door hissed shut automatically.

"Do you think he's getting me a shirt?" Volker asked Telford.

"I'd say there's a seventy percent chance that's what he's doing," Telford said dryly. He finished packing up the first aid kit and turned, opening one of the plastic bins along the walls and pulling out a silver package, which he handed to Volker.

"What is this?" Volker asked, fingering the packaging.

"The LA equivalent of an MRE."

"What?" Volker asked.

"Food," Telford said, rolling his eyes. "Don't forget to drink water. You didn't lose a dangerous amount of blood, I don't think, but still. It's always a good idea to stay hydrated."

Volker stared at him.

"What?" Telford demanded.

"Sorry. You just sounded so—normal."

"I am normal."

"Um," Volker said. "Yeah. Thanks for stitching me up."

"You're welcome," Telford said shortly. "Look, there's some intel I need to go over, so I'll be on the bridge if you need me." He headed toward the door. "Just tell Rush to go screw himself if he starts harassing you."

"Piss off, David. I heard that," Rush said from the hallway, edging past Telford into the room, one of Volker's shirts in hand.

"What?" Telford snapped. "You know how you are."

Rush ignored him and walked forward to hand Volker a blue dress shirt. After a few seconds the door swished shut, sealing them in the room together. Volker started the awkward process of pulling the shirt on.

"No," Rush said, crossing his arms over his chest.

"No?" Volker asked.

"Injured side first," Rush murmured.

Volker stopped and reoriented, pulling the shirt over his left arm and then reaching around behind to hook his right arm through the open sleeve.

"You have a lot of experience with this sort of thing, do you?" he asked Rush testily.

To his surprise, Rush looked away and said nothing.

Volker buttoned his shirt.

"What is going on, Rush?" Volker whispered as his fingers looped buttons through holes with something less than his usual dexterity. "I've been on this ship for what?" he looked down at his watch, getting a painful stabbing sensation from his left shoulder as he raised and twisted his hand, "Ten hours? And how many times have I covered for you?"

"I'm not sure that I'd put it that way," Rush murmured.

"Then how would you put it?" Volker asked.

"That you find yourself in the midst of a rather subtle conflict and have not yet declared yourself for one side or the other."

They looked at each other.

"A course," Rush murmured, "That I would pursue as long as possible, if I were you."

"Thanks for the advice," Volker said dubiously.

"Eat your dinner," Rush said. "Drink some water. We start in thirty minutes."

"Start what?" Volker murmured.

"Working," Rush replied shortly.

His shoulder felt like it was on fire. The edges of the room were starting to melt and blur. He could never remember being this exhausted. He felt like he could barely maintain his grip on reality, let alone whatever the heck Rush was currently talking about.

"But what about the COBE map?" Rush snapped. "Even there, the quadrupole has a low amplitude compared to what you would predict. The WMAP data seems even more convincing on that front."

Telford had gone to bed hours ago, following the announcement that Volker would have to find a place to sleep, as they only had two bunks. It looked like he'd be sleeping in the cargo bay. If Rush ever let him leave.

"Volker. Volker. Jesus Christ. Are you even paying attention?"

"Yes," Volker said, feeling a panicky edge to his exhaustion. "A full Bayesian analysis—"

"God, you're going to fucking tell me about experimental error, aren't you?" Rush snapped. "I'm telling you that that's not the case here. There are great-scale anisotropies. They've been cross-culturally observed."

He wanted to take ten minutes to just sit. Sit and process everything that had happened to him in the past twelve hours. But before he did that, he wanted to sleep. Anywhere. Under any conditions. But the thing he wanted most of all was to get the hell away from Rush.

"Volker," Rush snapped, throwing his pen against the bulkhead wall.

Volker flinched.

"Fucking pay attention. I don't have an unlimited amount of time here, and you're not listening to what I'm saying. There are large scale anisotropies and that is a verifiable fact."

Rush was shouting.

"I'm not interested in your opinion on whether these fucking anisotropies exist or not, I'm interested in their topological distribution, given that they do exist, and whether there are any patterns that can be identified by superimposing your radiometric map over the WMAP in order to identify planets that may contain naquadria deposits within the confines of this galaxy because they're going to emit on a spectrum that will disrupt the CBR and give off EM radiation along every observable frequency, including radiowaves—"

He was fairly certain he had not ever heard anyone pack that much informational content into one sentence. One sentence that still wasn't ending.

"—as high energy EM radiation passes through differential distances of the dense material that makes up the deposits themselves, not to mention the planetary crust; or maybe that's utter shit, I don't know, I'm not an astrophysicist, I'm just fucking telling you what has been observed when one of these planets was studied."

Finally, Rush paused.

"Naquadria?" Volker repeated.

Rush sighed in what could only be interpreted as disgust.

"Yeah, okay," Volker said, managing to hold himself together with an almost superhuman effort. "Forget this." He got to his feet.

"What do you mean—"

"I mean forget this," Volker said. "Leave me alone, Rush. I'm going to bed."

Rush dug the heel of one hand into his temple, his expression tight, but he said nothing. Volker crossed the room and hit the door controls and stepped into the cool, dim space of the hallway. He stopped off in the bathroom to take his meds and drink a glass of water before he made his way unsteadily to the cargo bay, hitting the door controls and stumbling through.

The lights were dim—dimmer than they had been earlier in the day. He didn't have the mental energy to puzzle through why that might be.

He heard a quiet meow and saw Mendelssohn appear from behind a crate.

"Hey buddy," he said, sliding down the wall next to the canvas bag he'd packed that morning.

The cat padded over towards him, meowing plaintively.

"Sorry," Volker whispered. "Were you lonely?"

He reached into the bag of cat food and pulled out a small handful, placing it on the floor next to the half-empty water dish.

The cat began to crunch his way through the dry pellets, absently, Volker ran a hand over his back.

He knew he should make some kind of attempt to sort out the utterly untenable and wholly unbelievable situation he found himself in, but instead he found himself thinking of Nupur, who had, just this morning, been earnestly worried about the radio array, and of Brian, who had never had his committee meeting.

He brought a shaky hand up to his face.

He had no idea how to deal with any of this. In the span of one day, he'd been abducted, knifed, and almost continuously ridiculed.

It was a lot to take.

He felt too stunned by all of it to really respond in any kind of meaningful way.

He stared at his empty hands.

After a few minutes, Mendelssohn came and curled up in his lap.

Volker decided that this was as good a place as any to go to sleep. He tried slumping over his bag, but his shoulder was much too painful for that, so he just stayed where he was, with his cat in his lap. After only a few minutes, his eyes fell shut.

"Volker." Someone was speaking quietly. "Dale. Dale."

He opened his eyes to find Rush crouching across from him, uncomfortably close in the dim light.

Volker jerked abruptly in spite of himself, startling Mendelssohn, who leapt out of his lap abruptly.

"What?" he asked. "What time is it?"

"It's late," Rush murmured. "Get up."

"No. No. I'm not—"

"Just—" Rush cocked his head. "Just get up, will you?"

Something about the way the other man said it made him pull his feet beneath him and stand. Rush helped him to his feet and pulled him into the hallway, stopping in front of one of the rooms that Volker hadn't entered. Rush hit the door controls, and the door swished open. It was nearly pitch dark in the room, but Rush pulled him forward, guiding him toward a low mattress.

"But—" Volker said.

"Shut up," Rush whispered and pulled away, vanishing back into the hallway with the pneumatic hiss of the doors.

Volker relaxed into the thin, hard mattress, pulling the blankets up over him, trying to avoid jostling his shoulder. It took him less than a minute to fall asleep.

Chapter Three

Volker woke with a start as Telford dropped off the upper berth and the lights in the room came up. For a few seconds the other man steadied himself on the wall.

"You slept," Telford said, his hands over his eyes. "That's a minor miracle—" He stopped abruptly as he angled his head up, getting a good look at Volker.

"Hi," Volker said.

"Oh fuck," Telford sighed. "I thought you were Rush."

"Nope," Volker said. "Still me."

Telford sighed again. "How's the shoulder?"

"Pretty painful, actually."

Telford nodded. He continued to stand, clad only in boxers, one hand braced against the wall as if the press of artificial gravity were something he had to fight against.

"It's going to be a long, bad day," Telford whispered.

Something about the other man's defeated stance killed the sarcastic comment that Volker had been about to make.

"Why?" Volker whispered, the word almost soundless.

Telford shook his head. "Just—try to help him as much as you can, as efficiently as you can, for as long as you can stand it."

"Okay," Volker said, trying to suppress the dread that was already churning somewhere deep in his chest, below his heart.

Telford started pulling on his shirt. Volker sat up, trying not to jostle his shoulder too much as he did so. He had been too exhausted to strip off his jeans and dress shirt from the previous day.

"Put on the leather stuff," Telford said, stepping into his leather pants.

"Is there a shower on this—" Volker made a loose hand gesture. "Ship?"

"Yes," Telford said, "There is a shower, but no showering until tonight. You already look too clean. If you brought any shaving gear, don't use it. In about fourteen hours we're going to have to pass you off as a low-ranking member of the LA."

"Seriously?" Volker asked, feeling an abrupt spike in his anxiety.

"Yeah," Telford said.

"There's no way I can—"

"This is not an optional thing, Volker," Telford snapped, kneeling to lace up his boots. "And believe me, I am not happy about it. I've worked out a way to play this. We'll go over everything a few hours ahead of time."

"But—"

"Cut it out," Telford said, pulling on his pants. "This is unavoidable. We're going to have to deal with it as best we can. So. Get dressed. Help Rush."

"He's terrible at explaining things," Volker said. "I'm still not entirely sure what he even wants from me."

Telford paused midway through swinging his jacket over his shoulder, the motion fading and aborting down to nothing. "He wants you to help him find a planet," Telford

murmured, his eyes fixed on the floor. "A planet with so much fissible material that it itself could serve as an energy source to power a stargate."

Stargates. Wormholes. The entire thing seemed too immense to believe.

"Why is this his job?"

"It shouldn't be," Telford whispered. "He's supposed to be doing something else. We had a planet."

"And what happened to it?" Volker asked, his voice hushed, though he didn't fully understand why.

"Its location was given to Stargate Command," Telford said. "By parties unknown. There was a pitched battle, and the LA lost control of the planet. Now we need a second one."

"That doesn't explain why this is his job."

"Two reasons," Telford said. "The first is that the Alliance doesn't treat its scientists terribly well. They have a habit of—ruining them. There aren't any left who can do what Rush does. If any of them ever could have. Which I doubt."

"So glad I'm here," Volker said, making a real effort to keep his voice steady.

"And number two," Telford said, "Is that he and I—individually or in conjunction—are suspected of leaking the location of the planet to stargate command."

"Did you?" Volker asked.

Telford smiled faintly. "Don't ask questions like that, Volker. They'll only get you killed." He swung his jacket over his shoulders and turned to hit the door controls.

"Right," Volker mouthed at his back.

The door hissed open and Telford jerked back so rapidly that it caused Volker to flinch. He flung one hand in front of his face in anticipation of some horrific thing on the other side.

"What the fuck?" Telford said, somewhat breathlessly, steadying himself on the doorframe. "Seriously. What the fuck?"

As he edged backwards, Volker could see his cat looking up at Telford.

"Oh," Volker said. "Yeah. That's my cat."

Telford half turned, staring at Volker like he had just spoken in some language other than English. After a few seconds, he raised one hand, fingers spread, looking toward the ceiling, as if asking for some kind of divine-mediated answer to a question he was unable to verbalize.

"Um," Volker said.

"No. Don't say anything," Telford replied.

Mendelssohn meowed inquisitively.

Telford shut his eyes. After a few seconds he edged past the cat and out into the hallway without speaking.

Mendelssohn watched him go before stalking into the room, his tail twitching slightly as he regarded Volker with something that looked vaguely like reproach.

In the hallway, the sound of Telford's hand hitting the door controls was so loud that Volker suspected he had actually punched them. "What the hell do you think you're—" was the only thing he heard before both sets of doors shut with asynchronous swishes.

"Rush let you out, I suppose," Volker said, eyeing the cat. "Didn't he tell you to keep a low profile? Hmmm?"

Mendelssohn rubbed against his ankles.

"Alright. Let's go."

Volker picked up the cat, hit the door controls and walked out into the hall. As soon as the door opened, the indistinct yelling clarified quite a bit.

"—that you're trying to do, Rush? Because you're clearly trying to do something. Bringing a cat on board? How the hell are we going to explain this? We're in enough trouble as it is. Cats are not exactly common on Tel'taks unless you're fucking Bastet, which is not really an excuse that we can fucking use—"

Volker entered the cargo bay and dropped to his knees to deposit Mendelssohn on the floor. The door swished shut, blocking out Telford's tirade. Volker suppressed a sigh, and wrapped an arm around his chest to support his injured shoulder. He stared at the floor.

A long, bad day.

Mendelssohn meowed expectantly, and Volker roused himself enough to dig a hand down into the bag of catfood and spread a small amount out on the floor next to the water.

He stood a bit unsteadily and then started to pull on his new clothes. The pants were a bit tight, but he didn't find that to be overly concerning—it didn't look as if caloric excess was going to be a problem for him in the near future.

The jacket was a bit loose across his shoulders, but otherwise fit well.

"What do you think?" he asked Mendelssohn. "Do I look like a space-pirate?"

Mendelssohn did not pause in his methodical crunching of cat food.

"Oh I see how it is," Volker said. "You don't care as long as you're getting fed. Is that right?"

The cat didn't give him a second glance.

"Fine," Volker said, tucking his t-shirt into his leather pants. He gave the cat a stern look. "But I'm warning you now, if you end up liking Rush better than me, I am not going to forgive you."

The cat continued to eat.

"Are we clear on that?" Volker ran a hand over his back.

The cat looked up, long enough to delicately sniff the sleeve of Volker's new leather jacket before going back to his food.

"Good," Volker said. He hit the door controls and walked back into the central corridor, feeling a bit more confident in his new outfit. There was something about it that felt vaguely like armor.

He hit the controls to the workroom. The sound of Rush tearing into Telford abruptly rose about ten decibels in volume.

"—going on about. Explain to me in a rational manner why it is that you fucking hold to this, David. It's not sustainable, it's not logical, and it's going to ruin us both and, if you want to know, I'm more than a little concerned that—"

Rush broke off as Volker entered the room.

They were standing very close, their weight shifted forward, their gazes locked. Something about his presence or his expression seemed to defuse the situation. Rush's animated gesticulations faded down and decoupled as one hand came up to run through his hair. Telford stepped back, turning away from Rush and walking over to press a hand against the window that had been covered with equations with a fine-tipped marker at some point during the night.

The symbols stood out, dark against the streaking white lines of the stars.

Rush braced one hand on the table. He looked pale and exhausted and miserable, standing in the midst of the utter disaster he had made of the room over the course of the night. The main wallspace, immediately to the left of the door, was covered with pieces of tiny notebook paper that had been fastened with varying degrees of success to the metal in a pattern that was vaguely grid-like, probably a rough version of a matrix. Or maybe a matrix of matrices. The table was an utter mess of computers and crumpled paper and—

Oh hey.

Apparently Rush had rescued his computer and brought it with him before he'd set fire to his building. So, that was a plus.

"You brought my laptop?" Volker said awkwardly into the silence.

Rush looked at him, nodding tiredly before dropping back into his chair and starting to type on Volker's laptop, as if he owned the thing. Maybe he thought he did. Or maybe he actually did? If someone kidnapped you and stole your laptop at the same time, who did the laptop belong to?

On one of the linked laptops, a rasterized map was being assembled line by line. It looked like it was maybe thirty percent complete.

Volker raised his eyebrows.

"Is that the superimposed data?" He dropped into the chair next to Rush, shooting Telford a nervous glance. The other man hadn't moved.

Rush shot him a look that seemed to be equal parts incredulity, annoyance, and disdain.

"Was that a 'yes'?" Volker asked.

"Yes," Rush replied. "It is the superimposed data."

"That's incredible," Volker said, angling the laptop screen to get a better look at the nascent heat map. "How did you—"

"Integer programming," Rush said, leaning forward, burying his face in his hands.

"Were you up all night?" Volker asked.

Rush nodded.

"Why?" Volker asked.

Rush pulled one hand away from his face to make a fluid, circular gesture, the meaning of which was entirely unclear to Volker.

"I'm really not sure what that means," Volker said, shooting another edgy glance at Telford who was still standing at the window, his gaze locked on the linear streaks of hyperspace or on the fluid, messy curves of Rush's math. It was impossible to tell where his focus lay.

"For every point," Rush said, speaking indistinctly into his hands "That local anisotropies and radio emissions overlap, I want you to drill down into your data and look for evidence of a star system in the vicinity. Compile a list of candidates."

"You want to find one of these naquadria-planets?" Volker asked hesitantly.

"So you were listening," Rush said with a faint smile, pulling his hands away from his face.

"Well, you know. I try."

They were quiet for a moment. Volker shot another glance at Telford.

"I don't want to find one," Rush murmured into the silence. "I need to find one."

Something about the line of Telford's shoulders seemed to harden. His head dropped fractionally.

"Yeah." Volker bit his lip. "Get some sleep. I'll get started on this."

"Are you sure you can—"

"Rush. It's my data."

"Yes. I suppose it is."

Telford pushed away from the window and walked over to take a seat at the table across from Rush.

"Nick," he said quietly.

"No," Rush shook his head. "I—"

Telford raised a hand. "It's not about the damn cat. Or the knifing. Or the shipment of Kassa that you 'inadvertently' set fire to."

"What then?" Rush said, bringing a hand up to his forehead.

"Volker," Telford said, clearly stalling for time. "There's food in the crates under the window if you want it."

"Thanks," he replied, standing and turning to open one of the crates and finding himself faced with an array of identical silver-wrapped packages.

"Look," Rush said, his fingers coming to his forehead. "I'm fucking exhausted. I haven't slept for two days."

"I know," Telford replied. "But—you're going to want to hear this."

"Does everything have to be so god damned ominous with you? Get to your point, if you have one."

"Kiva called a meeting."

"What?" Rush-half shouted, as the hand that had been at his temple slammed down onto the table. Volker jerked in surprise, dropping his silver-clad breakfast.

"Now don't panic," Telford said, both hands open, palms outward.

"Who's fucking panicking?" Rush said, surging to his feet and turning to pace a few steps away from the table, his hand running through his hair. "When?" Rush snapped.

"I said, 'don't panic'." Telford replied.

"And I" Rush said, gesturing at his own chest with one curved hand "said 'when?', which I will fucking reiterate for you now. When. When is this meeting supposed to take place?"

"I don't think you—"

"Today then."

"Yeah." Telford crossed his arms. "Fourteen hours from now."

Rush fisted a hand in his hair and turned away from Telford. "This is ridiculous. This is intolerable. Do you have any idea, any idea at all what kind of timetable this level of scientific or mathematical or technical progress requires? Do you? It takes years. Years, David. Not months. Not weeks. What they are asking is impossible to the point of farce. This is why they're going to fucking fail as a galactic power—they have the patience of a pack of illiterate Visigoths."

"Tell that to Kiva," Telford said darkly.

"I did," Rush said, looking like he was about to hyperventilate.

"And how did that go." It wasn't a question, and Rush didn't answer it.

"I don't have anything," Rush said, his gaze locked on the middle distance.

"You have fourteen hours," Telford said quietly.

"I'm not going to have anything after fourteen hours, either."

Telford looked at him steadily for the span of a few seconds. Then he got to his feet.

"Maybe you'll get lucky." He turned and paced out of the room.

Rush stood, entirely still, staring into the air in front of him, as if it could save him from whatever it was that was going to happen when he met Kiva. One hand came out to press against the nearest wall. Volker had never seen anyone so clearly terrified. He couldn't help the sympathetic thrill of horror that seemed to constrict like a band around his lungs and his throat. Rush didn't seem like the kind of person who would scare easily.

"What—" the word was inaudible. He tried again. "What is this Kiva-person going to do to you?"

"I guess we'll find out," Rush said quietly.

"You've met her before?" Volker asked.

"Yes," Rush murmured.

"What are you afraid of?" Volker asked.

Rush shot him a look that he had a difficult time interpreting.

"Telford said that the LA ruins their scientists," Volker murmured.

"Yes," Rush said. "They do."

"What did he mean by that?"

"They are finding that the nature of scientific inquiry does not mesh well with their governing philosophy."

"But it ruins them? Ruins them?"

"They place a premium on loyalty," Rush said. "And the means they use to achieve that loyalty—well. Suffice it to say that coercive persuasion does not allow for the conceptual latitude required for high-level scientific thought."

Volker swallowed.

"It constrains insight," Rush murmured. "It cripples one's capacity to construct and apply a logical framework—"

"Yeah okay," Volker said, struggling to take a deep breath.

"It creates bias." Rush's hand curled into a fist against the wall.

"Yeah I get it."

"It destroys any accurate estimation of uncertainty and nearly obliterates understanding of it as a concept."

"Rush. I get it."

"It leaves personality intact but it tears away empirical instinct—"

"Rush."

Finally, Rush turned his head to look at him.

He wondered if his fear was evident in his expression.

He tried not to think about what it would be like to have his thinking constrained, compartmentalized in some manner that was not even observable to him—like missing

a leg without the awareness of that loss—simply knowing that for some reason, one could no longer walk across the room.

"Either they accept it," Rush whispered, staring at Volker, "And they become part of the marginally productive LA science staff, which seems to be sufficient only to repair small scale technical problems, monitor sensors, complete calculations, or—they fail to accept it."

"What happens then?"

"What do you think?" Rush murmured. "What would you do, if you knew that it had happened to you?"

Volker looked away, down at his silver-wrapped breakfast. He found he didn't much feel like eating it.

"Do you think they're going to do it to you? Whatever it is that they do?" Volker whispered.

"I think they can barely fucking contain themselves," Rush said with a humorless smile. "So perhaps we should make an attempt to identify some candidate star systems and maybe they'll defer the destruction of my mind until next time."

"Yeah," Volker said. "Okay."

Two hours before the scheduled meeting, Telford dragged him out of the workroom and onto the bridge for a "briefing".

There was a dampness on his palms as he followed the other man onto the bridge. He tried wiping them on his leather pants, but that didn't seem to help much. The light was dim, and Volker supposed that meant it was technically "night," even though division of time was by necessity somewhat artificial. His nerves were stretched too tight to accommodate anything like a normal circadian schedule.

"Shouldn't Rush be in on this conversation?" Volker asked.

Telford dropped into his seat. "In a perfect world, yes. In the actual world, no. On his best day he doesn't have the patience for this kind of thing, and this is far from his best day."

"Okay," Volker said.

"Look, I'm not going to lie to you, Volker. This is going to be rough."

"Great."

Telford shot him a sharp look. "If you can't pass for an insider, things are going to go south very quickly. So you need to bring every single god damned intellectual asset you have to bear on this situation, you understand? You have a fucking PhD, so presumably you're smart enough to pull this off. You're going to need to cut it out with the semi-sarcastic asides. You're going to need to stop looking at things so closely. You're going to need to internalize the information I give you very quickly."

"What happens if I get caught?"

"Best case scenario, you're executed, Rush gets tortured, and I get executed."

"Um, that's the best case?"

"Worst case, you get tortured and then brainwashed, Rush gets tortured and then brainwashed, and I get tortured and then executed, and then you both kill yourselves to escape your miserable lives. But it's hard to anticipate an accurate worst case scenario. That's what makes it a worst case scenario. The fact that you didn't anticipate it."

"Thanks for the disclaimer," Volker said, feeling too stunned to really be afraid.

"And that," Telford said, "Is exactly what I'm talking about. You need to cut out the semi-incredulous sarcasm when you're around anyone except for us."

"Right."

"You're going to be an uneducated, minor member of the sixth clan of the Alliance. A bastard nephew of a contact that I have, who, fortunately also happens to be cousin of Kiva's. That should help us out. Presuming of course, that he keeps his word and doesn't fucking tell Kiva everything, in which case, nothing you do matters, because we're all fucked."

"Okay." Volker took a deep breath and tried to focus his fragmented thoughts. "And Kiva is?"

"The daughter of the head of the sixth clan and his most powerful second."

"Um—"

"Exactly who she is doesn't matter right now. She's ruthless and beautiful and practical and absolutely terrifying." There was more than a hint of admiration in Telford's tone as he described her.

"Okay. But you trust this guy. Your contact."

"As much as I can trust anyone."

"What's my name supposed to be?"

"We'll stick with Dale. It'll work as a sixth clan name, and it will make everything easier."

"Okay."

"I'm going to tell you roughly what's going to happen, so you know what to expect," Telford said, his face almost completely expressionless. "We're going proceed to the designated place, and dock with a large ship. We'll ring aboard and we'll likely be escorted at gunpoint to a room. There will be a lot of yelling about you being with us, and people will be upset and mistrustful. We will tell them who you are. They will verify this with my contact. While they are verifying this, they're likely going to separate you from Rush and I. You'll be questioned." Telford paused, and then added, "It's within the realm of possibility that you'll be tortured."

"What." Volker stared at Telford.

"They won't have long," Telford said in a manner that was apparently supposed to be reassuring. "So they won't be able to get inventive. Once they confirm your identity with my contact, they'll stop torturing you. They may even apologize, as you're a member of Kiva's clan. If they apologize to you, say that you understand it was necessary."

"This is like a normal procedure? A normal thing they do?" His voice was higher than normal.

"Yes. I'm sorry, but it's unavoidable. Initiation is much worse, but you'll be spared that."

"Um, what kind of torture are we talking about?"

"The use of electrical current, applied via a device that's about three feet in length. They won't have time for much else. It's very painful, but entirely survivable presuming you don't have any congenital heart problems. You don't, do you?"

"No?" Volker said, his utter incredulity making the word come out more as a question than as a statement.

"You'll know that it's likely to only last about twenty minutes or so, which should help you to make it through and stick to your story, which we'll work out ahead of time. We'll give you a standard line you can repeat when you start to get tired, but ideally, it

won't even get that far. Like I said, you're a member of the sixth clan, so that's going to give you some protection."

"Isn't Kiva going to realize that she hasn't seen me at all the clan reunions, or whatever?"

"No. Clans populate entire worlds," Telford said. "And hopefully you won't even be considered worth Kiva's time. You'll likely be interrogated by Dannic or Varro."

"Can't I just hide on the ship?"

"No," Telford said. "We're going to have a hard enough time hiding your cat." The other man glared at him.

Volker shrugged a bit guiltily.

"If you're going to be with us long term, you need to go through this."

"Can't you just—"

"Look," Telford said. "I may be able to get you out of this situation eventually, but until then, if you want to stay alive, you're going to need to trust me."

"Okay," Volker whispered.

"Let's get started," Telford said.

Telford drilled him on his backstory for two hours, before they were interrupted by the quiet trill of an alarm that Volker had never heard before.

Telford stared at the slow strobe of flashing, foreign text for a few seconds.

"What's that?" Volker asked.

"Proximity alert," Telford whispered back. "Go put your cat in the wall and wait with Rush."

Volker nodded, feeling a dryness in his throat and a tightness in his chest. He went to the cargo bay and moved Mendelssohn's food, water, and litter box into a hidden compartment in the wall of the ship. It was a bit colder in the space than he would have liked, and so he shoved a few of his shirts inside before depositing his cat in the small, dark compartment. Telford had told him that it had originally been part of an access point to the shield generator which was located directly beneath the cargo bay, but he and Rush had modified it for a purpose he hadn't been inclined to provide details about. It was open to the ventilation system, but the panels should at least muffle any sound of meowing.

Hopefully.

"Stay quiet, buddy," Volker whispered as he snapped the panel back into place.

He listened for a moment, but heard nothing.

Anxiously he removed the paneling again, only to find the cat staring back at him.

"Shh," Volker said needlessly, trying not to feel like an idiot.

"Dale," he heard Telford call from the main hallway. "Let's go."

For a split second, he knelt on the floor of the cargo bay, trying to pull in a long, slow, deep breath.

Torture.

The prospect was not something he had ever faced, nor had he ever anticipated facing. It was as far removed from his normal life as the alien ship that vibrated beneath his feet. He placed a hand over his injured shoulder. He felt delicate and poorly put

together, aware of his own transient biological nature, and aware of how easily it could be ripped from him.

He was not prepared for this.

He hadn't asked for it.

It was, however, inescapable.

That realization did nothing to loosen the knot in his chest. It didn't warm his hands, or slow his breathing, or make it any easier to stand up and hit the door controls before stepping into the hallway where Telford and Rush waited.

Chapter Four

They stood together in the transporter room. The dim gold of the walls felt close and confining, the dull metal pressing down upon his mind in an infinitely slow collapse.

"Just stick to what I told you," Telford said, his eyes dark and serious. "And you'll be fine."

Volker's mouth was too dry to reply. He positioned himself next to Telford, within the confines of the circle that had been etched onto the floor. He looked over at Rush, who was leaning against the wall.

The mathematician's stance was casual, his features impassive.

"Rush," Telford said, with something less than his usual snap. "Glasses."

Rush pulled off his square frames and placed them inside his jacket with an insouciant precision. He shook his hair back and gave Telford a twisted, superior smile.

"That attitude of yours is going to get you killed one of these days," Telford said grimly, his eyes fixing on the wall rather than Rush.

"You say that like it's a bad thing," Rush replied, straightening up and crossing the room in a few even steps. He turned sharply and positioned himself next to Volker. There was no trace of the terror that Volker had seen earlier in either his expression or his bearing.

Maybe he'd found something in the data.

Volker considered that to be extremely unlikely.

"When we make it back here," Telford said with a too-even cadence to his words, "We're going to have to assume they left surveillance equipment behind, so act accordingly until I'm able to sweep for it."

Volker nodded.

"Rush?"

"Is this need for perpetual verbal confirmation of literally every statement you make a result of your military background or is it some—" Rush broke off, waving a hand, "Personal quirk of your own?"

"I can see that this is going to go well," Telford said, clearly keeping a lid on his temper.

Volker tried to take a deep breath, tried to ground himself, but failed on both counts. His palms were damp and his mouth was dry and in his chest, beneath where his heart pounded frantically, he could feel a strange unsettled, vise-like sensation and he wondered what it was exactly that caused him to feel like someone had tied a knot in all his major vessels. And Rush—Rush was not helping.

"What is wrong with you?" Volker asked, his voice cracking as he turned toward the other man. "How can you be like this?"

"I'd work on improving your theory of mind, Dale," Rush said dryly, not looking back at him, managing to turn his name into some kind of aspersion on his intelligence through tonal twist alone.

Volker just stared at him, trying to think of something to say in return.

"Scintillating," Rush said after about three seconds. "And on that note, let's go, shall we?"

Telford reached over and clapped Volker on his uninjured shoulder in what Volker suspected was supposed to be a reassuring manner.

He was, in no way, reassured.

He had no idea why Telford, who had spent hours drilling him on his command of a relatively small number of facts about his cover story, who had critiqued his word choice, his bearing, his demeanor, and even what his eyes focused on, would allow Rush to go into the same situation with no guidance, no warnings, no attempt to bring his recklessness under any kind of control.

Maybe Telford had given up on Rush. Maybe that was the real reason the other man had been unwilling to send him home.

The rings surrounded them, solid, tonal, and uncomfortably close.

A split second later he found himself staring down a gun pointed straight into his face. There were several other guns that registered in his peripheral vision, but mainly he was concerned with the closest one. It was made of a dark silver material, and the diameter of the barrel seemed destructively wide.

He was too shocked to do anything other than stand there, looking at it.

"Hands behind your heads," someone snapped, and Volker hurried to comply, trying to mask his wince as the motion pulled viciously at his stitches. A flicker of movement to either side told him that Telford and Rush had done the same.

"Who the hell is this?" The man on the other side of the weapon he'd been studying earlier was a good several inches taller than Volker with deep-set eyes. He jabbed his gun forward.

Volker couldn't help but flinch slightly. He swallowed, and tried to work some saliva into his mouth so that he could answer.

"Dannic," Rush said lazily. "Do me a favor and pull that trigger, won't you? I can only stand so much inanity in my life and that one is not the sharpest of you lot that I've dealt with. It's possible that he may be even stupider than you."

Dannic swung the gun over to point it directly at Rush. "I look forward to the day that Kiva decides you've—"

"Oh god," Rush said speaking over the other man, "Spare me the fucking rhetoric. Are you more eloquent in your native language? I'd like to believe that's the case, but try as I might, I find I just can't imagine—" Rush flinched back into Volker as Dannic lunged forward.

Volker helped him as best he could, his good arm coming down reflexively to grip the leather of the other man's coat and keep him steady. Rush pulled out of his grip immediately.

"Knock it off." A blonde, powerfully built man was dragging Dannic back.

"I feel sorry for you," Dannic snarled in Volker's direction. "How do you handle dealing with this pretentious Tau'ri scum?"

Volker tried to look put-upon rather than terrified.

"Oh, pretentious, are we?" Rush said, "Did you learn that word for me? I'm flattered."

The blonde man had to yank Dannic back again, shouting, "What did I just say?"

"Rush," Telford said quietly. "Enough."

After a few seconds, everyone relaxed marginally and regained their composure, except for Rush, who had never lost his.

"This is Dale," Telford said into the ensuing silence. He gave Dannic a pointed look. "I don't think Kiva would be very happy with you if you shot him. He's sixth house. I picked him up to—"

"Why the hell is he here?"

"I picked him up," Telford continued determinedly, "To help me out around the ship. As you might suspect, Rush isn't very good at managing that sort of thing."

Rush exhaled in a manner he managed to imbue with a significant degree of incredulity.

In his peripheral vision he could see Telford, his stance relaxed, move one hand marginally to gesture at the array of guns that were pointed at them. "Guys. Come on. Isn't this a bit of overkill? We're unarmed. I'm sure you confirmed as much via your scans of our vessel."

"We also confirmed," the blonde man said, "That there were three people on board your ship."

"Yes, and now you know why," Telford said, his voice reasonable.

"This is not the time to be testing Kiva," the blonde man replied, his voice brusque. "Your position is tenuous enough as it is."

"Which is why we're committed to completing the tasks she gave us. Dale's presence will free up Rush to spend more of his time on achieving our objectives," Telford said smoothly.

Volker let his eyes quickly dart around the space they were in. They were standing on a low platform, maybe five inches off the floor in a large room filled with massive cylindrical containers the diameter of which seemed to be an near, if not exact fit for the capacity of the ring transport.

Most of his attention, however, was commanded by the group of six very armed, very capable looking people in leather outfits that had fanned out in front of them.

"I've brought along Dale's credentials. If you'd like to confirm his identity, you'll find the contact information for his next of kin on the data chip in my left front pocket." Telford was utterly calm, and Volker found himself feeling more confident by association.

The blonde man lowered his weapon to step forward and reach into Telford's front pocket. A split second later he had moved back, data chip in hand. "Alright," he said, gesturing with his weapon, "Let's go."

As they walked through the halls at gunpoint, it was difficult to keep his eyes from lingering on the unfamiliar, alien décor of the ship, but he forced himself to focus on the nondescript leather jacket in front of him, and off the wide, golden hallways, the hieroglyphic writing, or, most interesting, the obviously defaced statues that appeared and faded in shallow alcoves all over the ship. The vessel was clearly immense. It took them over five minutes of walking to reach their destination.

To Volker's dismay, it turned out their destination was some kind of gilded jail cell.

"You'll wait here," the blonde man said, "Until Kiva has decided how to proceed." Volker stepped past him, following Telford and Rush into the cell, but the blond man grabbed his arm. "Not you," he amended.

Volker didn't trust himself to speak.

"Kiva won't be happy if you—" Telford began.

"You let me worry about that," the blonde man said shortly, pulling Volker away from the cell.

It took all of his willpower not to look back at Rush and Telford.

They walked in silence for a few seconds, flanked by the leather-clad entourage.

"You're really not much of a talker, are you?" Dannic asked, half turning back, clearly looking for trouble.

"Nope," Volker said.

"I like that," Dannic said. "Maybe if Kiva decides to—"

"Go," the blonde man said, cutting Dannic off. "Take the team. Start the prep, in case she wants to use it on one or both of them, and then report to Kiva."

Volker felt a cold thrill go down his spine.

"Calvos," the blonde man said, holding up the data chip he'd gotten from Telford. "Get started on this."

Everything seemed to be moving too quickly.

The rest of the personnel peeled away and Volker found himself alone with the blond man, who still had one hand on his arm. It wasn't until the other man had looked back at him that he realized he'd been staring at him in surprise.

Shit.

That was exactly the kind of thing he wasn't supposed to do.

"You're not going to give me any trouble, are you?" the blonde man said, his voice subtly threatening.

"No," Volker managed.

The blonde man stopped in front of a door and hit the controls, waving Volker forward toward the table at the center of the room. It was plain and looked out of place in the context of the golden décor. "Take a seat."

He felt numb. He could barely force himself over to the table.

"Relax, Dale. We know exactly who you are, and why you're here."

Oh god.

Oh god.

His heart was hammering in his chest. He pulled the chair back. He could barely feel his fingers.

"Varro," the other man said, holding out his hand.

Volker stared at it uncomprehendingly, feeling frozen, trying to guess when and where the torture was going to begin.

"Oh right," Varro said, pulling back his hand as if he were remembering something. "That's a Tau'ri custom."

"Ah," Volker replied, completely confused. "I see."

"It's called a 'handshake'," Varro said.

"Oh," Volker said, trying to kick his brain into gear and marshal more than ten percent of his brain into working for him, rather than freezing up like a hard drive that was crapping out. "You said you knew why I was here?"

"It's obvious that Telford is trying to curry favor with Kiva by bringing a member of her house onto his crew. You can't really blame him. "

"Ah," Volker replied, trying not to look too relieved.

"I'm sure you are exactly who you say you are," Varro said. "Telford is too smart for anything else."

Volker cast around for something to say that wouldn't reveal anything. The possibility that he would escape being tortured made it somewhat easier to think things through clearly.

"So—what now?" Volker asked.

Varro shot him an appraising look.

Volker tried to think of any way what he had said could have been inappropriate. Maybe he should know what was coming?

"Anything you can tell me about them would be helpful," Varro said, watching him carefully.

"About them?"

"Yes. Rush and Telford."

Crap.

He had not been prepared for this and neither had Telford, apparently, because the possibility of Volker being questioned not about his own fictitious background but about Telford and Rush had not so much as been mentioned.

"I joined up with them about a day ago," Volker said truthfully. "That's not much time to get acquainted."

"And I'm sure that timetable wasn't accidental," Varro said, almost to himself. "Just enough time to show you off, not enough time to allow you to gather any useful information. That's Colonel Telford for you."

Volker shifted in his chair, feeling slightly uncomfortable, and more than a little concerned. Was it possible that Telford was keeping him around so he could pass Volker off as a cousin of Kiva's? Had he not sent Volker home because this ruse they were pulling could save Telford's life? Or Rush's?

No.

No?

No.

He had to stay focused. For all he knew, Varro was trying to rattle him into giving something away, and this was just as much about him as it was about Rush and Telford. He could evaluate the implications of whatever he learned later. Right now he needed to focus on staying alive and not breaking his cover.

"A master strategist," Varro said "And very determined in going after what he wants."

"Oh yeah?" Volker said neutrally.

"I wouldn't trade places with you, my friend, I'll tell you that much."

"As long as he keeps paying me," Volker replied, trailing off as he shifted again, unable to hold himself entirely still.

Varro nodded shortly. "Where did you meet him?"

"Rolan," Volker said.

Varro raised his eyebrows. "Rolan. Really. I have an acquaintance there," His eyes flicked subtly to Volker's jacket.

Shit. Shit.

"You probably know him. It's not a big settlement," Varro continued. "Does the name Simeon ring any bells?"

No.

"Tall guy?" Volker said, "Bit of a temper? Jacket like this?" He yanked on the front of his jacket, trying to cover his nerves as he took a stab at a generic description of pretty much every LA member that he'd seen so far.

"That's the one," Varro said with a small smile.

"We didn't get along very well," Volker said shortly.

"Not surprising."

They looked at each other in silence.

"What do you think of Rush?" Varro asked, leaning back in his chair.

Volker was halfway through a shrug that he managed to convert into a shoulder roll at the last second.

"He's arrogant," Volker said. "Other than that, I can't really tell you much."

"Do you know what he's working on?" Varro asked.

"No," Volker said.

"Personally," Varro said, "I like him."

Volker said nothing.

"I'll miss his commentary," Varro continued.

"Kiva's not happy with him, then I take it?" Volker said, trying to keep any hint of desperation out of his voice.

Varro made an unfamiliar repetitive hand gesture that seemed to indicate uncertainty. "It's hard to say. But eventually the need to keep him in line will outweigh the advantages of an unaltered mind. You know how it is."

"Yes," Volker said, trying to quiet the panic in the back of his mind.

"You seem like a decent guy, Dale," Varro said. "And being sixth house—well, I'm sure we could find a place for you here once these two are—reassigned."

"I appreciate the offer," Volker said neutrally. "Do you—see that happening any time soon?"

"It's hard to say," Varro replied. "Someone's been passing the Tau'ri information for months now, and Kiva is fairly suspicious that it's these two. But—" Again Varro made the equivocal up and down hand motion that seemed to be equivalent to a shrug. "She also needs Rush."

"I see," Volker said.

"I could personally guarantee you a spot with us in the future," Varro said, "If you would be willing to pass information back to Kiva at convenient intervals regarding their movements, along with anything else you may think we'd find useful."

Volker did not want to accept. Unfortunately he had the feeling that this was the kind of offer one did not walk away from. He looked at Varro. He was certain that his indecision was apparent on his face.

"It would be discreet," Varro said. "We'd equip you with a Goa'uld communication device. They're very simple to operate, and we wouldn't expect reports at regular intervals. Just—whenever you find it to be convenient."

"I'd be reporting directly to Kiva?" Volker said, trying to hide his dismay, trying to think himself out of the net that was closing around him.

"You'd report to me," Varro said. "And you'd be compensated for your trouble in proportion to the value of the information you provide."

Volker hesitated.

"If it makes a difference," Varro said, "I don't think Telford would kill you if he found out you were passing intel along behind his back. For one, you're sixth house and it would destroy his relationship with Kiva. For another, the Tau'ri don't generally kill in close quarters like that, except in self defense."

"Alright then," Volker said, trying to keep his despair out of his voice.

"Good." Varro said. "Right answer." He reached into his jacket and pulled out a small silver sphere and rolled it across the table.

Volker looked at it uncertainly.

"It's the small version," Varro said, as if that explained anything.

"Ah," Volker said. "I see."

The door opened without warning and Volker jumped slightly. There was a girl with long red hair standing in the doorway. Volker wondered if she was Kiva, but decided that was unlikely, as she didn't look particularly threatening.

"Everything checks out," she said, looking in Varro's direction. "Kiva wants to see you as soon as you're done here."

Varro nodded. "Ginn, this is Dale."

"Hi," the girl said. She looked about as nervous as he felt.

"Hi," Volker replied.

"Can you escort him back to the holding cells? He can wait for his shipmates there."

"Yes," the girl said. "Of course." Her hand came to rest delicately on her sidearm.

She reminded him of a graduate student.

A graduate student with a gun.

The walk back didn't seem nearly as long and, though he was careful to be circumspect about it, he let his eyes wander a bit more, trying to get a sense of the size of the ship, catching details he'd missed the first time around—the way certain strands of hieroglyphics seemed to be reliably defaced with a fluid black script in many different hands, the way the metal plating seemed to vibrate under his feet, the lack of windows, the way the girl next to him was surreptitiously watching the top of the walls, where the corridor joined with the ceiling.

There were gaps there, and he wondered if they were being monitored.

They had almost reached the holding cells when she spoke. Her voice was low, and she did not look at him.

"Dr. Rush," she said quietly. "Is it true that he's a scientist?"

"Yes," Volker said, just as quietly.

"He does nothing else?" she whispered. "That's his primary designation?"

"I haven't known him very long," Volker said. "But I think so."

"If such a thing is truly possible with the Tau'ri," she murmured, "Why would he leave them?"

"I don't know," Volker replied, wondering if this was still a part of his interrogation. Somehow, he doubted it. "Do you—" he had no idea how to talk about the Lucian Alliance scientific community—if there even was such a thing. "Like science?"

He very nearly clapped his hand to his face, but he caught himself.

Ginn said nothing for the span of five or six seconds, her expression tight, her eyes dark and anxious.

"No," she said finally. "I am much more interested in learning the use of military tactics to strengthen and broaden the reach of the Alliance to the best of my ability for the betterment of all worlds."

"Yeah," he said. "Me too."

They looked at each other. Then they continued on in silence until they reached the holding cell.

"You may wait for your shipmates here," Ginn said, opening the door and gesturing him through with a sweep of her hand.

He stepped inside and she hurried away. He looked out through the bars, watching her go, wondering what she would have made of a college education and a life on Earth with the 'Tau'ri.'

After what Volker estimated was maybe three hours plus or minus two hours, they brought Telford back.

He had dozed off, too exhausted to keep his eyes open, asleep against the wall with his good hand bracing his injured shoulder when the sound of the door controls woke him.

Telford had been dumped on the floor before Volker could organize an attempt get to his feet.

He lurched forward, bracing his injured arm to crouch next to Telford, carefully helping him onto his back before he remembered he was supposed to be a hardened member of the sixth house of the Alliance and tried to school his features into an indifferent mask.

"Hey," he said quietly. "Telford."

The other man looked terrible. He had a long gash on his cheek and his eyes were mostly shut. He blinked up at Volker, looking disoriented.

"Nick," Telford said.

"Nope," Volker said. "It's Dale."

"I know," Telford said hoarsely, shutting his eyes and pulling in a measured breath, "Who you are."

"Oh," Volker said uncertainly.

"Where is he?"

"Not back yet," Volker said shortly.

"Oh fuck," Telford said, managing to turn himself onto his side and then force himself up on one elbow. He looked like he might be sick.

"What—" he cut himself off before he could say anything too revealing. "Can I do anything?"

"No," Telford said, collapsing back to the floor and curling onto his side. "No."

"Alright then," Volker said quietly and backed away to sit against the wall.

He could not picture Rush outlasting Telford when it came to torture.

To think that last week, the worst thing he'd had to dread was his upcoming competing renewal for his grant from the NSF, and the terrible emptiness of his personal life—god. He would give anything to have those concerns back rather than this whole new set of things that seemed impossible to face.

He watched Telford shut his eyes and dig his nails into the metal of the floor, as if he were trying to close his fist straight through the metal.

Volker wondered if the man had been drugged, wondered if he'd been given the "prep" that Varro had mentioned earlier. How difficult would it be to tell if someone had been brainwashed? How long did it take? By what mechanism could it possibly be achieved?

Had it just happened to Telford?

Had it happened to Telford months ago?

Would Telford even know whether it had happened to him or not? Or was it one of those things that would creep into one's awareness, slow and insidious, like an invisible block that could be mapped out only by its borders?

His hand flew to the small sphere that Varro had given him, tucked away in his pocket. That, at least, was real enough, but could he trust any of what he himself remembered? Could he trust his own mind?

Rush had implied that they had killed themselves—those ruined scientists, whom the LA had destroyed. But when? How long did it take them to realize what they had become? Did they know? Were they told, did they remember, or did they just have to figure out how to map and test their own borders, how to do it always, until one day they found the edge that they could not push beyond.

Was that what Rush was doing?

And if so—was it his own borders he was testing, or Colonel Telford's?

He sat in silence alone with his circuitous thoughts for what felt like hours.

Across the room, for no reason that Volker could see, Telford sat up.

"Hey," Volker said. "Are you—"

Telford held up a hand to silence him, and then stood, motioning Volker up at the same time. After only a few seconds he heard the sound of footsteps echoing steady and sure over metal.

He stood.

The footfalls had a hard double click, as if they were made by high-heeled, rigid boots.

Telford's face was completely frozen. Volker stepped forward to stand next to him.

She came into view abruptly, dressed entirely in black leather. Her hair was black and her eyes were black and her dark collar was high and austere. Varro walked next to her and slightly behind, his expression as frozen as Telford's.

She was beautiful.

She was also the most terrifying thing Volker had seen in his life.

"Cousin Dale," she said, her voice low, nearly friendly. "Welcome to my employ."

Volker nodded, not trusting himself to speak. What had she meant by that—had she been referring to his 'recruitment' by 'Telford,' or was this a sign that everything was about to go to hell?

"David," she said, stepping forward. "How are you?" Her hands closed around the bars. "We haven't had a chance to speak in quite some time."

"I'm a little worse for wear," Telford said guardedly.

"Yes, I hear Dannic was a bit exuberant during the course of your interrogation, but he tells me your loyalty is above reproach."

"Of course it is," Telford replied.

Kiva stepped back, taking the door with her as she swung it wide, opening their cell. Volker fought down a surge of dread.

"You are free to go," she said.

Telford didn't move. Volker stood his ground as well.

"What about Rush?" Telford asked.

"He's waiting for you at the cargo transport."

"In a box?" Telford asked dryly.

"Hardly," Kiva said. "I am convinced of his loyalty as well."

"Meaning what?" Telford asked.

"Meaning I am convinced." Kiva's voice sharpened abruptly. Something in her tone caused both Varro and Telford to flinch involuntarily.

Kiva's eyes snapped to Volker, her attention clearly captured by his inappropriate stillness.

He shot a look at her that he was certain was a completely transparent window to the utter terror that filled every square inch of his body.

She smiled faintly at him.

"He doesn't favor the sixth house, does he, Varro?" she asked, stepping toward Volker.

"His references check out," Varro said. "He's—"

"So you said," Kiva said smoothly, her hand closing around Volker's jaw like he was something she owned. He fought the urge to flinch away from her. "The eyes, perhaps," she said after a moment of studying him. "What house was your mother from?" she demanded.

Telford had gone over that with him.

"Four," Volker managed. "Fourth house."

"Hmm," Kiva said, releasing him. "You take after her, then." The sentence was delivered like a slap—hard and full of disdain, as if it were some kind of insult.

"Yes," Volker said, an edge entering his voice. "I do."

Kiva smiled faintly. "So you have at least a fraction of a spine somewhere in there."

Volker said nothing.

Kiva stepped laterally, her eyes almost even with Telford's thanks to the heeled boots she was wearing. "David," she said. "Be careful."

"I always am," Telford said neutrally.

"Be sure that you're careful enough," she said, her voice silken, the menace in her tone unveiled.

"Right," Telford said.

She stepped back abruptly and then turned to stalk out of the cell, glancing at Varro as she did so.

"If you'll come with me," Varro said, starting in the opposite direction from the one Kiva had taken. Telford and Volker fell into step behind him.

The walk to the cargo bay where they had entered seemed very long.

Near the same place where Ginn had asked him about Rush, Telford stepped forward and asked Varro a question that Volker barely caught.

"Who was it?" Telford asked.

"Kiva," Varro said, his voice clipped.

"The whole time?"

"Yes."

Telford slowed enough to bring himself even with Volker. Volker tried to catch Telford's eye, and shoot him an inquisitive look. Telford shook his head fractionally and said nothing.

When they got to the cargo bay, other than the two guards inside the doors with their dusky silver weapons, there was no sign of anyone else. Volker tensed. He sensed Telford do the same.

"Varro—" Telford began, his voice icy.

"He's not on his feet," the other man said, holding up a hand to forestall any further comment. "It was a long session."

"Yeah," Telford said shortly. "Okay."

They walked forward, toward the platform they had ringed in on.

They had nearly reached it by the time Rush came into view. He was on the floor, his eyes half open, visibly shaking.

He did not look normal.

Volker had a hard time keeping his eyes fixed on Rush so instead he looked at Telford.

Telford stared at Rush for the span of about five seconds.

"How the hell is he supposed to fucking work like this, Varro? This is going to set us back by at least a day."

"Then it sets you back," Varro said. "Not my problem. Next meeting is in three weeks. Kiva says he had better have a planet by then so that he can go back to the decryption."

Telford sighed and then dropped into a crouch next to Rush.

"Hey," he half-shouted. "Get up."

Volker winced subtly in sympathy before he remembered himself. His eyes flashed over to Varro, who was looking at Telford with a thinly veiled expression of distaste.

"Rush." Telford tried again. "Get. Up."

"Maybe you didn't hear me," Varro said. "It was a long session. I don't think he's going to be able to stand."

Telford seemed to reach the same conclusion. "Dale," he snapped. "Give me a hand here, will you?"

Volker knelt down and together they pulled Rush to his feet, and managed to keep him there. They dragged him forward toward the ring platform and positioned themselves unsteadily in the center of the etched circle.

"See you in three weeks," Varro said, catching Volker's eye and giving him a small nod.

Volker nodded back and then the sound and sight of the rings drowned everything else out.

Chapter Five

He knew that he had fully rematerialized in the transport room when the subtle shaking that wracked Rush's frame faded back in a muted escalation.

The question of what had happened to Rush and Telford while he had been cooling his heels in that cell was almost too much for his already strained mind to bear. He was afraid to find out, but worse than that was the fear, the knowledge that—he would never know for certain.

Nevertheless, with Rush so clearly a complete wreck but without any obvious injuries, Volker couldn't help the unsettling suspicion that Rush might have gotten whatever the "prep" was that Varro had mentioned. But he couldn't ask. He couldn't say anything. All he could do was edge in closer, trying to take as much of Rush's weight as possible.

He looked over at Telford, trying to convey a sense of what-the-heck-do-we-do-now via his gaze alone.

Telford's eyes bored into him as the other man shook his head once in an unmistakable warning.

"Rush," Telford snapped, his voice unnecessarily loud, his tone at odds with the caution in his eyes. "Can you plot a course, or are you going to be fucking useless?" His gaze tore through the room as he spoke, looking for something that Volker could only guess at.

"Piss off, David," Rush murmured.

"You watch your fucking mouth," Telford said shortly, again at a slightly elevated volume. As he spoke, he caught Volker's eye and then carefully stepped forward, pulling Rush across the etched circle on the floor. "I'm sure that's what got you into this state in the first place."

"Oh I'm sure Kiva—" Rush staggered slightly and Volker winced, feeling the pull of the other man's weight against the stitches in his injured shoulder. After a few seconds Rush regrouped and managed to finish his sentence with, "—appreciates my witty commentary as much as your next pseudo-enlightened despot."

"Rush," Telford said, the exasperation in the word not reaching his eyes. The tone of his voice implied that he had more to say, but instead of continuing, he made a quick jerking motion that was too fast for Volker to follow. It seemed to unbalance the mathematician, pulling him away from Volker. Telford half turned, grabbed the front of Rush's jacket, and lowered him to the floor in an orchestrated fall.

Rush immediately struggled to sit, but Telford pressed him back with apparent ease.

"Just stay here," Telford mouthed silently at Rush. "Stay."

Rush narrowed his eyes. Telford gave him a pointed, steady glare. .

"Watch him," Telford said shortly, looking up at Volker. "I'm going to get us out of here."

"Don't you need—" Volker began.

"No," Telford said. "Stay here. Make sure he doesn't set the ship on fire." He held Volker's gaze for half a second and then mouthed, "No talking."

Volker nodded, and Telford shot to his feet, exiting the room.

Volker took a deep breath, trying to release the tension in his nerves to little effect. His heart continued to anxiously race away. He dropped into a crouch next to Rush, trying

to catch the other man's eye. Rush wasn't looking at him. His eyes were half shut and he was still—god, he was still visibly shaking.

Volker had the urge to take off his jacket and give it to the other man, but he hesitated, figuring that was probably not something Dale from the sixth house would do.

Or maybe Dale from the sixth house was a nice guy. There must be nice people in the Lucian Alliance. Ginn, for one, hadn't seemed so bad.

He decided to hell with it. He pulled off his jacket and carefully draped it over the other man; Stockholm syndrome and putative-concealed-video-surveillance-equipment be damned.

What the hell had they done to Rush?

Had they brainwashed him? If they had, would it look like this? He had no way of knowing, and he didn't, he couldn't trust Rush or Telford enough to ask them. He could feel his heart, racing out of control, trapped in his chest, trapped on this ship, in a situation that had gone from terrible to untenable in the span of thirty six hours.

The walls seemed to press down upon him and he shut his eyes, trying to think of anywhere but where he was, trying to think of fields of panoramas, of vistas, of the endlessness of space but failing, consistently failing until he thought of Caltech—of the lawn outside the planetary sciences building where the undergraduates would do their problem sets when the weather was nice. Rectangular. Green. Framed by elegant buildings.

There, no trees blocked the sun.

It was okay.

He pulled in a deep breath.

He was a scientist and he was just—defining his question, which was: whom, if anyone, had been brainwashed?

The unfortunate truth of it was that he didn't know, and no amount of mental gymnastics were going to facilitate acquisition of that knowledge. His question was currently unanswerable, but that did not mean it would always be so. He needed to gather data.

He looked back at Rush, who was now watching him.

"Hey," Volker mouthed silently.

Rush nodded fractionally at him.

"You okay?" Volker mouthed.

Rush gave him a choppy, painful-looking shrug.

They waited in silence for Telford to do whatever it was that he was doing—scanning for bugs, or starting the engines, or plotting a course or all three.

The quiet felt raw against his nerves. The need to talk to Rush was overwhelming.

Telford had said no talking.

Besides, what exactly would one say to someone who had been tortured? Volker didn't think there was really any standard set of things to say. Well, maybe there was, somewhere, invented by some psychologist. But it seemed like probably one would just say normal things. Whatever. Anything.

He wondered if Rush liked music.

God.

Telford hadn't even started the engines yet. He must be scanning the ship first. Or maybe he was very slow at plotting courses.

Volker looked back down at Rush. His eyes were half closed.

Still, the shaking continued.

And idea occurred to him.

As surreptitiously as possible, he shifted closer to Rush. He repositioned his own jacket slightly and then reached down into the space between himself and Rush, which was hopefully blocked from the view of any hypothetical surveillance equipment. Without looking, he found one of Rush's hands and gently pried it open, flattening it palm up on the deck.

After a few seconds of resistance, Rush seemed to understand his plan.

Using the tip of one finger, Volker traced a single line across Rush's palm. Then another. Then he traced a three. Then a five.

Rush looked at him, his gaze sharpening.

Volker repeated the sequence.

1, 1, 3, 5.

Then he held out his own palm, positioning it at an angle that Rush could easily reach.

Rush slowly traced an eight. He paused, and then added the number thirteen, the one and the three coming in quick succession.

Volker thought for a minute and traced a new set of numbers.

2, 7, 1, 8.

Almost immediately Rush responded with a two and then an eight, after which point he smacked Volker's palm with two fingers in clear irritation, apparently unimpressed with Volker's choice of integer sequence.

Volker shot him a look.

2, 3, 3, 5, 10, 13.

He waited a few seconds with his palm out, and then retraced the pattern. After only a few seconds Rush came up with thirty-nine and forty-three.

Volker pursed his lips and cocked his head, trying to shoot Rush a look that said 'not bad.'

Rush rolled his eyes.

Volker jumped slightly as the engines started up with a vibration that traveled subtly through the deck plating.

Clearly something harder was going to be called for. He chewed his lip subtly for a moment, watching Rush watch him impatiently. After a few seconds he had one.

13, 17, 31, 37, 71, 73.

This one was a bit trickier, in that it didn't involve computation per se, but Rush nailed it after only thirty seconds with a seventy-nine and a ninety-seven.

Damn it.

Rush smacked his hand again, apparently signaling his distaste for Volker's chosen sequence. This time, Volker subtly flicked him back with one finger. Rush flinched slightly, the movement punctuating his almost continuous shuddering, and making Volker feel like a complete and total jerk. He caught Rush's eye and made a face that he hoped conveyed the half-guilty and half-horrified tenor of his thoughts.

Rush narrowed his eyes.

Volker shrugged fractionally.

Rush flattened his hand against the deck plating.

0, 3, 8, 15 —

Volker broke off as the door swished open and Telford strode in. He shot Volker an irritated look, which Volker guessed was probably due to the fact that he'd draped his jacket over Rush, because there was no way that he could have seen the integer sequence game from where he'd been standing.

"Is he alright?" Telford snapped, dropping into a crouch and surreptitiously handing Volker a small piece of notebook paper.

"Yeah." Volker said shortly, unfolding the paper as Telford grabbed his leather jacket and pulled it away from Rush, throwing it at him in such a way that it concealed the small piece of paper. Telford's handwriting was neat and fluid.

There are three devices on the ship. One on the bridge. One in the sleeping quarters. One is in this room, probably on either you or Rush. Check your clothes.

"Fucking scientists," Telford said conversationally, as carefully turned the other man over onto his back, "They fall apart under even the slightest hint of pressure, you know?"

"Yeah," Volker agreed, a subtle widening of his eyes the only expression of dissent that he allowed himself, "They're pretty worthless."

"Who needs math anyway?" Telford asked with a dark hint of a smile. He caught Rush's eye and held a finger to his lips very briefly before he pulled the other man's jacket open. Telford started running his fingers over the leather, methodically tracing seam lines and plunging his hands into pockets in a relentless, methodical progression.

To Volker's surprise, Rush didn't put up any kind of fight.

"Not me," Volker said, trying to keep the irony in his tone from becoming at all noticeable. "That's for sure." He started to copy Telford's methodical examination of his own jacket until he realized with a sudden thrill of insight that he likely knew where the device was.

Certainly, it was the small sphere in the pocket of his jacket that Varro had given him.

Was there any conceivable harm in telling Telford about it?

He glanced over surreptitiously, watching the other man run his fingers beneath the collar of Rush's jacket.

Maybe.

He looked back at the little sphere, dark in the depths of his pocket. If he gave this thing to Telford, it would take away the only edge in this entire scenario that he had. If things really went downhill it might be his only chance of coming out of the situation alive. Granted, if things came to that, if he took Varro's offer and joined Kiva, he'd be signing himself up for a life of space-pirating—not exactly something he was excited about, but certainly better than death.

He looked over at Telford. The other man had Rush's jacket off entirely. He had thrown it aside and had started running his fingers over Rush's shirt, tracing the seams, the collar, his expression intent.

But if Telford, or Rush for that matter, had either already been brainwashed, or were, hypothetically brainwashed at some point in the future, then whether or not he was reporting to Kiva would likely end up being a moot point. He couldn't imagine that he would go unpunished for being someone other than whom he appeared to be.

Telford was pulling off Rush's boots.

This was getting ridiculous. He needed to say something before it looked to Telford like he was covering anything up, because he was fairly certain that the thing in his pocket, whatever it was, exactly, was the thing that Telford's scan had detected.

Volker reached over and tapped the other man on the shoulder, interrupting his methodical examination of Rush's left boot.

Volker pulled out the small silver sphere and held it aloft for Telford's inspection.

Telford looked up.

The dull metallic surface of the sphere shimmered.

Telford hit the thing out of Volker's hand with so much force that it cracked against the opposite wall and rebounded back against the floor where it rolled rapidly toward them. With a speed that was difficult to follow, Telford threw Rush's jacket at the thing, stopping its forward momentum and trapping it beneath the leather.

Volker stared at Telford in shock.

Telford glared at Volker and then shifted over, carefully wrapping the sphere entirely in Rush's jacket, not touching the thing at all with his bare hand.

"What?" Volker mouthed.

"Later," Telford mouthed back, getting to his feet, holding the jacket in both hands. He looked at Volker, letting his gaze shift pointedly to Rush and then back. "No talking," he mouthed again.

The door hissed open and then shut again.

Volker looked over at Rush. His eyes were half open and he was still shaking. As he watched, Rush twisted onto his side and curled into himself, his head resting on one arm.

After only a few minutes of waiting Telford came back into the room and dropped into a crouch, holding what appeared to be a Lucian Alliance equivalent of a military canteen.

"Listen up," he said speaking quietly. "This room is now reading as clear, but I don't know how sensitive the other two devices are, so we're going to have to keep it down until we figure out what to do about them."

"Can't we just shut them off?" Volker whispered.

"That's not going to look good," Telford replied absently. He was watching Rush.

"Hey," Telford said after a few seconds. "Nick."

"What?" Rush murmured, not focusing on him properly.

"What happened?" Telford murmured.

"What does it look like?" Rush asked. "I achieved all of my objectives with flawless execution." He shut his eyes.

Telford smiled faintly. "Were you ever unconscious?"

"No," Rush whispered. "I don't think so."

"Well, that's something," Telford said.

"She was in a very reasonable mood."

Volker exhaled, short and incredulous.

"Yeah, she seemed pretty chipper," Telford said, rolling his eyes subtly as he inverted the water bottle several times.

"She likes me," Rush murmured, his eyes still shut. "I can tell."

"Well I hope she didn't fucking put you into renal failure," Telford murmured. "Come on, sit up."

"Renal failure?" Volker repeated, entirely nonplussed, helping Telford pull Rush into a sitting position and then holding him steady while Telford shook the canteen several times.

"I'm not drinking your fucking water," Rush said, mostly leaning against Volker. "You clearly put something in it."

"Yeah," Telford replied. "There's a shit-ton of bicarbonate in here, which you had damn well better drink." His eyes shifted to Volker. "Electrical current used to elicit pain also causes intense prolonged skeletal muscle contraction for the duration of the stimulus," he said shortly. "If you're subjected to it for hours—your muscles become injured and break down which can fuck over your kidneys if it's bad enough."

"Great," Volker said. "How do you know if it's 'bad enough'?"

"Your piss turns black," Telford said.

"And you know this because—"

"Because it's happened to me." Telford whispered shortly.

"Oh," Volker said, a bit weakly. "Obviously. And the bicarbonate helps?"

"Yeah." Telford eyed Rush forbiddingly. "So drink it."

"I don't think so."

"Rush," Telford hissed, clearly irritated, "What the hell do you think is going to happen, exactly? It's not fucking poisoned."

"I'm not drinking that," Rush murmured.

"Why. Because I want you to?"

"Yes," Rush hissed. "That's exactly why. Now fuck off and leave me alone. I will make my own bicarbonate water. Later."

"God damn it," Telford hissed. "I am trying to help you. You can't even sit."

"Untrue," Rush said, pulling away from Volker and sitting under his own power. "Get the fuck away from me, both of you."

Telford stared at Rush, his jaw locked, his eyes black and glittering. "Fine. I'll just leave this here," Telford said, shaking the canteen. "You can either drink it, or just lie here while your kidneys necrose." He got to his feet. "I'll come back in half a day to see if you're dead."

"Umm," Volker said, looking skeptically up at Telford "Why don't we just—"

Telford yanked him to his feet and dragged him toward the door, away from Rush. He was too surprised and unbalanced to pull away until they were practically already out the door, at which point Telford shoved him out into the hallway, hard enough to cause him to lose his balance and half fall against the opposite wall.

He shot Telford a look of horrified incredulity as the door swished shut.

"What the hell are you—"

Telford cut him off with a furious look and a short hand gesture. Then he stepped in, very close to Volker.

"Quietly," he hissed. "LA surveillance devices are very sensitive."

"Okay fine," Volker whispered back. "But you can't just leave him in there. He—"

"You've been here for what?" Telford hissed, "Maybe thirty-six hours? You think you understand anything about what's really going on here?"

"No, but I know you can't leave a half-conscious injured person lying on the floor. He can't even get up. He—"

"He's got to drink the bicarb," Telford hissed, "And the more I try to convince him that he should, the more he's going to resist. It would take fucking hours and it would fucking exhaust everyone and we all need to fucking sleep."

"Look," Volker said. "I'll talk to him. He—"

"You want to go in there and do what? Spout some sensitive NPR bullshit? Give him a fucking hug? Go ahead. Try it. See how far it gets you."

"I just think that—"

"No," Telford hissed. "No thinking. Right now, you and I are going to the bridge and we are going to look busy and have a conversation about how fucking annoying Rush is, because until we figure out how we're going to deal with these surveillance devices, we're going to have give the impression that we don't know they're there."

"Can I go let my cat out of the wall first?" Volker whispered finding a somewhat rebellious appreciation in the irony of being reasonable in the face of an unreasonable situation.

Telford exhaled, short and irritated. "Make sure it doesn't make it out of the cargo bay. If we fucking get killed because of that cat—"

Volker turned on his heel and walked down the hallway toward the aft portion of the ship. He opened the door and stepped inside. The lights here, like everywhere, were dimmed down in a pathetic demi-night. He'd gotten a few minutes of exhausted sleep on the LA ship, but somehow the low light in the cargo bay seemed to sap at what remained of his energy.

He knelt down and pulled the paneling away from the wall, revealing Mendelssohn curled up in a nest of his shirts, apparently sleeping contentedly.

"Hey buddy," Volker whispered, leaning the paneling against the wall. The cat blinked at him sleepily, but otherwise seemed disinclined to move.

He considered the pluses and minuses of moving the litter box and the cat food back out into the main area of the cargo bay, but decided that maybe it was better that Mendelssohn's stuff stayed inside the shielded bulkhead, in case of any type of emergency.

"You're not bored?" he whispered, reaching over to scratch behind the cat's ears. "Sorry you got locked in the dark all day."

Mendelssohn meowed a bit plaintively and sniffed at the cuff of his unfamiliar jacket, and then reached out a paw to bat at his wrist.

"Yeah," Volker said. "I hear ya." He considered a moment and then pulled the cat out of the small space, settling him over his good shoulder. "Telford can wait for three minutes, right?" he murmured, running a hand over the cat's back.

He stood and scanned the cargo bay, making sure that nothing too looked amiss, and then headed for the door.

"Shh," he whispered. "No meowing. And no running away, either. Otherwise no more field trips for you. This is a highly covert operation right here. Are we clear on that?"

Mendelssohn purred softly.

"Okay," Volker murmured. "Here we go."

The cat startled slightly at the hiss of the door controls but was otherwise well behaved on the walk down to the transport room. Volker opened the door and stepped

through, half turning to shut it behind him. Rush was lying on the floor curled on his side, still shaking and looking utterly miserable.

"Hey," Volker whispered, dropping into a crouch. "How are you doing?"

"Fine," Rush said, his eyes closed.

"Look," Volker whispered. "I'm supposed to go have a fake conversation with Telford on the bridge, but my cat is pretty lonely after being trapped in a wall all day. If you're just going to be lying in here on the floor anyway—"

"Oh very subtle," Rush snapped.

"Eh," Volker said with a shrug.

Volker reached over and dragged the canteen that Telford had left closer to Rush. Then he pried Mendelssohn off his shoulder and set him down immediately next to Rush. "Be nice to my cat."

"I've been nothing but nice to your cat," Rush whispered hoarsely, watching Mendelssohn delicately bat at the canteen.

"True," Volker said. "Which is why I'm giving you my cat and not some, and I quote, 'sensitive NPR bullshit.'"

Rush gave him a wan smile. Volker gave Mendelssohn a final pat, and was about to stand up when the other man reached out, icy fingers closing on his wrist. Volker looked over at him.

"Were you ever unconscious?" Rush whispered.

"No," Volker replied, his gaze locked on Rush. "Is that what they do?" He paused and licked his lips. "But would I even know if I was unconscious? Would I remember? If they can implant loyalties, can they implant memories?"

Rush stared at him for a moment, his eyes half-closed. "You're beginning to understand."

"You have to help me," Volker whispered desperately. "You have to tell me what you know."

"But," Rush said soundlessly, with a twisted smile, "How could you ever truly believe anything I say?"

"No one can live like this," Volker said, his voice cracking, "Without going insane."

"I'm aware," Rush replied, shivering.

Volker shut his eyes against a sudden sting, and fought against the deep, instinctive, anger he felt toward Rush—toward this intellectual narcissist who had destroyed his old life, who had literally burned it to the ground, who had ripped from him everything he'd spent his life working towards to plunge him into some kind of absurdist space-nightmare.

He pulled in a deep breath.

He ran a hand over Mendelssohn's back before he got to his feet and left the room without a backward glance.

He stood in the dim hallway for a moment, trying to steel himself against—well, the remains of his presumably short life.

He really couldn't see any way by which things were going to end well for him. No matter whom the LA got to—himself, Rush, Telford—it was only a matter of time before his true identity was revealed. Maybe it already had been. In which case, he was essentially living beneath his own personal sword of Damocles.

What in god's name was he going to do?

He walked toward the bridge.

Telford half turned in his seat, when Volker hit the door controls.

"Dale," he said shortly. "What took you so long?"

Volker shrugged as he slid into the copilot's seat. "I had a few things to take care of."

"Did you check on Rush?" Telford asked, his tone casual.

"Yeah," Volker replied.

"Did he drink the water?"

"Not yet," Volker replied, trying to guess what Telford wanted conveyed to whomever might be listening. "Are you going to keep him trapped in that room all night?"

Telford shot him a look that Volker thought was probably approval. "Just until he drinks it."

"You put anything in it?" Volker asked, forcing his voice to stay casual.

Telford shot him a look that was a bit more measured. "Of course I did. Standard post-interrogation cocktail."

"Yeah, of course," Volker said, wondering what the heck was in a 'standard post-interrogation cocktail,' and also whether Telford had really given any such thing to Rush.

He hated his life.

"Are you testing me?" Telford snapped, his tone abruptly hostile. "You think I don't know the protocol?"

Telford was clearly much better at this than he was.

"Clearly you do know it," Volker said, trying to sound offhand and cagey, but fairly certain he just sounded nervous.

"You're damn right I know it," Telford hissed. "If you doubt my loyalty I'll be happy to drop you off at the next spaceport. Because I don't need that from you. You got that?"

"I was just curious," Volker said, backpedaling abruptly. "I wasn't sure, since you're both from earth, whether the same standards applied to—"

"Of course they do," Telford said, sounding mollified. "I take my affiliation very seriously." Telford paused for almost half a minute, presumably allowing the manufactured tension to leave the air. You know I was inducted into sixth house myself."

"Really," Volker said, not needing to feign interest.

"Yeah," Telford said. "Sponsored by Kiva, actually."

"That's—" Volker searched around for something appropriate to respond with. "That's quite an honor."

"You're damn right it was," Telford said quietly.

"I didn't mean to cast any doubts on your loyalty," Volker said.

"I understand," Telford replied.

There was a short pause.

"What about Rush?" Volker said. "Was he inducted into sixth house as well?"

"Yes," Telford said darkly. "Not that it means anything to him."

"I wouldn't know," Volker said neutrally.

Telford shot him another approving look.

"He's completely insane," Telford said casually, leaning back in his chair, his posture, his face, his tone all indicating relaxation. Only the fingers of his right hand gave away any tension as they tightened on the armrest of his chair.

"Yeah, he seems a bit—unbalanced," Volker agreed.

"Do you know he doesn't sleep?" Telford asked incredulously. "He hasn't slept in his damn bunk since we set foot on this ship."

"That's impossible," Volker said. "He must sleep sometimes."

"Oh he does, I guess, here and there. Mostly down near the engines."

It occurred to Volker that Telford had just essentially explained why Rush would not be appearing in one of the two places that the LA surveillance devices were located.

"Is he really worth all this work?" Volker asked.

"I think so," Telford said. "It's hard for me to say, but I do know that stargate command had been leaning on him pretty hard to join up before we acquired him." Telford gave an artless shrug and glanced over at Volker. "They generally pick them pretty well."

"They must be looking for him, then," Volker said.

"Oh they are," Telford said with a twisted looking smile. "But they're not looking in the right places."

"I see," Volker said, reflecting that unfortunately, he really didn't see at all.

They lapsed into silence, watching the blur of the stars. Volker fought against the drag of exhaustion for an amorphous length of time before Telford finally suggested that they go check on Rush. He nodded and stood, feeling slightly more alert as his blood started flowing again.

They left the bridge and walked down the hall to the transport room. Telford hit the door controls.

Rush was half-curved on the floor, no longer shaking, clearly asleep. Mendelssohn watched them from where he had coiled up next to Rush's chest, his tail ticking irregularly back and forth at intervals.

Telford turned to shoot Volker a pointed look.

"What?" Volker whispered defensively.

"What part of 'cargo bay' was not clear to you?"

"Mendelssohn is a people person," Volker said defensively.

"Mendelssohn? That's your cat's name?"

"Yes. After the composer, because, you know, people name their cats Felix, and—"

"I know who Felix Mendelssohn is," Telford whisper-snapped, looking somewhat offended. "And I get it. It's clever."

"Thanks. Rush hates it."

"Of course he does. He hates everything," Telford stepped forward and knelt down. He picked up the canteen and shook it. It was clearly mostly empty. "Thank god."

"What was really in there?" Volker asked, dropping into a crouch next to Telford and pointing at the canteen.

"Bicarbonate," Telford said, giving him a measured look, "And a muscle relaxant, which he clearly fucking needed."

"What was supposed to be in there?"

"Bicarbonate, a muscle relaxant and a psychotropic drug."

"Which he did not get, right?"

"No," Telford said, not looking at Volker, reaching out to scratch gently behind Mendelssohn's ears. "Of course not."

Volker stared at Telford.

After a few seconds Telford looked back at him. "What?" the other man hissed. "You don't believe me?"

"Not really," Volker said.

"He's fucked up enough already," Telford hissed. "I'm not about to fuck him up more."

"Yeah," Volker murmured skeptically. "I guess."

Telford's eyes flicked to him, dark and forbidding, his jaw locked.

Volker recoiled slightly.

"I'll be right back," Telford said after several more seconds of pointed silence.

Volker released a shuddery breath.

As the door hissed shut, he reached out to stroke the top of Mendelssohn's head, listening to the quiet, familiar purr and watched Rush critically, trying to find any sign that Telford had given him anything other than what he'd claimed. But nothing seemed obviously amiss.

After a few minutes Telford came back in with an armful of blankets and dropped back into a crouch.

"Two below for every one above," Telford murmured to Volker, indicating the blankets with his eyes. "Otherwise you create a heat sink on a cold surface like this."

"Mmm," Volker murmured. "Emergency medicine is a hobby of yours?"

"Wilderness medicine," Telford whispered. "As hobbies go, one could do worse."

"I guess so," Volker said. "Yeah."

They spread the blankets out on the deck plating and Volker detangled his cat from Rush's grip so Telford could maneuver the other man onto the blankets. When that was done, Volker carefully put the cat back down mostly on top of Rush and they spread the last blanket over him.

"Is he going to be okay like this?" Volker asked skeptically. "Lying on the floor of the transporter room all night?"

Telford pulled himself into a cross-legged position and leaned forward, his back hunched. "First of all, it's 'transport' room, not 'transporter' room. This isn't fucking star trek, Volker."

"Oh. Yeah. I don't know how I could have messed that up."

Telford looked up with a hint of a smile. "But to answer your question, I'll keep an eye on him for a few hours, make sure he doesn't wake up and pass out or do anything stupid."

"Wake me up when you need a break," Volker murmured.

Telford nodded. "I'll try to give you a solid four or five hours."

Volker nodded tiredly and got his feet, making his way toward the door.

"Remember," Telford murmured. "You're being monitored in there."

Volker looked back at him and nodded. "As if I could forget."

Chapter Six

Telford had been true to his word and had managed to stay awake for a good six hours before he'd slipped into the darkness of the sleeping quarters and subtly shaken Volker awake with a short "Your watch."

Before Volker was really alert enough to respond, Telford had surreptitiously slipped a piece of notebook paper into his hand before climbing up to the top berth with something less than his usual grace.

He forced himself to his feet, fighting the mental drudge of an exhausted, coffee-less, morning-less 'morning'.

"He okay?" Volker asked.

"Yeah," Telford replied indistinctly, from where he was lying, face down on the bed.

Of course, it had been a useless question, because he couldn't interpret Telford's answer—not knowing there was a listening device in the room they currently occupied.

Volker staggered out into the hallway, feeling completely disgusting after going two days without a shower and sleeping in his clothes, which weren't even his, and hopefully weren't going to give him any diseases just from wearing them.

Maybe he could take a shower today.

Hopefully that would be allowed.

He unfolded the scrap of notebook paper in his hand.

Go to the bridge and try to look like you have some idea of what's happening on the consoles. Stay there for a few minutes, then go sit with Rush. When he wakes up, remind him about the surveillance devices. Don't let him do anything stupid.

Great.

He spent a few minutes in the bathroom, brushing his teeth and splashing water on his face to try and get rid of the fog of what he assumed was a combination of too little sleep and caffeine withdrawal. He considered taking a shower, but ultimately decided that the search he would have to make for a towel, followed by the process of figuring out how to use an alien shower could take a long time.

Telford clearly did not want Rush waking up alone.

Fine. No shower. Yet.

He squared his shoulders, making an effort to look a bit more put together and confident than he otherwise felt, and walked onto the bridge. He set one hand casually on the back of a chair, and let his eyes scan the monitors, trying to pretend he was back in his lab, watching the data feed from the radio array. He tried to think about alignment and integrity and transfer rates, and hoped some measure of competence came through.

When he had examined each of the four displays in the room, he turned and walked back off the bridge. He hit the door controls for the transport room and stepped inside.

Both his kidnapper and his cat were still sleeping.

That was nice.

For them.

He dropped into a seated position next to them and pulled his knees up to his chest, trying to avoid being crushed beneath the hopelessness of his own situation. He was trapped on an alien ship, pretending to be something he wasn't, not able to so much as reliably read a darn console. Furthermore, he'd been demoted from his position as an independent scientific investigator—a tenured professor of astrophysics at Caltech—to like, the space pirate lab technician of a crazy person.

He rested his forehead against his knees.

He had a lot of complicated feelings about Rush that could mostly be summed up as falling into the categories of 'anger' and 'pity'.

Telford, on the other hand, seemed like a straightforward, reasonable guy, except for the times when he was completely terrifying.

God. He didn't trust either of them. He didn't know if they trusted each other. He didn't know what they were doing or what they wanted or if they wanted the same thing or different things. He didn't know if one or both of them had been brainwashed. He didn't know anything.

He was going to die.

He tried to keep his breathing calm and measured. Tried to focus on the point where his forehead dug painfully into his knees.

Something that he didn't know was going to kill him.

He was sure of that.

He was sure.

He was going to have to try and do something about this. He was going to have to try and save himself in some way. He just didn't know how, because he didn't know anything. Not anything.

Okay. Logical. Be logical.

Thinking clearly under stress had always been something he'd struggled with.

It seemed like he had two choices. He could assume that Telford and Rush hadn't been serious about the whole threat-to-his-graduate-students thing and he could literally try to escape this ship and the Lucian Alliance and make his way to some planet—

Seriously? 'Some planet?' This was his life now?

So he could make his way to some planet, and then try to get by wherever he found himself, or, he could stay with Rush and Telford, try to survive this situation, and possibly, possibly make it back to Earth if he was lucky and smart.

He sighed.

It was not a good choice. He really did not want to risk the safety of his graduate students just to go on the run so he could reinvent himself as a psychotropic corn farmer, or whatever, but neither did he want to stay under the watchful eye of Lucian Alliance. If he stayed, he'd probably get tortured at some point, as that seemed to be kind of a standard thing that they did. He pictured the whole torture thing as—not going very well for him.

Nope. Torture. Not a good time.

He sighed, thinking of Nupur and Brian and Katie.

Fine.

He'd stay. It made sense, and had kind of always been his plan, but he felt better now that he'd laid it out and made a fake decision about it.

So, now, he needed a way to not die. Maybe, like, multiple ways not to die. He decided to start making a mental list.

1. Learn Goa'uld.
2. Learn about Lucian Alliance customs, body language, and history.
3. Get in shape.
4. Learn to fight.
5. Learn to fly a space ship.

It sounded a bit juvenile laid out like that, and also a bit like—Luke Skywalker's training montage from *Empire Strikes Back*, but, the bottom line was that all of these things were things he could do.

At least it would be better than just sitting, frozen, in this tomb of a ship, waiting to be killed by something outside of his control.

He glanced at Rush again. The mathematician hadn't so much as twitched the entire time he'd been sitting there silently freaking out, and it didn't look like he'd be waking up any time soon. He wondered how much of that was exhaustion and how much was from the muscle relaxant Telford had given him.

Satisfied that Rush would not be waking up in the next three minutes, Volker left the room, crossed over to the work room, and began to look through the books that were scattered around the place. After a few minutes he found a cheap paperback one that looked promising.

Practical Goa'uld for the SGC Science Professional: Edited by Dr. Daniel Jackson.

This Dr. Jackson guy was everywhere, apparently.

He picked it up along with one of Rush's small notebooks and walked back to the transporter room.

Oh wait.

The transport room. "Transport," he whispered. "Transport, transport, transport."

He sat down on the floor next to Rush and began to scan the table of contents.

Chapter one—The Goa'uld alphabet and basic grammar rules. Chapter two—Words that will save your life. Chapter three—Phrases that will save your life. Chapter four—Declensions, conjugations, adjectives. Chapter five—Navigating the starship console: a linguistic perspective. Chapter six—Numbers. Chapter seven—Protocol and vocabulary regarding imprisonment and hostage scenarios.

And it went on like that. Well, it least seemed like it would be useful. He flipped to the first page and set about committing the alphabet to memory, testing himself by recopying it over and over in tiny, careful script into one of Rush's notebooks. He spent maybe an hour working with it before he moved on to reading the grammar rules. He tried to make sense of them as best he could, but, really, he was quite interested in starting in on the "Words that will save your life," chapter, as that one was pretty highly relevant to his current interests.

He scanned down the list, covering the English, trying to read the word in Goa'uld with the appropriate pronunciation and then recall its definition.

"Kree," he whispered, looking up at the ceiling. "Attend."

"Arik," he whispered. "Will not surrender."

"Kek," he murmured. "Death or weakness."

"Nok," he bit his lip. "Stop?" he looked down at the list. "Yup. Great."

"Tal," he whispered. He shut his eyes, trying to visualize the word.

"Death," Rush murmured, "But also, oddly, 'power consumption'. I suppose I can see the connection."

Volker's eyes flew open. His hand coming to his chest as he tried to calm his unbearably tight nerves. He took a deep breath. "Hi," he said. "Sorry if I woke you."

Rush gave him a listless looking flip of his hand before pushing himself up, dislodging Mendelssohn in a slide of irritated cat. Mendelssohn clawed at his jacket cuff.

"Oh what," Rush said to the cat.

"How are you feeling?" Volker asked.

"Fucked," Rush replied.

"Oh."

There was an awkward silence, during which he tried not to look horrified.

After a few seconds, Rush looked over at him.

Every time he thought he had seen the maximum amount of disdain that one person could convey in a single expression, Rush seemed to take it up another level.

"Metaphorically fucked," Rush said in one slow, derisive pull.

"Well—hey. I mean—you were—um? I was just concerned that—"

"Stop talking."

"Okay."

Rush pulled his feet underneath him, clearly in preparation for standing in the relatively near future.

"Hey so, David wanted me to remind you that—"

"On a first name basis with him now, are you?" Rush asked dryly.

"Well, no—I mean, kind of? He calls me Dale, so—"

"Endlessly fuckin' fascinatin' as I find this, Dale," Rush said, his speech slightly slurred, "I regret I cannot stay in this fucking room for one more fucking second so I will see you later. Enjoy the fucking intellectual fruits of Dr. Daniel fucking Jackson, triple PhD."

Rush pushed himself to his feet in what was a fluid and vaguely heroic display of a lack of coordination that ended up with Rush back on the floor, in something that looked a bit like a sprinter's crouch.

"Yeah," Volker said, absently reaching out to lay a hand on Mendelssohn's back. "Muscle relaxants still working, I guess."

"Fuckinghellshit. I will—" Rush shook his head, "Muscle relaxants? What the fuck."

"You were, ah—not looking good," Volker said, in Telford's defense.

Rush shot him a glare.

"So, David wanted me to remind you that there are surveillance devices on the bridge and in the sleeping quarters."

"Yes," Rush said breathily, clearly about to attempt to get to his feet again. "I know."

"Okay," Volker said. "Great. Also, maybe you should consider just—you know, taking it easy until it wears off."

"No," Rush said evenly. "No, I will not be considering that."

This time Rush managed to make it to his feet and Volker followed him toward the door, wondering if this was the kind of thing he was supposed to be preventing. Rush made his way into the bathroom and downed several glasses of water then stood, with his hands braced against the sink for a moment.

"Do you need—"

"No."

"Well, what are you—"

"No."

Rush shut his eyes for a few seconds, either thinking about something or trying not to pass out, Volker really wasn't sure which. Then he turned and brushed past Volker out into the hallway. He headed toward the work room, looking slightly steadier.

"Rush," Volker said, trailing after him.

Rush said nothing until the door had swished shut behind them. "We have, Volker, a potentially fantastic opportunity." He crossed the room to open a particular laptop.

"What, to read Telford's email?" Volker hissed.

"No," Rush said with a faint smile, "But I like your attitude."

Volker rolled his eyes, but came to stand shoulder to shoulder with Rush, looking down at what appeared to be a schematic of the ship, with three red dots pulsing ominously. One on the bridge, one in the sleeping quarters, and one, presumably Volker's silver sphere, in the cargo bay.

"The surveillance devices?" Volker asked.

"Mmm hmm," Rush replied absently, zooming in on the blueprints of the sleeping quarters, centering one of the dots in the middle of the screen. It appeared to be affixed to a wall.

"I think," Rush murmured, "That this one is likely connected to the interior of the grating the covers the air circulator."

"Um, and that's useful how?" Volker asked.

"Oh," Rush said smiling faintly as he turned toward the door. "You'll see."

Volker followed him with a feeling of trepidation. "Rush," he hissed. "Rush, what are you going to do."

"Sometimes these things are best left—undiscussed," Rush replied airily, staggering slightly and then catching himself against the wall as he approached the door.

"David said—"

"I don't care."

"But—"

"I. Don't. Care."

"What if we just look at the rasterized map—it's done by now, and maybe we can find one of these naquadria planets. You know?" Volker was whispering furiously. He realized that Rush seemed to be walking straight towards the sleeping quarters. "Rush do not go in there—just don't—"

"Stay here," Rush said, shooting him a look that seemed to be an equal mixture of arrogance and menace.

"No," Volker hissed, "Rush—"

Rush pressed the door controls and Volker followed him as far as the doorway, hovering there, hoping he would be invisible to the surveillance device that apparently lodged behind a grate in the bulkhead that separated the room from the central corridor.

Rush walked straight into the room, braced one foot against the lower bunk, and yanked Telford straight out of the top berth. They crashed together to the floor, as Volker stood in the corridor, staring at what had just happened in utter astonishment.

So—yep, this was probably what Telford had meant when he had said, 'Don't let him do anything stupid.'

"What the fuck," Telford shouted, half-sitting, clearly disoriented.

Rush punched him, his fist driving into Telford's cheekbone, and half knocking him back.

Volker took a half-step forward.

"Do not ever," Rush shouted his expression distorting with rage, "Do that again."

Telford shifted forward, plowing into Rush without even fully coming to his feet, tackling him hard and shoving him into the opposite wall.

Volker edged forward another half-step. He would give Rush twenty seconds to demonstrate that he had some kind of plan before he went in there and risked any further injury to his still-healing shoulder.

Rush elbowed Telford in the face and managed to get to his feet, twisting as he did so, his fingers curling into the grating on the wall. When Telford dragged him back down to the floor, the grating came down with him.

That counted as a plan, Volker supposed.

"Do what again, you god damned—" he broke off to duck as Rush sloppily swung the grating at his head. The wrought metal crashed into the wall with a low and hollow tone.

Telford's eyes flicked abruptly to the grating. He and Rush locked gazes for a split second.

"What do you think?" Rush snarled. "You can't just fucking drug me and expect—" he broke off as Telford flipped their positions, and ended up mostly on top of Rush. His fingers closed around the mathematician's wrist. Telford slammed the other man's hand straight into the metal wall where the grating impacted again with another hollow tone.

Rush did not let it go.

"You little—" Telford slammed Rush's wrist into the wall for a second time, the grating echoing against the metal of the bulkhead.

"Fucking—" Again the grate hit the wall.

"Sociopath." Again the grate hit the wall, this time with a sickening crack. Something that had been affixed to the back of it dropped onto the floor in glittering fragments of gold and dull, matte metal.

Telford dropped the grate on the floor with a clang and looked down at Rush, who was still pinned beneath him.

Rush raised his eyebrows, evidently quite pleased with himself.

"You are a little fucking sociopath, you know," Telford said, looking at the remains of the surveillance device.

"You're welcome," Rush said lazily.

Telford pursed his lips and exhaled shortly.

"You look exhausted, David. Why don't you take a nap?"

Telford turned to look up at Volker. "You're doing a terrible job," he said. "Next time, use handcuffs."

"Yeah, okay. You know what, you guys? I'm taking a shower," Volker said, turning on his heel and heading toward the bathroom without a backward glance.

The remainder of the morning and early afternoon passed in a haze of Goa'uld memorization. He was left mostly to his own devices, as Telford was catching up on sleep, and Rush had disappeared behind his favorite door—the one that seemed to lead to the engines.

Honestly, it was something of a relief to have a few hours to himself.

Every so often he went to check on the monitors on the bridge, just to show up on candid camera for a few minutes. By the early afternoon the displays with their triangles and their hieroglyphics were starting to make a bit more sense. It was hard to restrain himself when it came to examining the consoles, but he did his best to seem uninterested.

Telford emerged just about the time Volker had forced himself about halfway through chapter 4 of Dr. Daniel Jackson's paperback manual. The other man stood, hovering in the doorway, one hand on the doorframe as he surveyed the work room.

"Hey," Volker said quietly.

Telford gave him a short nod and crossed the room, pulling a silver-wrapped Lucian Alliance meal out of one of the crates along the wall. He sat down at the table next to Volker, and opened the packaging with a quiet efficiency.

"Where's Rush?" he asked.

"Down by the engines, I think," Volker said. "I'm not sure what he's doing."

Telford nodded.

For a few moments, they sat in silence.

"How tall are you?" Telford asked suddenly.

"What?" Volker asked, surprised by the non sequitur.

"How tall are you?" Telford repeated, glaring impatiently at Volker.

"Um, five foot eleven, or so," Volker said. "Why?"

"You're going to need to try on my one of my uniforms."

"Your Air Force uniform?"

"Yes," Telford said shortly, continuing to eat his alien-appearing trail mix.

"Are you going to tell me why?" Volker asked pointedly.

"It is, occasionally, useful to Kiva to have certain—favors—done for her by personnel who are not clearly identifiable as members of the Lucian Alliance"

"So she wants us to do something for her and the Air Force takes the blame?"

"Yes."

"And they're okay with this? The Air Force, I mean?"

"More or less," Telford said, looking down at his hands as he toyed with a bit of silver packaging.

Volker said nothing.

After a few seconds Telford turned his head to look over at him. "They understand the nature of a deep cover assignment may come with some unavoidable—collateral damage."

"Is that what I am?" Volker asked quietly. "Collateral damage?"

"Not yet," Telford said, the line of his gaze sliding away from Volker and out toward the linear streaks of the stars that blurred past as the traveled within hyperspace. "Not yet."

"So what is it that we're supposed to be doing?" Volker asked

"We're making a hit on a tactical asset of the second house of the LA."

"What kind of tactical asset?"

"A facility that's manufacturing modified versions of X-302s, based on plans stolen from earth. It could really give the second house of the LA an edge in some of the internal conflict that the Alliance is getting caught up in." Telford sighed. "Anyway, it doesn't hurt to stay on Kiva's good side."

"I didn't realize we were on her good side."

"For now," Telford said grimly, "I think we are, presuming that Rush," he paused curling his hand into a fist against the glass, "does not entirely fuck us over."

"Do you think he got—" Volker trailed off, the words dying as Telford turned to give him an intent stare "Well. You know. Brainwashed."

"There would be," Telford murmured, "Almost no way for us to tell."

"Yeah," Volker said dully.

"But, for the little that it's worth, I would say no."

"Why no?"

"Because," Telford whispered. "He hasn't done what they want yet."

"And when he does?"

"You don't destroy a person who has unlocked one of the greatest secrets in the history of intelligent life."

"Are you sure they know that?"

"Yeah," Telford said, looking away, out at the stars. "They know. Of course they know."

Volker shot Telford a dubious look. "So what is it, exactly? This secret that he's supposed to be unlocking."

"He hasn't told you?" Telford asked, twisting his entire body around to fix Volker with a dark, intent look.

"Um—no. I mean, the only thing we've really talked about finding this Naquadria planet."

Telford stared at him for the span of about three seconds, and then turned back to the window that was still covered with Rush's fluid script.

"Is that a big deal?" Volker asked quietly, getting to his feet. "I mean, he doesn't seem like the most communicative guy—maybe he just hasn't gotten around to telling me about the big picture. There was a kind of—'find a planet or die' mentality around here yesterday." Absently he reached up to rub gently at his knife wound, trying to ease the itch of knitting skin.

Telford said nothing. He did not turn around.

Volker walked over to stand next to him.

"What," Volker said. "What is he trying to do?"

"He's trying to unlock the nine-chevron address," Telford murmured, looking out at the streaking stars.

"The nine-chevron address?" Volker echoed. He tried to think back to the training videos and remember how many chevrons it usually took to dial the stargate. Seven. He was pretty sure it was seven.

"There's only one," Telford whispered, looking over at him. "No one knows where it goes or how to get it to lock."

"And this is what he's working on?" Volker said.

"Yes," Telford said darkly. "What he supposedly needs your help for."

"You think he's lying about that?" Volker asked.

"I don't know," Telford whispered. "I have no idea. He wanted you for some reason though," he murmured ominously. "That much, I don't doubt."

The tone of Telford's voice, and the set of his shoulders as he had looked out at the streaming stars, stayed with Volker for the rest of the day.

Fourteen hours later, Volker stood in the transport room, thumbing through chapter three of Daniel Jackson's book. He tried to focus on the phrases and pronunciation and not on how uncomfortable and self-conscious he felt in Telford's jacket and pants, which were just—not quite right for his build.

"Hal mek," he murmured. "Hold your fire."

The door swished open and Rush strode in, an assault rifle balanced on his shoulder. The overall aesthetic was fairly impressive, but damaged by the fact that he, too, was wearing a uniform that clearly did not fit him. Either Rush or Telford had managed to pin the sleeves and pants in such a way that it looked passable, but it was hard to get around the fact that Telford had probably something like a good six inches on Rush.

"How are you feeling?" Volker asked politely.

"Ona rak ja'do."

"I'm only on chapter four," Volker replied uncertainly.

Rush swiped the book out of his hand with a lift of his eyebrows

"Hey, um, gal al'quel."

"Mmm, not bad," Rush said absently, ignoring his request to return the book as he flipped through the manual, "Don't separate the conjunction. It makes you sound like you have no idea what you're doing."

"Well I don't. Have any idea what I'm doing. In any arena."

"Do you not understand that it's a uniformly bad idea to advertise that?" Rush hissed at him.

"Your uniform is a bad idea."

Rush smirked at him and tossed the book back in a curving arc. "I'm aware. But these things," he paused, fingering the material of his collar, "Aren't exactly easily obtainable. For obvious reasons."

"Yeah," Volker said. "Wouldn't want anyone masquerading as SGC personnel."

The door swished open, revealing Telford, who looked maddeningly crisp and professional in his own perfectly fitting uniform.

"Indeed not," Rush said, eyeing Telford, "It's bad for the wholesome and trustworthy image they unceasingly cultivate as they traipse through the galaxy in a hyper-technological haze of modern manifest destiny."

"My ears are burning," Telford said wryly. "But I do not traipse."

"I love it when you reassure me of your self-awareness," Rush said silkily. "Because I so often have doubts."

Telford rolled his eyes. "And on that note—"

"Why don't I have a rifle?" Volker broke in.

"Do you know how to properly handle an assault rifle?" Telford asked, moving to stand within the rings.

"No."

"Do you want to shoot anyone?"

"No."

"Would you shoot anyone?"

"Maybe in self defense?"

"I'll believe that when I see it," Telford said. "Anyway, they're mainly for show. They go with the Tau'ri outfits. As far as an actual weapon goes—take this." Telford tossed him a compact device of a dark metal that was somehow suggested a snake.

"What is it?"

"A zat'nik'tel," Telford said.

"One more time?"

"A zat. One shot stuns, two shots kill, three shots disintegrate."

"Seriously?" Volker said, making a face.

"Propose a mechanism for that," Rush said, examining the cuff of his uniform. "If you can."

"Just try to resist shooting Rush," Telford said darkly. "It might sound fun, but it's not worth it."

"Your insults are so witty and well-conceived, David, sometimes I just don't know—"

"Oh shut up for ten seconds, will you?"

Volker looked down and carefully strapped the alien sidearm to his thigh, imitating the way Telford had his secured.

"Are we going to have to shoot anyone?" he asked trying to sound nonchalant, but unable to entirely conceal his nervousness.

"Almost certainly," Telford said, looking impatient from his position within the engraved circle of the ring transport. "What are you two doing? Waiting for an engraved invitation?"

Volker stepped over to join him, awkwardly tucking Dr. Jackson's book into a broad inner pocket in his jacket. Rush sauntered over at a pace that seemed designed to irritate Telford. After several seconds, Rush finally made it into the circle and turned to stand at Telford's left shoulder.

"You have everything you need?" Telford asked.

"Of course," Rush said, his voice smooth and dark. "Who do you think I am? Fucking Dale?"

"Thanks," Volker said. "That's great. That's just great. Let's just remember who abducted who here."

"It's 'who abducted whom, actually.'" Rush said, looking intensely self-satisfied. "Consider brushing up on the grammar of your native language along with the Goa'uld."

"You're a jerk. Next time you make some kind of simple mistake I'm never going to let you hear the end of it."

"You'll be waiting a long fucking time for that one," Rush said archly.

"I'm a patient guy," Volker said.

"Well I'm not. Are you two done?" Telford asked pointedly.

"Oh I suppose," Rush replied.

Telford hit the controls for the ring transport.

They rematerialized in almost complete darkness amidst giant containers full of something he could only guess at. There was a dusky glow coming from small lights that lined the perimeter of the ceiling, made diffuse by some kind of fragrant dust that was in the air.

It smelled both familiar and foreign, like inhaling an aerosolized, alien alternative to anise.

Already, he felt the urge to cough.

Telford motioned them forward and then stepped off the platform ducking down behind a large dark container. Rush shoved him forward and down and they joined Telford, dropping into a crouch. Near the floor, the air seemed slightly cleaner.

Telford had pulled out a small device, which he was studying intently.

"Looks like Kiva's intel was good," he whispered. "Night shift is on—there are only a few people in the facility. This room is clear."

"We have to get out of here," Rush hissed.

"Don't worry about the dust," Telford whispered back. "We'll be fine."

"Oh yes. You've convinced me with your baseless fucking assertion." The words were clearly meant to be delivered in a dry, sarcastic manner, but there was more than an edge of panic in them.

Apparently, Telford heard it too.

"You think it's affecting you?"

"I know it's affecting me, David, you should fucking well realize—"

"Hey," Telford said, looking up from his handheld monitor and raising one hand, palm out. "I do," he whispered. "Okay? I know. Just give me two minutes," he whispered. "And if everything goes fine, you can set this shit on fire on our way out."

"Alright," Rush said after a few seconds. "Alright."

Telford looked back down at his device.

"What is this stuff?" Volker whispered to Rush, pointing up at the dust.

"Probably a variant of kassa Maybe other psychotropic grain products. Nothing you want to inhale for a long period of time." Rush's profile was mostly lost against the darkness in the shadow of the crates, but from the way the edges of his hair caught the light, Volker could tell that he was looking up at the lazy swirl of tiny air currents near the ceiling. They seemed to shimmer, splitting the hazy light into a range of muted, swirling pastels.

Volker tried to tear his eyes away from the shifting patterns, but found that it was difficult. "Why would it be affecting you but not—"

"Drop it." Telford said shortly, not looking up from his device.

The light really was very pretty.

"Alright," Telford said, standing. "Let's move." He started to get to his feet and then stopped. "What are you looking at?" He sounded perplexed.

"The light," Volker whispered. "There's something weird about it—it—"

In his peripheral vision, he sensed, more than saw Telford cock his head, looking up at the patterns that formed and fractured and reformed, riding the dust as their medium.

"Right," Telford said, shaking his head. "That's enough."

Volker felt Telford's hand close around his forearm and he was pulled to his feet and shoved in the direction of the door. He braced himself against a storage container, looking back to see Telford haul Rush to his feet, the sound of fingers on fabric, of boots on the floor erupting in fading flares of purple and gold.

That was new.

He blinked and shook his head, but the inappropriate colors persisted.

He forced himself through the darkness toward the door, every sound flaring visually as a subtle flash of color.

Telford entered a code and the door slid open sending a fantastic array of reddish orange into the darkness as it did so.

They stepped out into cleaner air and Telford led them down a few paces to duck into an alcove occupied by a headless statue, dragging Rush with him.

"How affected are you?" Telford whispered, his entire attention focused on Rush, the low tones of his voice triggering colored waves that seemed to spread out through the air.

Volker shook his head. He was pretty sure that words did not usually have colors. It was the kassa dust. It had to be.

Telford backed Rush against the curved wall of the alcove. He pulled off his glasses, handed them to Volker, who was a bit too distracted to do anything but take them. Telford looked critically at Rush's eyes.

"Not very," Rush whispered back, his words a fading, multi-hued haze. "Would you mind terribly if I asked you to back the fuck off?"

"Look at me, damn it. Or can't you even follow simple instructions?"

"There's a difference between ability and inclination, David," Rush hissed, using the wall for leverage as he successfully shoved Telford back.

Volker offered him his glasses, because it seemed like the thing to do.

Telford recovered his balance and looked at Rush in irritation. "Are you sure that you can do this?" Telford asked darkly, glancing down the corridors.

"Quite sure."

"Are you hearing things?" Telford demanded. "Seeing things?"

"Mmm," Rush said with an equivocal hand gesture. "Not exactly," he whispered back, "Just a bit of cross-sensory bleedover in the face of what should be uni-modal perceptive input."

"Me too," Volker said earnestly. "Kassa dust. Good for parties, not so good for secret missions."

Rush and Telford both stared at him with nearly identical expressions that Volker would have to characterize as something like mildly affronted astonishment.

"Pull yourselves together. Both of you," Telford snapped.

"I'm perfectly fucking focused, thank you," Rush hissed. "And he's always like that."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Volker hissed.

"No more talking," Telford said, his eyes flicking between the device in his hand and the empty, dimly lit corridor.

Whether it was the kassa dust, or something else, the air seemed shadowed and thick; the lines of the walls were indistinct.

Threatening.

They moved along the empty golden hallways of the foremost research facility of one of the most powerful houses of the entire Lucian Alliance, Telford pausing intermittently to disable security systems with codes that had, presumably, been supplied to him by Kiva. As they proceeded, Volker tried to copy his stance, the way his hands closed around his zat, the restless shifting of his eyes.

Rush made no such effort. His stride was casual as he paced though the nebulous pool of color generated by the distinct sounds of six separate feet hitting the ground. His stance, his expression, his posture, were all entirely open and unconcerned. As if he thought no one could touch him.

It made Volker nervous just watching him.

They stopped at an intersection of four corridors.

"Do what I do," Telford mouthed, pocketing his life-signs detector. "And stay behind me. Both of you."

Volker nodded, absently wiping his left palm on the pants of his borrowed uniform.

The air was a colorless silence.

Rush gave a nonchalant half-shrug, pulling out his zat. He pressed a button and it uncoiled in his hand with a soft, blue-green hiss.

Telford pointed at Rush, his gaze furious and intent, his jaw clenched. He formed his hand into a blade and swept it through the air.

Rush winked at him.

Telford exhaled, long and slow through his nose, looking up at the ceiling and then turned sharply, both hands closed around his zat. He looked at Volker.

Volker nodded at him.

In a graceful flow, Telford rounded the corner, bringing his zat up to shoulder level as he hit the button that opened it with a serpentine unfolding. Volker had already started to copy his motion when he realized Telford was firing. Into a group of people, the electrical sound of his zat disrupting Volker's vision in fantastic waves of red and gold.

Telford moved forward a few steps, giving Volker enough space to advance along the wall behind him.

Through a haze of sound he took aim and fired at a man who had a weapon at his shoulder. He'd been sitting at a console—probably analyzing something, looking at some kind of data—oh god. He watched him go down and tried to find a second target, only to realize that he already had one bearing down on him—someone coming from his peripheral vision, who was already so close—

Rush launched himself at whoever it was, intercepting the other party, managing to take him to the floor by virtue of the butt of his rifle and an intense application of momentum.

Volker watched them crash to the floor, too tangled for any attempt at a clear shot before he turned his attention to the rest of the room, trying to help cover Telford as the man advanced against a roomful of opponents. Some sixth sense allowed him to duck out of the way of an energy-based weapon that singed its way past him and dissipated in a hot blue-white flash along the gold detailing of the wall behind him.

In his peripheral vision, he saw Rush land a solid punch against the dark-haired, leather-clad member of the second house who had him half-pinned to the floor.

Telford was advancing, mercilessly advancing, his eyes fixed on one man, on one console—

In a free second, in a clear airspace, when the colors of the weapons fire seemed to destructively interfere to the point that he could get a good shot—he fired, taking down Telford's target.

He saw the tension go out of Telford's shoulders as he turned with a half smile, hitting another member of the second house security force with a bolt of electricity as he did so.

A few seconds later, the only remaining member of the security force was on top of Rush, breathing heavily, a plasma weapon pressed to the mathematician's jawline.

"Shak'na kree," the other man growled.

"Shal'nok, asshole," Rush hissed. "You'll have to fucking shoot me."

"No problem."

"Wait—" Telford said urgently. "Wait."

The man looked up at Telford and froze.

Telford's eyes widened.

"David?" the LA member hissed, shaking his wavy hair out of his eyes.

"Everett?" Telford said, obviously astonished.

"Enchanted," Rush said dryly. "I'm sure. But would you mind either shooting me or getting the fuck off of me?"

"What are you—" the other man said, ignoring Rush and looking up at Telford.

Telford raised a hand, his gaze as intent Volker had ever seen it. The room fell silent.

"So," Rush said conversationally into the uncomfortable quiet. "You two know each other? How fortunate. I can't imagine where you could have met, but I'm sure, if it were me, I would remember such a distinctive name," Rush hissed, his voice a cascade of dark blue in the cold light of the security station.

Volker licked his lips and tried not to look nervous.

"That's enough," Telford snapped.

"Everett." Rush said the word in a slow roll, thickly accented, breaking off with a snap on the final 't' despite the way the plasma weapon was forcing his head back. "What a terribly—unusual name," Rush breathed. "In this part of the galaxy."

For a moment, there was silence, while the stranger's eyes swept over Volker, Rush and Telford.

"If you mispronounce it," the other man growled, pressing the weapon mercilessly against Rush's jaw. "I like your uniform. He reached down with one hand to trace the faint lines where some kind of insignia patch had been torn away. "But you're going to need better intel if you want to pose as the Tau'ri, you classless son of a bitch."

Telford stepped forward, his boots echoing quietly along the floor. Volker flanked him.

"Back off," the other man said quietly. "Or I kill him."

Something seemed to pass between Telford and the stranger on the floor. Telford did not back off.

"Let him up," Telford said evenly. "And drop your weapon."

The other man clenched his jaw.

Volker kept his face impassive.

"For—old times sake?" Telford asked, cocking his head. "Otherwise, I'm going to have to kill you. I'd—rather not do that."

The other man shot Volker and Telford another appraising look and then levered himself up, freeing Rush, who shot to his feet so quickly that Volker had to step in to steady him. The other man dropped his weapon to the floor, where it clattered in a haze of color that was difficult for Volker to tear his eyes away from.

"Go," Telford said, his eyes flicking to Rush over the barrel of his zat. "Do what we came to do."

"Oh no," Rush said silkily. "I'm quite interested in how this plays out, actually," He stepped toward the man who had pinned him to the floor. "Are you going to kill him?" He glanced back at Telford. "I think that's what I'd advise." His voice lowered to a hiss.

"I said go," Telford repeated coolly.

Rush didn't back away. "Who. Are. You." He was inches away from the LA member. "Where are you from?"

"Get out of here," Telford hissed. "You crazy fuck." He reached forward, dragging Rush back and shoving him in Volker's direction.

Everett was watching Rush with narrowed eyes.

"Do your job," Telford hissed, pointing at the door on the other side of the security station. "Go. Go."

"Come on," Volker whispered, his hand closing around Rush's upper arm, dragging him toward the door, away from the confrontation between Telford and whoever this dark-haired stranger was. Dragging him through the door, which swished open with a faint tinge of purple as Volker slammed his hand down on the controls.

The room was huge—cavernous even, with husks of ships in various stages of construction suspended from the ceiling in skeletal relief.

"Fuck," Rush hissed, as the door slid shut. "Fuck."

"Why 'fuck'?" Volker asked, his eyes scanning the dark recesses of the room, the hanging shells of ships. "Thank god that guy didn't shoot you."

"Fuck because," Rush paused to run a hand through his hair with a frustrated exhalation, "Because I'll bet he's from earth. From earth. Shit. Shit."

"You don't know that," Volker said, uncertainly, eyeing the door. Through the thick glass of the small window he could just make out the blurred outlines of Telford and the other man, talking over the barrel of Telford's zat.

"Everett?" Rush hissed, "Everett? You saw his face. He was fucking shocked. They know each other. They know each other well."

"But—"

"But nothing. David never said our names. Did you notice that? Fucking think about this critically for two seconds. He's from earth. He's from earth. He must be. Probably stargate command. Probably an operative."

"Well, does that really matter?"

"I need to talk to him," Rush said, his breathing shallow. "I don't think they know—I don't think they know what happened to me. To you. They don't fucking know. I don't think David has told them—I don't—" Rush broke off, fisting his hands into his hair.

"You think Telford isn't really working for the SGC?" Volker asked urgently. "You think he hasn't told them about you? About the ninth chevron? I thought this was a deep cover mission. I thought he was—"

"Well, if a deep cover mission has no fucking bottom," Rush hissed, "And no fucking end, then is it a deep cover mission? Or is it a fucking defection?"

"Oh god," Volker hissed. "Have you ever talked to anyone from stargate command?"

"No," Rush hissed. "I was recruited by the Alliance. The Alliance."

He tried to get a hold of himself, tried to think of something.

"If this Everett guy is with the SGC," Volker said, "Telford won't kill him. Probably."

"Probably not," Rush whispered.

"Which means he'll report back. Can we—somehow—"

"Yes," Rush hissed.

"Something he'll recognize," Volker murmured. "Something that will mean something to the SGC."

"A nonagon," Rush whispered. "For the gate."

"That would do it," Volker replied. "But how do we construct it?" he asked.

"With fire," Rush hissed. "With fire."

"The room is square," Volker whispered.

"I have line," Rush snapped, his eyes flicking toward the doorway. "But time is limited."

"Alright then," Volker said.

They sprinted to what appeared to be the approximate center of the room. Rush pulled a ball of thin line out of his pocket, along with five small blocks of some kind of deformable material, which he pulled into halves before handing them to Volker.

"Go," he hissed, his fingers closing loosely around the ball that he'd removed from his pocket. "I'll tell you where to plant the blocks."

Volker sprinted toward the far wall. When he'd reached it, he felt the line go taught as Rush stopped the unraveling of the ball. Volker planted a block of explosive on the floor and started walking clockwise, at a rapid clip.

"Now," Rush hissed across the space that separated them. He dropped to one knee and pressed a deformable explosive against the floor, then he was up and walking again.

"Now," Rush hissed again, jerking subtly on the line.

They continued in this way until all nine blocks had been laid out along the floor at intervals that clearly approximated a nonagon—that approached the chevron arrangement of the gate.

Volker jogged back toward Rush, beginning to loop the line over his arm in loose circles as he did so. After a few seconds he stopped as he saw Rush shake his head, sprinting toward him across the cavernous floor space, beneath the dark, nascent ships, his footfalls a faint and fading haze of color on the metal.

Hopefully the kassa dust was coming out of his system.

Maybe it was the near-panic.

"This is the fuse," Rush hissed, passing him to bury the line in a deformable plastic block. "Run it along the perimeter," he snapped, shoving the line at Volker as he approached. "And link the blocks up. As if it were an actual god damned gate. Hopefully our overly aggressive friend out there will document the damage and some fucking overpaid analyst from homeworld command will be paying attention. They'd have to be too stupid for words to miss this."

Already feeling out of breath, Volker ran the perimeter of the room while Rush doused the equipment with some kind of liquid that he pulled out of a small flask he had concealed inside his jacket. Presumably it was some kind of flammable accelerant.

When the room was wired, when the air smelled of hydrocarbons, they met back in front of the door.

Rush lit a match, in a scratch of friction and phosphorous. He watched it for a moment, before kneeling to touch it to one end of the fuse, where it began its slow burn away from them, across the vast darkness of the floor.

"Open the door," Rush said smoothly, only fractionally out of breath.

Volker hit the door controls.

They didn't respond.

He hit them again.

They still didn't respond.

"Hmm," Rush said. "Curious."

He hit them a third time, feeling a band constrict around his chest, cutting off his air. Still no response.

"You want to—" Volker said, making a motion in the direction of the door controls, stepping back.

"No," Rush said quietly, watching the burning progress of the fuse

"No?" Volker echoed incredulously.

"This is a skill set you really should have," Rush murmured, leaning against the wall.

Volker watched in incredulous astonishment as the fuse continued to burn toward its target of deformable explosive. It was far away. The room was large—but still—still.

Just when he had been sure that Rush wasn't actually psychotic—

"You're wasting time," Rush murmured.

"I—" Volker said, trying to think about anything other than the inexorable progression of the little flame that seemed to sear its way into his peripheral vision.

"This is not a promising start," Rush said wryly, indolently bringing his hands up to cover his ears.

With an explosion that echoed deafeningly in the cavernous hangar, the first small block of C4 detonated in shower of metal paneling, Volker lost his balance and steadied himself on the wall, his vision tinged diffusely with red.

"Try to think critically."

"You are crazy," Volker breathed. "The last block is only twenty feet from us."

"I'd also advise thinking quickly," Rush said, crossing his arms.

"Rush. Stop being an asshole. Get us out of here."

"I'm afraid you're going to have to do that," Rush said with a faint smile. "I find I don't feel particularly inclined to do any such thing."

Volker licked his lips and wiped his hands on his pants, searching his mind for something—anything he had learned that might help him.

Tau.

The golden ratio.

The mathematical ostentation that Rush had mentioned.

He looked at the keypad.

"I haven't gotten to numbers yet, Rush," he hissed.

"Fair enough," Rush said, raising his eyebrows. "And what would you like to type in?"

"16180339."

"A good thought," Rush said. "I doubt it will work, but, worth trying, all the same." He rapidly typed in the number sequence, only to have the door reject him.

Behind them another small block of explosive went up in a colored haze of heat and light. The accelerant seeping along the floor had started to burn.

"Hmm," Rush said, shaking his hair back.

"I hate you," Volker whispered, his voice cracking.

"Scintillating," Rush said with a half-smile, looking out at the rapidly progressing conflagration that was beginning to consume the hangar. "But that doesn't get you out of here, does it?"

"What the hell are you trying to prove?" Volker hissed. "That you're not afraid? That you're tough? That you're a pathetic excuse for a human being?"

"Do I really need to prove that to you?" Rush asked disdainfully.

He took a deep breath.

Then another.

Then another.

He coughed.

Behind him, another small block of C4 added its contribution to the fire.

If the door was sealed—soon they would run out of oxygen.

He could feel the blood roaring in his ears.

"Ask yourself what just happened," Rush said, leaning against the wall. "Why is the door now locked?"

Why. Why when it hadn't been before—when—

"A safety protocol," he said speaking through a haze of panic. "It must be a containment protocol of some kind."

"That's likely," Rush said, the red gold roar of the flames shining in the frames of his glasses. "Triggered by what, do you think?"

"Maybe heat," Volker replied, feeling sweat begin to trickle down his spine. "Maybe increased turbidity in the air. Maybe a drop in atmospheric oxygen."

"Detected where?" Rush asked, shutting his eyes just before another fragment of C4 went up.

"Anywhere. God. I don't know," he shouted. "It could be anywhere. It doesn't matter—wherever the sensor is it's routed to this door."

"Mmm," Rush said, pulling a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and looking at them speculatively.

Already Volker was running his fingers along the edges of the panel that housed the keys for the door control. He had to get inside this thing, somehow. He had to look at it. He had to see its circuits." After only a few seconds, the panel came away under his hand, and he was searching, his eyes roving restlessly around the perimeter of the nested circuits, around the crystals—

Crystals? Great.

"Green are capacitor-equivalents," Rush said, his eyebrows lifting. "Blue are diodes, red are resistors, depending on their size and quantum configuration they may double as processors," Rush said with an inappropriately languid wave of his hand. "Cigarette?"

"Rush," Telford shouted, his voice muted as he banged on the other side of the door. "Rush."

Rush shrugged at him, and cocked his head, tapping one ear.

"God damn it," Telford shouted. His fist impacted the window, and then he was gone.

It was getting hot. His eyes were burning from the acrid sting of the smoke.

Across the hangar, another deformable block of C4 ignited, blasting them with a wave of hot air. He narrowed his eyes, his fingers slowly tracing the rim of the opening he'd made in the door controls, looking for an input of any kind. Looking for the place where the sensor interfaced with the door controls. Where it must interface.

Finally, he found it, his fingers rubbing faintly over two tiny incoming wires.

Without stopping to question himself, he dug his nails beneath them and pulled them free. He began to cough.

Rush pushed away from the wall and looked over his shoulder. "Good," he said shortly. "Power supply," he said, coughing slightly in the smoke as he pointed to one component of the circuit. "Electronic strike," he said, pointing to something several inches away. "Cut the wire, then use it to bridge them to—" he broke off, nearly doubled over coughing. "Short out the locking mechanism."

Volker yanked one of the delicate wires free of the panel and bent it slightly.

He couldn't stop coughing. It felt like there was no oxygen in the air.

He anchored the wire once by twisting it around the electronic strike mechanism.

His eyes were streaming.

He knocked it into position as with a small, barely audible snap, the door came open. Almost immediately Rush started to pry it away from the frame, and Volker stepped into help him. After only a few seconds they were able to slip out, back in to the security station where Telford was standing grim-faced and intent, on the other side of a bank of monitors.

Volker pulled in one deep shuddering breath, and then another, his hands on his knees.

"Nice job," Rush gasped, one hand on the wall. He still managed to give him a sanctimonious smirk.

Volker straightened up, curled his hand into a fist, and drove it straight into Rush's mouth, knocking him to the floor.

Telford pulled him back, dragging him away from Rush, shoving him toward the corridor. "Go," he hissed into Volker's ear. "I don't care what he did, just go."

And alarm began to sound throughout the facility, an echoing, alien tone.

Telford dragged Rush off the ground and together the three of them sped back toward the transport room, toward the cloying air, full of kassa that was only marginally better than smoke, not talking, not slowing until they stood within the confines of the ring transport they had beamed in on.

Telford was about to hit the transport controls when Rush broke the silence.

"Don't," he said, his voice hoarse and breathless.

He reached into his jacket and pulled out a book of matches.

In the cloying air, he struck it, and flicked it in a flaming arc through the dust filled darkness where it landed atop one of the open bins and blazed brightly up as the rings descended.

Chapter Seven

As soon as Volker could feel the firmness of the deck plating beneath his feet, he launched himself at Rush with a half-strangled shout. The impact of the tackle and subsequent landing jarred his vision and sent a shock of pain through his head, both sensations subsumed by the fury that his body seemed unable to contain.

"Dale. Dale. God damn it." Telford was shouting, was pulling him back—just enough to take the sting out of the knee Volker took to the face as Rush scrambled back away from him, clearly unwilling to lose his third fight of the day.

With another burst of energy, Volker tore himself free from Telford's grip and managed to take Rush down again in an inelegant sprawl.

"You bastard," Volker shouted. "You complete psychopath. You—"

"That's enough," Telford said through gritted teeth.

Rush landed a solid blow against his cheekbone that half knocked him back, but Volker recovered, fisting his hands in the loose material of Rush's SGC uniform.

"Recedere." The word was a hybrid of scream and snarl as Rush twisted violently, nearly breaking Volker's tenuous hold.

Only a second later his hold was broken as Telford dragged him back—by his shirt, by his shoulder, until the room skewed rapidly and he found himself shoved across the floor.

The blood rushed in his ears, fast and rhythmic.

He reoriented himself and came up to his knees—only to find that no one was looking at him.

Telford and Rush were staring at one another, breathing hard, their expressions closed.

"What did you say?" Telford asked finally.

Rush levered himself up on one elbow, shook his hair back, and didn't answer.

"What did you just say?" Telford repeated.

Rush adroitly pulled himself into a crouch. "I'm not sure what you mean."

Volker's hand absently wrapped around his injured, painful shoulder as he watched them stare each other down; Telford on his feet, Rush looking like he might launch himself off the floor at any moment..

"Recedere," Telford repeated, his expression flat, his eyes dark. "That's what you said."

"I think you're mistaken," Rush replied neutrally.

"I heard you," Telford said, his voice hollow. "I heard you."

"Oh I'm sure you heard something, David," Rush said, pushing himself to his feet in a fluid uncoiling. "I was in danger of death-by-astronomer. You'll have to forgive my less than perfect diction."

"You said you'd keep me informed," Telford said.

"You know everything that I know," Rush said, the mildness of his tone deeply unsettling.

Volker got to his feet as well, edgily eyeing the pair of them. The air seemed charged; the room too small to contain whatever was building.

"Do I?" Telford asked.

"Ask yourself," Rush said, his control cracking almost as soon as he'd applied it, each word breaking off into silence with an unnatural suddenness. "How it could be otherwise."

Telford said nothing.

"When you've been with me nearly every single goddamned moment of every fucking day. When you—" Rush looked away, the arc of his open hand completing whatever thought he could not or would not verbalize. "When you've tracked my movements, when you've—done all that you've done. When you know all that you know."

Telford looked away.

For several seconds, there was silence.

"Have you cracked it?" Telford whispered, his eyes haunted. "Have you already cracked it?"

For a split second, Rush froze.

Then he looked at Telford. "No," he replied, his unnatural control back in place. "No, of course I haven't." His eyes slid away.

"I'm on your side," Telford said.

"Right."

"Nick."

"David."

Telford swallowed. "You can tell me," he said. "When you solve it."

Rush pushed his hair out of his eyes in one long, smooth rake of his fingers. "Who else could I possibly tell?" Rush replied with a twisted half-smile, as he neatly sidestepped Telford. "Fucking Dale?" He threw the phrase back over his shoulder as he pressed the door controls.

Telford said nothing.

The door swished shut behind him.

Volker stared at the door for a few seconds, then shifted his gaze to Telford, who was staring intently at the closed door, his eyes dark and his expression unreadable. When he spoke, his tone was flat.

"He may," Telford said. He did not shift his gaze.

"Excuse me?" Volker whispered.

"He may tell you when he solves it. The nine chevron address."

Volker said nothing.

Telford dragged his gaze away from the door and pinned Volker with his eyes—too dark, and too fervid. "If he does," Telford replied. "You tell me."

"Yeah," Volker said, more than a little bit unnerved.

"You tell me."

"Yep. Okay. I'll tell you. No problem."

Telford looked at him, his expression locked. "I need your word on that."

Volker hesitated for only a split second.

"You have it."

"What did he do?" Telford asked, his eyes flicking back toward the door.

Volker said nothing. His anger at Rush had entirely evaporated in the face of Telford's flat affect, the intensity of his gaze, and it took him a moment to dredge up an appropriate response to Telford's question.

"What," Telford repeated, "Did he do."

"He ah—" He tried to brace himself. "He nearly killed both of us."

"Yes," Telford said. "I'm sure. But how?"

"He wouldn't open the door to the room after we set the charges. He just stood there—I don't know—" Volker flung his hand out, "Taunting me while he made me open it."

Telford smiled, brief and crooked.

"You think that's funny?" Volker asked incredulously.

"No," Telford said slowly, "I don't." The spring-like tension in Telford's stance seemed to loosen, as if the other man had been expecting Volker to say something else.

"What the hell is his problem?"

"He has more than one," Telford murmured.

Volker waited, resisting the urge to wipe his palms on the dark material of his borrowed uniform.

"Do you know," Telford asked quietly, his gaze still fixed on the door, "What he was doing before he came to see you?"

"Before he—" Volker began, confused.

"In California," Telford whispered, slowly turning his head to look at Volker.

"California," Volker repeated, his throat closing.

It felt like a lifetime ago.

"No," Volker said finally. "I don't. I don't know."

Telford nodded.

You don't trust him?"

"I don't trust anyone," Telford replied, his eyes dark and haunted.

Volker looked back at him, trying to give nothing away.

Volker watched him go.

He bent his head and ran his hands through his hair, the faint smell of smoke wafting through the air as he disrupted the strands. It triggered a sudden spike of adrenaline, and he tipped his head up. He took a deep breath and tried to picture wide the wide openness of the coastline—the sun-drenched Pacific Coast Highway where, from the cliffs, one could look out until only the curvature of the earth ended one's line of sight.

Everything was fine. He was alive. He had not died in a firefight. He had not died in an explosion. He had not died of smoke inhalation. He had not burned to death in a locked room. He had opened the door. He was alive. Everything was fine.

He walked calmly out of the transport room and down the hall toward the cargo bay.

Half an hour later found him idly arranging pieces of dried catfood in the shape of a Christmas tree on the reflective surface of the cargo bay floor, trying to outpace Mendelssohn's progressive crunching. He figured he had used up two handfuls worth of catfood on the tree, which was perhaps—not the best decision on his part.

"Merry Christmas, buddy," Volker said. "It's kinda hard for me to say if I'm getting the dates right what with all the um—time zone changes and, time dilation, and lack of real

'day,' and real 'night' and dead iPhone batteries and whatnot, but, yeah. We'll say it's Christmas. I owe you one 'Kitty Christmahanakwanzika Basket' from the Dog and Cat Emporium down the street."

Mendelssohn looked up at him and meowed.

"Oh I'm sorry," Volker said. "Am I disturbing your dinner with all of this boring conversation?"

Mendelssohn went back to eating.

"So what did you do today?" Volker asked. "Sleep? Explore the cargo bay? Sleep some more?"

The door to the room slid open with a pneumatic hiss.

Volker shut his eyes in a long, pained blink, resolutely refusing to look up at Rush.

"What the fuck is that, exactly?" the mathematician asked, sounding—not unfriendly. It was more like he had been startled into some semblance of profane politeness.

"Um," Volker said, looking at his partially-consumed, stylized version of a tree and trying to think of anything to say besides 'a Christmas tree.' After about two seconds, he had it. "Sierpinski gasket," he said with a one-shouldered shrug.

"It doesn't look very accurate," Rush said dubiously.

"Well my cat has destroyed the self-similarity by—you know. Eating it. Obviously."

"Mmm," Rush said, seeming to find this response entirely reasonable. He bent down, ostensibly to examine Volker's Christmas-tree-turned-fractal, but really petting the cat.

"This is a piss-poor rendering, you know," Rush said with a half-smile.

Volker shut his eyes. "Can I ask you something?"

"I really despise all the fucking prefacing, Volker. It makes me wonder where in life you found it necessary or desirable to pick up the art of obsequiously levering normalcy on whomever you find yourself with. As if to be a paragon of sanity isn't insult enough. You have to foist it upon others."

"Um," Volker said. "So I'm going to interpret everything you just said as 'Yes, Dale, you can ask me a question'."

"Your prerogative," Rush said, petting the cat.

"Are you crazy, or are you faking it?"

"Neither," Rush said, not looking at him.

"So—" Volker drew the word out. "Crazy, then."

Rush smiled faintly. "How insensitive."

"Insensitive? You have got to be kidding me."

"You want to sit in an empty room doing fucking nothing, or would you prefer to be analyzing your database, which, aside from the inherent interest that such an undertaking likely has for you, may improve our long term chances of survival?"

"First of all, I was not doing 'nothing.' I was feeding my cat."

"Mmm," Rush said. "Noted."

"Second of all, I thought you might be be, oh, I don't know, tired after the whole getting-tortured-for-hours-and-then-drugged-by-Telford thing."

Rush shot him an incredulous look. "That was yesterday," he pointed out, as if Volker was being an idiot.

"And then getting your ass kicked." Volker finished. "Twice. Two-point-five times, maybe. Today."

Rush shook his hair back, then economically swept what remained of the cat food off the floor and dumped it into his pocket. Mendelssohn looked up at him plaintively.

"Yeah, so, just so you know? Hoarding cat food? It's not helping my perception of your mental health."

Rush shot him a withering look, got to his feet, and walked over toward the door. "Hey," he snapped. "Script Kitty. Let's go."

"No," Volker said, half to Rush, half to the cat. "You do not get to rename my cat. And even if, in some kind of bizarro alternate dimension, you did get to rename him, which just to be totally clear, is not happening? I veto 'Script Kitty'."

Mendelssohn padded over toward Rush.

Rush took a piece of cat food out of his pocket and held it up, then pointed at the door.

"Are you trying to train him?"

Mendelssohn looked at Rush, one paw coming off the floor in hopeful anticipation.

Rush looked back at the cat, quirking one eyebrow.

"Cats cannot be trained, Rush—"

Mendelssohn meowed.

The door swished open. Rush tossed the piece of cat food into the hall.

Volker got to his feet. "Did you program the doors to—"

"Obviously," Rush said, heading toward the workroom, ignoring Mendelssohn, who was looking at him, clearly hopeful. "Are you coming?" He hit the door controls and entered the other room without waiting for a response.

"I feed you," Volker said as he bent down to scoop up Mendelssohn. "Okay? You got that? Me. At least, I bought that cat food that he's been feeding you. Don't be fooled."

It wasn't until several hours later, when Telford had wandered in and out of the workroom a few times before calling it a night, when Volker's eyes were starting to burn from staring for too long at his glowing display, when Mendelssohn had sprawled out on the floor adjacent to the doorway, that he finally shifted his laptop aside and cleared his throat.

Rush ignored him.

This did not surprise Volker.

"Why did you bring me here?" Volker asked quietly.

Rush shut his eyes and pressed the heel of one hand against his right eye as he pulled his glasses off.

"You haven't told me anything about this address that Telford says is like—the final final frontier. You haven't mentioned it. Not even one time."

Rush said nothing.

"You don't need me for this," Volker hissed. "To merge two databases and then to mine them? For this you could get by with an enterprising undergraduate."

"True," Rush said.

"You're a cryptography genius. You know they made a PBS program on the whole $P=NP$ thing?"

Rush pulled his hand away from his head. "Seriously?"

"Yeah. A Nova special. It starts with Turing and ends with the chair of the Berkeley Math department walking sadly into the sunset with a Neil deGrasse Tyson voiceover about how we may never know what really happened to you."

"Classy," Rush said dryly.

"For your information, it was classy, especially compared to the other junk that came out—a Sixty-Minutes documentary, a Dateline investigative report into your disappearance, which concluded you're living in seclusion in the Ukraine, by the way. You made it onto Unsolved Mysteries and the Fox Network made a ninety minute program about how the government orchestrated a hit on you because you completely screwed up the entire underpinnings of current information security and undermined the structure of western civilization as we know it."

"Mmmm," Rush said.

"So yeah, genius rockstar status, certified for life. And this guy—this guy who makes a relatively obscure cryptography problem a household catchphrase? He shows up at my office and decides to abduct me? Me. To help him with a cryptography problem? Telford seems to find it reasonable, but that doesn't erase the fact that, actually, it makes no sense."

"Relatively obscure? I find that description to be of dubious accuracy."

Volker stared him down.

Rush shrugged. "I needed your dataset."

"So why not just take it?" Volker asked. "It. Not me."

Rush replaced his glasses and looked back at his laptop.

Volker reached across the table and closed the display, forcing Rush to look at him. The other man's eyes were wary, his features frozen in place.

"Tell me anything," he said. "Any piece of it—what you want, why you want it, how you came here—anything, Rush. Anything."

"Find a planet," Rush said as he stood, the words barely audible over the whisper of shifting leather.

It took him three days of combing his database, superimposing sets of data, to find even one example of a planet with the type of energy signature that he was looking for. After only half an hour of playing around with the numbers, he determined the planet was not emitting sufficiently to meet the minimum criteria that Rush had specified.

In other words, it didn't have enough naquadria.

That did not mean, however, that it wouldn't be useful.

Rush had been forthcoming enough that Volker had at least some understanding of the mechanics of what they were trying to achieve—something that essentially amounted to tapping the energy of vast deposits of a radioactive, unstable element and using it to power the establishment of an Einstein-Rosen bridge that traversed an unusually great distance, or, rather, really freaking distorted the topology of spacetime.

Much as he was dubious of Rush and Telford, he found that the idea of harnessing energy on a planetary level and thereby putting humanity solidly on the Kardashev scale was something he could get behind.

It had taken almost no convincing for Volker to persuade Telford and Rush that even though the planet wasn't suitable for their purposes, it was worth a trip to improve their capability to detect and map naquadria deposits. Volker had been working his way

slowly through the information in the ship's databanks that pertained to naquadria, but there wasn't much other than a chemical composition from which he was able to predict its likely emission spectrum. The Goa'uld had considered the material sacred; a fun fact that he found completely unsurprising—they seemed to consider pretty much everything sacred—and consequently hadn't left much information additional information lying around in the database of a generic Tel'tak. That didn't stop his painfully slow translation of the pertinent entries, Jackson's text in one hand, hunched over the laptop-based interface with the mainframe that Rush had rigged up.

That was where Telford found him, when they were one day out from the planet.

Volker hadn't even looked up when the other man entered the room, figuring he was just on his way to grab a silver-wrapped meal. Instead, Telford sat down at the table opposite Volker and fixed him with the kind of look he usually reserved for Rush.

"Hey," Volker said warily.

"Hey," Telford replied. "How's it going?"

"Okay. Better. With the translation, I mean."

"Yeah," Telford said quietly. "It's been about five days since Varro gave you that communications sphere."

Volker nodded, but said nothing.

"I know you don't want to hear this," Telford said, his voice low and intent, "But you're going to have to contact them."

"Already?" Volker asked, trying to fight the dread the other man's comment produced. "Today?"

"It's a perfect opportunity," Telford said. "You have something to tell them. You can set Rush up as being the one who discovered this planet and who wants to take this little trip there. Best case scenario, they've heard of it and we get some intel we can use about what might be down there."

"Worst case scenario?" Volker asked dryly.

"You blow your cover," Telford said. "And then," he waved his hand.

"Torture, death, yadda yadda yadda," Volker replied.

"Yeah," Telford said with a half smile. "So don't fuck up."

"Thanks," Volker said dryly. "Thanks for that."

"You'll be fine," Telford said. "Compared to the face-to-face meeting we had, this should be a snap. Just don't make any witty, earth-based observations and you'll be fine."

"Don't be witty," Volker said. "Check."

"Don't say 'check'."

"Got it."

"Good," Telford said, pushing himself to his feet. "Let's go."

"Wait, you want me to do this now? Right now?"

"Yeah," Telford said. "So let's go."

Volker stood, trailing after the other man as they left the room. "Well, can we maybe practice first, or something?"

Telford didn't say anything until they had entered the cargo bay, where they had sequestered the little silver sphere. Then he turned to Volker, his gaze intent, his eyes nearly black in the dim, evening-level light.

"The best way," he said quietly, "To survive this, the best way to succeed when you're undercover, is to become who you pretend to be."

Volker stared at him uncertainly. "Is that what you did?" There was a hint of challenge in the words that he hadn't consciously meant to give them.

"Become the man who doesn't need to practice," Telford said quietly. "The man who speaks Goa'uld, who has grown up in a culture that doesn't prize wit, or sentiment, or sensitivity. The man who lives for the work of his hands, for the advancement of the Alliance against all who would subjugate a people who have known nothing but slavery to false idols. Become hard. Shut your mind. Shut your mouth."

"That's not who I am," Volker whispered.

"I know." Telford put a hand on his shoulder, and dug his fingers in, giving Volker a subtle shake that was almost sympathetic.

For a moment, neither of them said anything. Telford's hand fell away.

"To activate the communications device, just hold it up and look at it." The other man bent down, carefully lifted Mendelssohn off the floor and settled him over his shoulder. "Let me know how it goes."

Volker watched incredulously as Telford left the room, staring at the door that had swished shut behind the other man.

"Seriously?" he said to the quiet air.

No answer was forthcoming.

With no other option, he slowly approached the corner of the cargo bay that contained his hastily assembled vestiges of his old life. He had stuffed the communications device into one of his socks. He pulled it out and carried it over towards a small space between boxes, just large enough for him to wedge himself into, just in case the little silver sphere offered the observer a three hundred and sixty degree view of the surrounding environment.

He tried to envision himself, not as Dale Volker, Caltech professor, but as Dale of the sixth house. Dale who spoke Goa'uld, Dale who was cautious, Dale who was smart, Dale who didn't talk more than absolutely necessary.

He eased the sphere out of the sock. It fell into his hand, heavy, smooth, and slightly warm.

He held it up, and the surface shimmered gold and then resolved into an image of Varro's face, looking at him in mild surprise.

"Dale," Varro said. "I didn't expect to hear from you so soon."

"I have something to report," Volker said, preventing a shrug at the last minute. "Is now—" he broke off with a convulsive swallow, "A convenient time?"

"If it works for you," Varro said quietly, "Then it works for me. Go ahead."

"Rush has found a planet," Volker said quietly.

Varro said nothing. His face was difficult to read.

"He doesn't think it will work for whatever Kiva wants it for," Volker said, "But he wants to check it out anyway."

"Why?" Varro asked.

"He thinks he can get more information about this naquadria stuff if we make a stop there. Readings of some kind that will help him with mapping and possibly with detection of a planet that would meet Kiva's standards."

"Where is this planet?" Varro asked.

Volker rattled off the spatial coordinates according to Goa'uld convention, and Varro looked down, as if he were inputting data into a device that Volker couldn't see. After a few seconds he frowned.

"That's an old Alliance outpost. Fourth house. It was abandoned last year."

"Why?" Volker murmured.

Varro looked back at him steadily. "Long term exposure to the radiation produced by naquadria is not conducive to the kind productivity expected by the leadership of fourth house."

"Ah," Volker said.

"If I were you, Dale," he said quietly, "I'd just get those readings and go. Don't linger planetside."

"Thanks for the advice," Volker replied.

"Do you have anything else for me?" Varro asked.

"No," Volker said.

Varro gave him a measured look.

Volker felt compelled to say something else. To justify his lack of information. "Rush keeps to himself mostly, working on—whatever it is that he's working on."

"But he is working?" Varro asked.

"He does nothing else," Volker said truthfully.

Varro nodded. "Keep us apprised."

Volker nodded back. "Will do."

The display shimmered back to silver as Varro's face faded away, replaced briefly with a sweep of gold detailing as he lowered his sphere. Volker lowered his own sphere. The image faded as he shoved the thing back inside his sock.

He took a long, shuddering breath and shut his eyes, leaning against the crates behind him.

That hadn't gone badly.

At least, not in an obvious way.

The planet was hot; and the air, thick with humidity, fought his efforts to draw it down into his lungs. Overhead, the trees formed a canopy of verdant darkness through which light faintly filtered, making its way through and around leaves larger than the palm of a human hand.

"What I would like to know," Rush said, his diction blurring slightly with what Volker assumed was unmitigated irritation as he took in the impressive structure of corroded metal in front of them, "Is whose fucking idea this was."

Telford said nothing, his gaze fixed unerringly on the structure before them, as he absently swatted some kind of blood sucking insect away from his own neck.

Volker squinted into the dim haze, his eyes struggling to follow the boxy outline of the overgrown, corroded building in front of them.

"Um," Volker said, swiping at the sweat beading at his hairline. "When you say 'fucking idea,' what part of this—" he waved his hand at the building in front of them, "would you be referring to, exactly?"

"Don't even start," Telford said.

"Every part. I didn't specify otherwise, did I?"

"Well, no, but—"

"Knock it off," Telford snapped.

"Who builds an iron-based structure in the middle of a swamp?" Rush continued undeterred. "It looks like shit, structurally it's shit—"

"You know what, Rush?" Telford snapped. "Structurally, you're—"

"Don't finish that sentence," Rush shot back. He turned to Volker. "Are you even looking for the naquadria signature?"

"Right," Volker said dryly. "Let me just check my tricorder." He pulled out the delicate hand-held device that Telford had given him moments before they ringed down.

"Did you just say 'tricorder'?" Telford asked.

Above their heads, a flock of winged animals burst from the dark canopy, startling all three of them with the abrupt rustle of shifting leaves and the snapping sound of featherless wings hitting the air. He flinched at the noise, as did Rush. Telford stood impassive, watching the small dark shapes tore across the small patches of clouded sky visible through breaks in the overhead canopy.

"Well," Volker said, trying to ignore his racing heart. "What am I supposed to call it?"

"A modified Ancient lifesigns detector," Telford said.

"A MALD?" Volker asked.

"Absolutely not," Rush replied.

"Sure," Telford said simultaneously. "But loose the 'm.' It sounds too much like 'MALP'."

"And a MALP is what, exactly?" Rush asked.

"Don't worry about it. It's a military term. Not for you."

"So we're calling this thing an ALD?" Volker asked dubiously.

"No," Rush snapped. "We're not calling it that."

"ALD is good," Telford said. "What the fuck do you think we should call it?"

"A modified Ancient lifesigns detector," Rush replied.

"We're going with ALD, and this conversation is over. Pay attention to the fucking tree-line so that we don't get ambushed or eaten by indigenous wildlife."

Rush sighed, but looked out over the marshy clearing in front of them, his line of sight sweeping along the dark border of the trees that stood apart from the front of the corroded iron building.

"Yeah, not getting eaten. Check." Volker cleared his throat. "But just—so you know? If you want me to perform a high level spectroscopic analysis of an unknown compound using a foreign device?" He waved the ALD in Telford's direction. "It's nice to give me more than five minutes to learn how it works. Especially if you've had it on board this entire time. Either that, or, you know, abduct a materials scientist."

Telford said nothing; he turned his head to look pointedly at Rush.

"It's intuitive," Rush replied to the silent half-accusation. He shrugged fluidly. "Like your iPhone. Furthermore, I believe it was you who wanted the additional data."

"Like my iPhone? Did you seriously just say that?"

Rush ignored him.

"Well thanks." Volker swatted at a small insect that seemed intent on landing on his neck. "That's very helpful. And yeah. I 'wanted' the additional data kind of like, um, Spock 'wanted' to help the people of Sigma Draconis VI."

Neither Rush nor Telford dignified that with a response. Nor was it strictly true. He had been curious.

Volker sighed.

He looked down at the display, alight with foreign symbols in a language he had yet to even begin learning.

"There's not a Goa'uld version of this thing?"

"There is indeed a shit version, yes," Rush replied.

Telford exhaled, short and sharp. Either amused, or irritated, or derisive—it was hard to tell.

"Oh. Indeed. A shit version," Volker parroted under his breath as he narrowed his eyes at the Ancient tricorder. What he really wanted was to find a concentrated deposit of naquadia and then obtain, if not a sample, then at least a highly detailed analysis of its chemical composition so as to facilitate later confirmation of emission spectra, with the added potential benefit of being able to map deposits of it on candidate worlds.

Emission spectra, he was great at. Parsing out elements in situ in the crust of alien planets was not really his forte.

Rush was already heading toward the metal building.

The corroding, creepily abandoned metal building.

If there were zombies, or giant Anaconda-esque snakes, or flying piranhas, or velociraptors, he was going to be so so so upset.

But not surprised.

"We're going in there?" Volker asked uncertainly as Telford started forward. "Because I mean, I don't really—I don't need to. For science."

"We picked up no lifesigns," Telford said neutrally. "There's no reason to think that it's anything other than what it's tagged as in the LA database—an abandoned chemical refinery."

"Yeah," Volker said, nervously splitting his attention between his Ancient tricorder and the dark greenery that surrounded them. He kept studying it, as he followed Rush in a slow loop around the featureless structure. It was rectangular, its edges softened by corrosion.

"You know," Volker said, when they were back where they started, "According to Dr. Jackson's handbook, the Goa'uld don't really have a word for 'chemical'."

"How is that relevant?" Telford asked blandly, his eyes invisible behind his sunglasses.

Rush didn't respond at all. His hands were still on the metal, his gaze directed up the planar metal surface above him.

"Well, the word is more like 'substance of the earth.' This is how Jackson translates it. And at first I'm thinking, is this guy a hack? I mean, it's kind of a terrible translation, because well—" Volker made a hand gesture to encompass their clearly non-earth surroundings. "Earth seems kind of—provincial out here right? The assumption though, is that he chose 'earth' as an indicator of like soil, or dirt, but yet he didn't say that, right?"

"Right," Telford said with a rising intonation that seemed to suggest that Volker had better be making his point soon.

Rush's gaze flicked over toward him, but he said nothing.

"He doesn't chose 'dirt'," Volker continued. "He choses 'earth,' for his translation guide because of the whole connection to something that transcends the literal. Like the ancient Greek elements. Air. Water. Fire. Earth. It's something broadly encompassing and yet grounded in the physical."

"So," Telford said, as they waded through ankle-deep water. "You're implying, what, exactly? That this may not actually be a chemical refinery?"

"I'm simply pointing out," Volker said, nearly tripping over a tangle of reeds obscured by murky water as they moved forward, "That its name doesn't really give us an understanding the nature of this place, other than something implied from our own experiences, which may be misleading, if they apply at all. I mean, we learned from the computer that this place was occupied by the LA. Varro confirmed it. This is a naquadria-laced world, supposedly, and now it's abandoned? Given its potential as a power source, naquadria seems like something that you don't walk away from."

"Point taken," Telford said quietly, "But if they were working with the stuff here—well, this may be the place to go to get your detailed readings."

"Maybe it's better not to know what happened here," Volker said as they drew even with Rush who had stopped in front of the forbidding structure and was running one hand along its surface, looking for an entry point. "Why don't we just stay outside? Let me scan for the stuff. Maybe we can find a vein of it and track it. We'll get some readings, plus or minus some sample collection?"

"Maybe," Telford said, his fingers tapping a slow rhythm onto the edge of the zat in his hand.

"I'll make you a deal, Volker," Rush said, absently running his hands over the rough and pitted metal. Flakes of black came away beneath his fingers.

"Dale," Telford hissed. "We're calling him Dale."

"You get what you need before I find a way inside this place, and we'll go," Rush said, ignoring Telford.

"Uh, yeah, that's a bit too National-Science-Olympiad-meets-Heart-of-Darkness for me, man," Volker said. "No deal."

Rush's intense appraisal of the building briefly took on an amused cast.

Telford watched the dark border of the trees.

Volker looked down at the device he held. Elegant blue symbols were arranged in a radial pattern around a central circle. He tapped the image that looked like a sine wave, hoping that it indicated electromagnetic radiation. He was rewarded with another radial menu, this one with green text and multicolored icons.

He spotted what he wanted immediately. The icon consisted of horizontal rectangle—black, with four vertical lines, each a different color—greeting him like an old friend.

"Oh hey there, Balmer series," he murmured, tapping the familiar lines of the emission spectrum of hydrogen.

It took him maybe five minutes to understand that what he had in his hand was an extremely beautiful, extremely responsive, extremely sensitive and exquisitely portable spectrum analyzer. Amongst other things. Apparently.

He felt a surge of affection for the little gadget he held. The Ancient tricorder. The A-corder?

He wasn't sure he wanted to give this thing back to Rush.

The display shimmered, rippling briefly through the spectrum, the entire display going from green to blue to indigo to violet, swinging back around to red, frequency going up, wavelength going down, until it settled back at green.

Volker raised his eyebrows, not entirely sure what had prompted the cheerful cycle through the visible spectrum. He gripped the device a bit tighter, and then started scanning the local environment. After only a few moments it became apparent that his signal to noise ratio was unacceptably low. It also became apparent that that ratio increased when he pointed his device at the building in front of him.

He touched the screen, dragging a thumb across its smooth surface, not entirely sure where he was going with the motion of his finger, but knowing that he wanted to separate the naquadria emission spectrum from the surrounding environment. With a downward swipe, he was rewarded with the separation of the muddled signal into three fluctuating, analog measurements, labeled with Ancient text.

His mouth dropped open, and he shut it abruptly.

He looked intently at the device his hands frozen to its borders, and focused as hard as he could on his memory on everything he knew of naquadria, including its predicted emission profile and watched as one of the lines turned red.

Holy crap.

When Rush had said intuitive, he'd really meant it. Literally.

So apparently Ancients were freaking awesome.

He needed to learn Ancient. Like ASAP.

He started recording, saving his readings to wherever this little handheld miracle saved things. He would have to look into that later.

"Does this seem odd to you?" Rush murmured to Telford, catching Volker's attention.

"Compared to what?" Telford responded just as quietly.

"The color is wrong," Rush replied. "The building is corroded, but—" he broke off, rubbing his fingers together. They were coated with a grayish blue patina of dust and flaked metal.

"Isn't it iron?" Telford asked, stepping closer to examine the bluish dust. "Usually when the LA slaps together a structure like this, they go with an iron alloy, and not a sophisticated one."

Volker looked back at his device. At his three signals. He pointed the device in his hand down at the water that reached up to their ankles, and was rewarded with one of the lines rising to prominence and turning red.

"What do you use to refine naquadria?" he asked.

"They weren't refining naquadria here," Telford said dismissively. "That would be so fucking stupid. The LA doesn't have the tech to attempt anything that dangerous."

"Naquada," Rush said quietly, his fingers pressing into the blue-gray metal. "Naquada." He fixed the device in Volker's hand with an intent, meaningful look.

Volker shut his eyes briefly, and focused on the unfamiliar word. When he looked down at the device in his hand, he saw the signature he'd picked up from the water flash several times like a strobe.

He looked back at Rush, startled.

Rush looked away, his expression shuttered.

"There's naquada in the water?" Volker said.

"Is there," Rush murmured dryly, turning back to the building, bending down to run his fingers just below the waterline. "You don't sound sure."

"Take a look," Volker said, turning the device so Rush could see it and stepping forward through the dark, shallow water.

Rush nodded shortly, confirming the identity of the spectral trace.

"They weren't refining it here," Telford said. "They weren't. There's no way."

Volker looked back down at his device. With the feeling of pieces snapping into place in his mind, he watched as the lines shifted—a real time rearrangement in response to his gelling insight. At the bottom of the screen, in a cool green-blue trace was the naquada emission spectrum. At the top, was the slowly pulsing red of the naquadria signature. And in the middle, now colored yellow, was something that could only be an intermediate product.

"Yes," Volker said quietly. "They were refining it here. There's naquada in the water," he said, confirming his own insight even as he communicated it to them. "And in this facility," he murmured, holding the device aloft, "There's both naquadria and something that's clearly an intermediate product."

"Mmm," Rush said, smiling faintly.

"Let me see that," Telford snapped, holding out his hand for the device.

As it left Volker's fingers, the display color changed back to a flat blue-gray, the lines losing their colors, fading and merging back into one real time reading that would be the best he could do on an earth device.

Telford stared at it for a moment, and then said, "I have no idea what I'm supposed to be looking at, here."

Instinctively, Volker looked over at Rush. The mathematician gave him a cautionary tilt of the head, but did not interfere.

"Look," Volker said. He reached out, touching the device, separating and coloring the three signals again with a brief spread of his fingers. "The green is naquada. The red is naquadria, and the middle—that's your intermediate."

"Well shit," Telford murmured. "I see what you're saying." He watched the minor fluctuations in the spectral readings for a moment. "I'm looking at—wavelength along the x-axis?"

"Yeah," Volker said, unable to keep the surprise out of his voice.

Telford looked up at him sharply.

Volker kept his face neutral.

"And the spikes represent wavelength at which this shit is emitting—"

"Photons," Volker finished.

Telford nodded shortly.

"So if they can't find a naquadria-laden planet," Rush said slowly, "They make one. How exquisitely enterprising."

"That's what it looks like," Telford replied, as if the words were being forced out of him. "And for us to pick up the signature on your galactic map, or whatever, they must have made—well, a lot of it."

Volker nodded, eyeing the forbidding metal box next to them. "More than would fit in there. Unless that thing—goes deep. Really deep."

"I'd say that's a safe bet," Telford said quietly.

"Oh yes," Rush said smoothly, "The question is, why did they stop." Rush stepped back from the dull gray metal, but his eyes didn't leave the structure. "Why did they leave, when they'd clearly made a near success of it?"

Telford said nothing. He turned his head, looking out toward the tree line, grimacing faintly.

"Pass me your knife," Rush said, holding out his hand in Telford's direction.

"You have ten minutes to get in," Telford said, pulling a knife out of his pocket and passing it over. "After that, we ring back and get out of here. The sun is on its way down and I don't particularly want to stick around after dark."

"Agreed," Rush said. "Fortunately, I won't need ten minutes." He unsheathed the knife, and bent down, reaching into the water, probing with the blade.

"Look, I know you've got the crazy genius thing going," Volker said, "with a heavy emphasis on the crazy, but I don't see how you could possibly—"

He broke off as Rush abruptly adjusted his stance and brought the knife up and out of the water. Volker flinched at the unpleasant shriek of metal-on-metal. Rush drew the weapon across the surface of the building, blue rust flaking away behind the blade. The other man stopped the arc only when it extended up beyond his easy reach.

Volker and Telford stepped forward together to look at the line in the metal. Rush had been following a curve that was inlaid into the building itself, invisible beneath the strange blue naquadah-rust.

"How did you know that was there?" Volker asked.

"a is to b as a plus b is to a," Rush breathed.

"Great," Telford said, with a frustrated roll of his shoulders.

"Um," Volker said, trying to visualize what Rush had just said.

"More secure than a simple door," Rush said, walking through the ankle deep water as he abandoned his partially scraped out curve to proceed further down the building. "But childishy inadequate nonetheless. This is what happens when you borrow codes based on semiotics as opposed to say—" he broke off to scrape away another piece of an arced line that was conveniently located at chest-height, "The factoring of large integers. If I gave a fuck, I could save Kiva a great deal of trouble. Unfortunately for her, I do not give any such fuck."

Volker scanned the lines of the building, trying to ignore Rush's self-satisfied monologue and focus on the pertinent details. "Is this thing a golden rectangle?"

"Of course it is," Rush replied, driving the tip of the knife into the convergence point of the spiraling arc that he had carved with the blade. He worked the tip of the weapon in several different directions until a pane of metal came away to reveal a control panel. Rush studied it for the span of about three seconds, and then began to type in a code.

"Rush," Telford hissed, splashing through the shallow water. "What are you doing?"

"I should think," Rush murmured as he hit the last button, "That the answer to your question would be obvious."

The center of the logarithmic spiral broke open and folded inward, resolving piecewise into a rectangular doorway.

Inside, there was nothing but darkness.

"What the fuck did you type in?" Telford hissed, his fingers curling around his weapon.

"Phi," Rush said. "Well, to be more correct, an eight digit approximation thereof."

"Phi," Telford whispered, pulling off his sunglasses. "What the fuck is phi?"

"Named for the mean of Phidias," Rush said, "An ancient Greek sculptor." He paused briefly, then added. "I wonder if he was a Goa'uld?" He shrugged. "Not pertinent. It's a fucking ratio, David, suggested by the proportions of the building. Look it up next time you're on earth."

"I don't get how this is supposed to be secure," Volker said, resisting the urge to take a step back from the gaping darkness in front of them..

"Obviously it's not," Rush replied. "But it's meant to be—exclusive."

"So knowing the golden ratio is like having the AmEx black card?" Volker asked.

"What?" Rush asked in irritation.

"He's not good with pop culture," Telford said.

"Knowing the golden ratio—it's like a status thing in the Goa'uld world?"

"Yes. A 'status thing'." Rush managed to pack an impressive amount of disdain into four words.

"Well, I appreciated the layperson explanation," Telford said, dragging Rush back by his leather jacket as the other man stepped toward the opening.

"You're welcome?" Volker offered.

Rush shook his hair back, pulled free of Telford's grip, and shot them both an affronted look.

"Guys, are we seriously going into this—building? Refinery? Underground death trap structure-thing? I mean, I'm not a professional space criminal or anything, but like, this has bad idea written all over it."

"We're not space criminals," Telford said shortly.

"Worst case scenario," Rush replied in a manner that sounded like it was supposed to be reassuring, "We're all killed."

"I don't think so," Telford said, pulling a flashlight out of his jacket.

"You don't think what?" Volker asked, shifting his weight as he watched the white light play over dull metal. "You don't think we'll be killed, or you don't think that's the worst case scenario?"

Telford peered forward into the dark interior of the building. "Number two." He shook his head with a rueful exhalation and looked at Rush.

"Varro advised against hanging around this planet when I talked with him," Volker said.

"Did he," Rush said smoothly.

The words hadn't sounded like a question, but Volker responded anyway. "Yeah."

Rush met his gaze steadily.

"I'm with Dale on this one," Telford said quietly, still peering into the dark, downward sloping tunnel. "I'm not getting a good feeling about this place."

Rush said nothing.

"Tell me I'm wrong about this," Telford said, his eyes flicking between the darkness and Rush. "Tell me you really think this is a good idea."

Rush turned, his entire attention focused on Telford, and gave the other man a smile that was twisted with something Volker couldn't identify. "You're with Dale, are you?" He paused for a few seconds, his eyes narrowing. "How illuminating."

"What are you talking about?" Telford hissed.

"Did they tell you not to look?" Rush hissed straight back. "I know you talk to them. I know that you—"

"No," Telford snapped. "No. We are not having this conversation. Not now. Not here—"

"Then where?" Rush breathed. "On the ship where they're listening? In an Alliance holding cell? Whom do you work for?"

"Guys," Volker said, his voice low.

"If you've flipped—" Rush began.

"I haven't flipped, Nick. God."

"Maybe you never needed to," Rush said grimly. "Do you even have a primary affiliation? Have you ever?"

"Fuck you, asshole," Telford hissed, "I've done nothing but cover for you with Kiva, who, if you'll remember, is actually your employer."

They stood for a moment, staring each other down on the corroded threshold.

"Mmm," Rush said, stepping back in one slow, smooth movement. "True. Technically."

Telford seemed to lose his balance in the face of Rush's uncharacteristic de-escalation. He looked distinctly unsettled. "Look," he said quietly. "I've got no problem taking a look around for ten minutes or so if it makes you fucking happy."

"Oh exceedingly," Rush said, pulling out his own flashlight.

"Fine," Telford snapped. "Take our six."

"I think I'll take point," Rush said, stepping forward. "I have a hypothesis," he added. "I'd like to—direct our trajectory."

"Oh yeah?" Telford said, falling in behind Volker. "Is your hypothesis that fucking asshole scientists fare better against hostiles in the dark than trained military personnel? Because if so, I really have to admire your experimental setup."

Rush actually smiled at that one.

Even near the door, the darkness was oppressive.

"I feel like it's been maybe a day since I told you guys that I hate you," Volker said. "I just want to reassure you that that's still the case."

"My favorite part of our working relationship is the part when you say pointless things," Rush replied.

"We don't have a working relationship," Volker whispered. "Our relationship is kidnapper to kidnappee."

"Everyone is shutting the hell up now, and focusing," Telford hissed as the dark seemed to close in around them.

After only thirty seconds of advancement down the narrow sloping passage that led away from the door, it became apparent that the space that they had entered was larger than the single structure that they had entered, and that most of it was subterranean.

The air was close and humid. It carried the hint of a smell—sickly-sweet and cloying—that set his teeth on edge.

They advanced further, Volker fighting his claustrophobia by following the beams of their three flashlights as they cut forward through the dark, interweaving, mapping out the space ahead of them and behind them in the passage, and by watching the readings on his A-corder shift with a friendly brightness in his hand.

"Stop," Telford said, low and abrupt. "Flashlight down."

Rush froze immediately, his flashlight pointed at the floor.

Volker followed suit, but not before he had caught sight of something further down the corridor.

Something his brain hadn't had time to entirely process.

Telford paced forward, with a murmured "Watch our six," to Volker on his way past.

His boots made scuffing noises over the floor and when he came level with Rush, Telford grabbed his elbow, locking him in place, their outlines dark against their

lowered flashlights. Light reflected off the leather of their jackets, bright at the edges and swallowed down to nothing by the press of the dark.

Volker pulled a slow, shallow breath in through his mouth.

"Did you see it?" Telford murmured.

"Yes," Rush breathed.

"See what?" Volker asked, feeling sick with dread.

"Turn around," Telford said quietly. "Watch our six."

"See. What." Volker whispered, his throat tightening.

"Do what I say."

Volker turned. He pointed his flashlight back the way they had come, watching the beam until it was swallowed by the darkness.

Behind him, he heard Telford and Rush advancing together without speaking.

After a moment, their footsteps stopped.

Volker held tight to his flashlight. His eyes still fixed on the darkness around his flashlight beam, he carefully slipped the A-corder into his pocket.

There was a short sound, as if a boot had slid laterally across the dusty floor in a startled half-step.

Volker undid the snap that attached his zat to his thigh and wrapped his fingers around the weapon.

"You said," Telford began, his voice measured and low and so calm that it prickled the hair at the back of Volker's neck, "That you had a hypothesis."

"I don't—" Rush breathed. "I don't understand what I'm looking at."

"It's the positioning of the wound that's the key."

For a moment, no one spoke.

"She was a host," Rush said, his voice hollow. "This was supposed to be an Alliance outpost. You said it was Alliance."

"Spies everywhere," Telford whispered. "You should know that better than anyone, Nick."

"Guys," Volker said in a hoarse whisper. "Seriously. What the heck is going on here?"

"Does this jive or not jive with your hypothesis about what happened here?" Telford asked, ignoring Volker.

"It's neither expected nor unexpected. It's likely unrelated."

"Does anyone want to clue me in on—" Volker wasn't sure whether he turned out of habit or frustration or pique, but the words died in his throat as he took in the unmistakable sprawl of a human form on the dark metal of the floor, skin distorted and tight with decay, the front of the throat torn open, dark hair spilled across the floor—

He spun back, facing the darkness, drawing in a startled, shallow breath, his hands unsteady, his vision distorting as the dark pressed in on him without mercy. The smell that had been permeating the air seemed to hit him full force, resolving into something nearly unbearable now that it was identifiable.

Decay.

"Hey," Telford said quietly, crossing the distance that separated them and putting himself straight in front of Volker. "Hey."

"Yeah," Volker said, his throat clamping shut on him. "I'm okay." He barely got the words out past the image burned into his mind.

"I told you not to look," Telford said quietly.

"Yeah. I know. But I'm fine. It's okay. I'm fine. I'm fine. With this."

"Yeah," Telford echoed him, one hand closing over Volker's uninjured shoulder, interrupting his meaningless monologue. "You are. You're fine."

"Yup," Volker said.

"It's dead," Rush said from behind them.

"Really?" Telford hissed back. "Can you try for ten seconds to not be such an—"

"The Goa'uld." Rush snapped. "It's on the floor. Not three feet from her."

Telford exhaled short and sharp. He dug his fingers into Volker's shoulder in a brief pulse of reassurance before stepping back toward Rush.

Volker took a deep breath in through his mouth and then turned around again. He tried to ignore the dead woman and focus on the rotting snake-like thing on the floor. It was only marginally easier.

"That thing?" Volker asked, horrified as he got a good look at the pale, nearly featureless line of decay. "That's a Goa'uld?"

"Yeah," Telford said, his hand in front of his face, as if that would do anything to block the smell.

"That thing can live inside a person? It must be—ten inches long," Volker said, his voice rising, his heart hammering in his chest.

"What the fuck happened here?" Rush asked. "It tears out of her throat and then dies not three feet away?"

"It was cut in half," Telford said. "Hard to tell with the decomposition but—look at the tail end of the thing. Ten inches is too short. They're more like eighteen."

"So it tears out of her and was then killed by—fucking parties unknown?" Rush asked. "And where the fuck is the other half of this thing?"

"Eaten, maybe?" Telford breathed.

"Pardon me, but what the fuck?" Rush asked politely.

"Eaten?" Volker echoed.

"It's a thing that the Goa'uld do. They consume their young. It's supposed to impart vitality."

"So let me just weave your assumptions into a linear narrative," Rush said, looking edgily into the dark.

"Go for it," Telford said, frowning as he examined both ends of the Goa'uld.

"For some reason this thing left its host, likely to try to take another. During this transition, it was cut in half, and one half was consumed, likely by another Goa'uld, while the other half of the thing was left to rot on the floor."

"Yeah," Telford said quietly. "And not that long ago. Maybe a week? Maybe less? Also—these bastards are fast. It's very difficult to kill them when they're trying to transition between hosts. Unfortunately."

"Varro said this place was abandoned by the alliance last year," Volker hissed. "You think she was killed a week ago?"

"Why eat only half?" Rush asked. "If it was eaten?"

"No idea," Telford said.

"This is going to bother me," Rush murmured.

"Which part?" Volker hissed incredulously.

"The half-eaten thing."

"The part that bothers me is the part where there's another one of these things down here," Volker hissed back.

"Yeah," Telford said, looking out into the dark.

"Let's keep going," Rush said.

"Are you nuts?" Volker asked.

"It's just getting interesting," Rush replied.

"I'm taking point," Telford murmured. "Form up, and let's keep it tight. Rush, you've got our six."

Caught between Telford and Rush, with no choice but to go on or face the darkness of the return journey alone, Volker readjusted his grip on his flashlight and followed Telford as they advanced deeper into the refinery.

Chapter Eight

No.

Just—

No.

Not snakes.

Not cannibals.

Not alien parasites.

But cannibalistic, alien, parasite snakes?

He hated his life.

He hated his life so much right now.

The darkness pressed down on him like a collapsing wall as they moved further into the refinery, progressing downward into warm, damp air. Occasionally, lukewarm drops of what he very much hoped was water fell from the invisible ceiling above them and landed on his face and in his hair.

In front of him, Telford stopped abruptly, one hand upraised in a dark silhouette against the diffuse light that spread out from his downward-directed flashlight. Volker swallowed the automatic question that came to his lips, trying to suppress his flinch of surprise as Rush stepped forward, coming up beside him on his left, sweeping his flashlight up and ahead of them.

The downward sloping metal of the floor ahead of them was covered with a thin sheen of liquid.

They stood silently, listening to the irregular patter of dripping water. Volker swept his eyes over the parts of the walls that he could see. He couldn't identify the source of the water—though he did notice a slight beveling where the panels that made up the wall met the panels that made up the floor.

Telford looked at Rush.

Rush swept a hand out to encompass the path ahead of them, and inclined his head in something just short of a bow.

Telford glared back at him and then turned to Volker. "Scan it," he said, pointing at the water.

Volker pulled out his A-corder and crouched down near the surface of the liquid in front of them. He wasn't sure what exactly he was supposed to be looking for. He started with what he knew, identifying traces of naquadah, not one but two intermediate products, and naquadria.

No surprises there.

He navigated back to the main screen on his device and tried to think through what he wanted. It would be nice to know if the stuff was radioactive—

Hmm.

An icon was flashing at him. It was clearly the nucleus of an atom with a shadow-like p-orbital, surrounding it in a reddish haze.

He tapped it.

Sure enough, as he navigated to a new screen that showed a symbolic representation of what could only be an alpha particle in the corner of the screen. The rest of the display was dark with a occasional showers of green and yellow explosions of pixels.

It was a visual, silent, Ancient, equivalent of a Geiger counter.

He loved this thing.

He did not so much love radiation in the absence of a lead suit.

Volker knelt down, bringing the device close to the surface of the liquid that coated the floor, and saw the showers of color on the screen increase in both intensity and frequency, turning from mostly yellow to mostly green, with an occasional burst of blue.

With a whisper of leather, Rush dropped into a crouch next to him. The other man grabbed the device by its rim and almost immediately the screen exploded with annotations and sidebars, all in Ancient.

Volker felt slightly jealous.

Rush examined the display for a few seconds, then let it go as he surged to his feet.

Volker stood as well.

"It's radioactive," he whispered, looking at Telford.

"It's fine," Rush said.

Telford glared at the pair of them, and then seemed to decide that glaring at Rush was more productive.

"It's radioactive and fine," Rush whispered. "Unless you plan on drinking the stuff or living here for a prolonged period." He stepped delicately into the dark liquid.

Telford reached out and yanked him back.

"You," Telford said, the word nearly silent. "Have our six."

Telford started forward again, the beam of his flashlight reflecting irregularly off the surface of the water, throwing the sides of the passage and the ceiling into better relief. Volker followed the metal paneling with his eyes, noting the dark crust of blue-gray rust that seemed to coat every metallic surface.

After a few more minutes of walking, they found themselves faced with a door. The tunnel split away on either side of the door, forming a "y" with branches to both their left and right that sloped downward at a terrifyingly steep grade. The beveling that Volker had noted earlier had become more pronounced. The metal tunnel that they currently occupied as well as both branches ahead of them had no planar surface. Every edge was rounded.

The door in front of them was less of a door than a hatch.

Volker caught Rush's eye and gave the other man a significant look, tilting his head toward the door. Rush nodded.

"This," Volker mouthed to Telford, waving a hand at their current surroundings, "Is meant to be submerged." He pointed at the door in front of them and whispered, "That's an airlock. Water," he continued in a whisper, "floods this place."

Rush flinched, taking an instinctive step back the way they had come.

Telford swung to face Rush, and they looked at each other intently for a moment.

Volker eyed the pair of them. "Does that—mean something to you guys?"

"No," Rush said, looking down the right passage, into darkness, shaking his hair back out of his eyes. "It means nothing."

Telford grimaced faintly as he stepped forward and began to turn the wheel mounted on the metal door.

It opened with a well-oiled silence that seemed to unsettle even Rush.

Telford directed his flashlight into the darkness of the opening. It hit another door of dull gray metal that was located less than five feet behind the first.

The space was so small. Intolerably small.

"No," he said, and even though he had spoken quietly, the word echoed subtly off the metal walls. He shook his head. "We don't know where that thing leads. We don't know what's on the other side. It's not worth it," he hissed at the pair of them, at the empty air. "It's not—"

Rush grabbed him, by the front of his leather jacket, and yanked him in, arranging an apposition of lips and ears.

"It is," the other man said, so quietly Volker could barely hear him. "It is worth it." Rush shoved him back. "Pull yourself together," he hissed at a volume audible to Telford.

"Quiet," Telford whispered. "Both of you." The other man glanced over at Rush, fixing the man with an unreadable stare.

Rush stared back.

Telford stepped through the hatch.

"We have to know," Rush mouthed at him.

"Why?" Volker replied soundlessly.

"Because they never would have voluntarily abandoned this," Rush whispered. "Never. And when people are unwilling to stay—"

"They make them stay."

"Yes," Rush said. "But not here."

"You think—"

"There's always a workaround," Rush whispered.

Volker tried to force air into his lungs. He nodded, the movement likely invisible in the dim light.

He stepped forward, climbing into the confined space of the airlock. In the oblique light that came from Telford's vacillating flashlight, he could see the other man attempting to turn the wheel of the far door. Volker waited until he could sense Rush's presence directly behind him before speaking.

"If this place is really meant to protect against differential pressures," he whispered, "Then that side isn't going to open until this side is closed."

Telford stopped struggling against the immovable wheel and stood for a moment, he hand with his light braced against the thin rim of metal attached to the door. "I know," he said.

With a clang that startled both of them, Rush pulled the rear door shut.

Volker shut his eyes. The frantic pounding of his heart drove all the air out of his lungs.

Along the walls, vertical panels of backlit hieroglyphic writing flared to life, glowing gold in the darkness.

"Ah," Rush said. "Propitious."

Volker took in a slow breath and tried to focus on the script that flowed down the walls around them, picking out the words for "power," some kind of variant on the word "time," and "water," right away along with sets of numbers.

"What is?" Telford murmured, scanning the panels.

"The time of our arrival," Rush said. "These tunnels are cyclically flooded."

"Maybe they were," Telford said dubiously, "Back when this place was in operation, but that body we came across had been there at least for a few days."

"It was close to the surface," Rush said.

"You think this place might still be running?" Telford asked. "We picked up no life signs—either from orbit or on the surface."

"If it's automated and well-constructed," Rush said, "Then I think it's a possibility. It's clear that—" he broke off, one hand coming up to the side of his head in the same moment that Volker felt the subtle pain in deep in his ears that indicated a building pressure differential.

"Rush," Telford said, his head angled up toward the too-close ceiling.

With a pop, Volker's ears adjusted.

The need to get out of the enclosed space was overwhelming.

"How long—" Volker was cut off by the closing of his throat. "Do you think this might take?"

"You doing okay over there, Dale?" Telford asked, his tone a mixture of warning and concern.

"I might be a little claustrophobic," Volker said, doing his best not to hyperventilate.

Rush, a dark outline against the lighted panel of the back wall, snapped two fingers against the glowing glyphs. "Where there's fucking light," he said, "there's fucking hope. So relax. Dale."

The opposite door unlocked with a sound like a gunshot and Telford swung it open, revealing a three-dimensional blackness that seemed to call to him with its own metaphysical gravity.

They trained their Lucian Alliance flashlights down a dark, dry hallway, lined by sealed doors.

Rush stepped forward, skidding slightly on the downward sloping floor.

Telford pulled him back.

"Hey," Telford whispered. "Do you have a learning disability of some kind? You have our six." Telford turned to Volker. "Take a look at the ALD," he said.

"Um," Volker said, "I think we should go with 'A-corder', actually? Ancient-tricorder. Also, kind of like the word accord? Get it? It's kind of a pun?"

"Whatever," Telford hissed. "Scan for lifesigns."

"Okay—" Volker began, only to cut off abruptly as Rush yanked the device out of his hand. "Or, yeah. Maybe that's better."

Rush navigated the device one-handed, his expression intent, angling it in such a way that it made it impossible for Volker to see what he was doing. "We're clear," Rush said, shoving the device back at Volker. "There's no one down here."

"You're sure," Telford said.

"Positive."

They proceeded carefully along the hall, stepping laterally along the steep grade.

Volker was relieved to be out of the airlock, but was not fond of the idea that they'd have to go back through the thing to get out of this place. He tried to distract himself by sweeping his light along the walls, looking for Goa'uld words that he knew.

Power.

Personnel.

Two symbols that he was going to guess that together meant something like 'resupply,' or 'extra supplies,' or maybe actually it was 'enrichment'? That would make sense if this place was really a naquadah refinery.

"Stop," Rush hissed, as he stopped in front of an otherwise unremarkable looking door. His flashlight swept over a set of symbols that Volker didn't recognize. "This one."

"Why this one?" Telford asked.

Volker looked down at his A-corder. An icon was flashing.

"Well," Rush replied. "Being that it is a monitoring station, and I find myself in the position of wanting to fucking monitor things, it seems a logical choice of door to open." He glanced between the gold edged writing and Telford, his eyes narrowed. "Can you not read this?"

"I can read it, asshole, I'm a little busy making sure that nothing kills us."

Volker tapped the icon and was presented with a screen with a black background. Outlined faintly in gray was a maze-like series of lines.

Telford nodded shortly. He motioned Volker back against the wall.

On Volker's A-corder, four clustered dots appeared. Two were blue, and two were green.

Hmm.

Rush and Telford, flashlights and weapons aligned, stood in front of the door. Rush hit the door controls, and an atrocious, acrid smell wafted into the dry air of the corridor.

It occurred to Volker, as he was studying the ghosted gray outlines that he was looking at a map.

A map that could detect lifesigns.

A map that was detecting four lifesigns.

That couldn't be right.

Rush had checked.

Rush had checked.

"Hey guys," Volker whispered, looking at his A-corder in growing horror, and then glancing wildly around. "Wait—"

No one was in the hall, which left the dark interior of the room that Rush and Telford were sweeping with their flashlights.

"I'm sure that no one is interested in what you have to say, Volker," Rush said archly, stepping deliberately ahead of Telford, a dark outline against the limited glow of his flashlight.

"It's just that I think that there might be someone—" Volker cut off abruptly as Rush was yanked off his feet, his light clattering away from him, careening wildly off the dark solidity of something inside the room.

"Hey," Telford shouted, sprinting forward, gun and flashlight held ahead of him, unable to fire, instead throwing himself forward.

Volker hesitated only briefly before following Telford into the room, his heart beating wildly, his hands sweeping the grooved and ornamented metal of the walls until his fingers found a panel. He lifted a lever, and the lights came up to reveal Telford, Rush, and a third person struggling in a massed knot on the floor.

Volker awkwardly exchanged his A-corder for his zat, wondering what would happen if he shot all three of them.

Probably they would all be rendered unconscious, presuming that zats operated in a manner that—

Or.

Never mind.

With the addition of the lights, Telford resolved the situation into something that Volker was able to parse out as decidedly in their favor.

Rush, unsurprisingly, was lying on the floor, pinned by his assailant, who was currently frozen with Telford's gun pressed to his head.

The man was pale, emaciated, his eyes red-rimmed and wild. He scanned them from beneath a fringe of sparse hair. He wasn't old, but he looked—

Sick.

Very sick.

"Back. Off." Telford snarled, applying more pressure with his weapon.

"So they finally sent someone," the man hissed, climbing off of Rush who sat up slowly, his eyes fixed on his attacker.

"Who are you?" Telford asked.

"Cowan," the man hissed, "of fourth house." He coughed, bringing up a trickle of blood that he wiped across the worn leather of his pants leg. "You fourths?"

"No," Telford said. "Sixths."

"Sixths," Cowan hissed, his eyes raking over Volker and Rush. "Do you have a ship?"

Telford said nothing.

"Why?" Rush asked, the word a deliberate, slow pull. "Do you find yourself in need of transportation?"

"Quiet," Telford snapped at Rush. "Get back here,"

Rush ignored him.

"You must take me with you," Cowan said. "I'm the last one left."

Volker looked down at the A-corder, scanning the map, alert for any other dots. He saw none.

"I'm not picking up any other lifesigns," Volker said quietly, directing his words at Telford.

He got a short nod in return before Telford looked back at the man on the floor.

"What happened here?" Telford asked, readjusting his fingers on his gun.

"Everyone is dead," Cowan whispered.

"Did you kill them?" Telford shot back.

Volker touched the blue circle that was dead-centered on the screen of the A-corder.

"No," Cowan said. "It was the goa'uld."

Volker looked back down at his A-corder, which was now presenting with a set of what were probably numbers that he couldn't read, and a fast wave that looked like heartbeat. Curious, he pressed his fingers to his own wrist. His heart rate and the wave on the monitor synced up perfectly.

"You expect me to believe you're not a snake-head?" Telford snapped. "We found your lunch upstairs, fucker."

"Lunch?" Cowan said, coughing. "I've been locked in this room for the past four days. There were ten goa'uld here," he continued. "They were sent among the most recent crew of—replacements."

"Replacements?" Rush prompted.

"This place," Cowan continued, "consumes workers."

"What do you mean it 'consumes' them?" Telford demanded.

"Before they die," Cowan said, "They lose the will to work. The goa'uld were meant to last longer. They were meant to resist the effects of this place."

"The Alliance doesn't work with goa'uld," Telford snapped.

"Perhaps sixth house does not," Cowan replied darkly. "If that is true, then you should count yourselves fortunate."

Volker glanced up. Cowan's eyes were on him, baleful in his pale, sweaty face. He shuddered and focused back on the A-corder. Volker zoomed in on the four lifesigns, allowing them to take up the entire screen.

"Pardon me," Rush said, his voice intent and smooth, "but I was under the impression that the Lucian Alliance has the means of preventing these kinds of acts of open revolt, even by goa'uld. No matter how—deplorable the circumstances."

Volker kept one eye on the ongoing interrogation, one eye on his A-corder. It was clear from the orientation of the dots, that the other blue dot was Rush.

Telford and Cowan were green.

He was sure there was a reason for that.

"Something about this place," Cowan whispered, "destroyed their means of control."

Volker tapped Cowan's green dot on the A-corder. The first thing he noticed was a heart rate that was more than double his own, a panicked wave on the monitor.

"What, specifically, about this place allowed for such a thing?" Rush asked, inching closer to Cowan. "Do you know?"

"Rush," Telford said, the warning in his tone unmistakable.

Volker tapped a glowing icon that looked like a teardrop on the A-corder. He was going to assume that had something to do with blood, though how the little device could tell anything about Cowan's bloodstream across the room, Volker had no idea.

When a small window popped up, he found himself looking at a familiar emission spectrum.

Naquadah.

God. The guy must have ingested a truckload of the stuff.

No naquadria was registering though. Nor were any of the intermediate products showing up.

That was weird.

"Do you know?" Rush said again, his voice as intent as Volker had ever heard it.

Cowan coughed again. "Yes," he said. "Yes I know."

"Tell me," Rush demanded.

Volker angled the A-corder toward Telford, pointing with one finger toward the flashing naquadah emission spectrum.

Telford looked at him, his eyes questioning.

"We will give you passage off this planet," Rush hissed, "If you tell me."

"Naquadah," Volker mouthed at Telford, "in his blood."

Telford froze, his eyes locking on Volker with a startled expression that transformed immediately into something flinted before flicking over toward Rush.

"Give me passage first," Cowan said, "then I'll tell you."

Telford's hand closed around Volker's forearm.

"I don't think so," Rush said.

Cowan coughed again, his eyes fixed on Rush.

"Hands," Telford mouthed, "free." He stepped behind Volker, moving laterally, under the guise of looking at a monitor, his gun still trained on Cowan.

Hands free?

He didn't particularly like the sound of that.

Volker pocketed his A-corder.

"I will have passage off this poisoned world," Cowan snarled.

Volker watched Telford anxiously, hoping for some kind of sign.

"Not unless you tell us what you know," Rush replied, low and intent.

"I will have passage," Cowan repeated, and as he spoke, his voice doubled, dropping a register as his eyes lit up, the whites flashing to an ominous, unearthly gold.

Volker tried to suppress a surge of terror, his hands coming up instinctively, as if he could ward the thing off. Certainly it was not human, but that was all he could process—his thoughts were an incoherent, frozen block of unreasoning terror.

From somewhere to his left he heard the click of a weapon cocking and firing in quick succession.

The single shot that rang out in the enclosed space of the room carried with it an instinctive relief that was undercut by Volker's instantaneous realization that it was not Cowan who had gone down, it was not Cowan who had fallen, it was not Cowan whom Telford had shot—

It was Rush.

It was Rush.

Telford had just shot—

Cowan's mouth opened and his entire frame convulsed, his eyes, his stance shifting away from Rush and towards Volker as—something, oh god, something horrible—came out of his mouth, launching itself into the air with a coiled spring, screeching as it came.

Volker tried to duck but he was too slow.

Too slow.

The thing hit him in the shoulder with a burning agony as it tore its way into him.

He screamed, making an instinctive grab at it, his hand closing around it as he fell back, feeling the powerful convulsions of contracting, alien muscles beneath his desperate fingers.

With the clatter of a falling gun and sweep of leather Telford was beside him, both his hands closing around Volker's, pulling the thing out of him, his fingers digging into his skin into his shoulder, inside the injury, one knee braced against Volker's ribcage as he dragged it back, dragged it out, crushing it beneath his hands, winding the thing around his fist—until finally, finally he yanked it out, slammed it to the floor, and

crushed it beneath his boot, beneath his hands, smearing it along the metal even as it tried to twist around enough to dig teeth into his wrist.

Telford kept at it until the thing was dead streak along the floor.

Volker lay against the cool metal, his shoulder burning, his breath tearing through his throat. Every muscle in his body was trembling.

A few feet away, what was left of Cowan slumped to the floor, blood trailing from his mouth.

Telford looked at Volker.

"Hands free," Volker shouted, his voice high and terrified and nothing like himself. "HANDS FREE!?"

Telford said nothing, just turned away, shifting laterally to kneel next to Rush.

Volker sat up, one hand clapped to his shoulder, trembling.

"Rush," Telford snapped, his fingers probing the wound in Rush's left shoulder.

"You—shot me," Rush said, as if he wasn't quite sure. Beneath him, narrow rivulets of blood were creeping across the floor.

"You lied about the lifesigns," Telford said, his eyes glittering, his tone even.

Volker's breath was coming in short, pained gasps as he struggled to process everything that had just happened.

"Lied?" Rush replied, his face pale under the gold cast of the overhead lights. He levered himself up onto his right elbow. "Lied' is such a strong word, David."

Telford ignored his comment and twisted to look at Volker. "Are you wearing a real shirt?"

"What?" Volker asked shakily.

"Are you wearing anything that isn't leather?"

"Yeah," Volker said, feeling slightly lightheaded.

"Can you take it off?" Telford said, speaking slowly. "I need it."

It took him a moment to make sense of the request.

"Oh," Volker said, his eyes watering, his voice unsteady. "Sure. Why not. I'll be happy to give you the shirt off my back in order to make an unsanitary bandage for the guy who led us straight to that thing." He gestured vaguely at the dead goa'uld on the floor and at poor Cowan, who was now an aged, dead husk of whomever he had been.

"We'll discuss this later," Telford said.

Volker eased his jacket down over his newly injured shoulder, which was now bleeding sluggishly immediately below his healing knife wound. He pulled off his repurposed, now nearly unrecognizable black dress shirt and tossed it to Telford.

"It should heal pretty quickly," Telford said, pulling out his knife, his eyes flicking toward Volker's injury. "They release a substance that stops bleeding and promotes tissue repair."

"Oh," Volker said weakly, "that's nice."

"You owe Dale a shirt," Telford hissed at Rush, as he sliced the material apart.

"Well, add it to my tab," Rush said. "Ten more years of indentured servitude ought to cover it."

"I'm sure that can be arranged," Telford said, positioning a folder square of fabric beneath Rush's shoulder.

Volker shivered in his undershirt. He pulled his leather jacket back on, gingerly.

"If I were Volker, I'd be fair fucking pissed to find myself the quo in a quid pro quo. But unfortunately—"

Rush broke off with a strangled sound Telford applied the other half of Volker's shirt to the entry wound in his left shoulder, pressing down with a vicious amount of force.

"Oh I'm sorry," Telford said. "Is this painful for you?"

"Um," Volker said, "is it too much to ask that you guys just—"

"No," Rush replied, breathing shallowly. "By all means, David, do your fucking worst."

"Good," Telford said, shifting his position to replace his hands with his knee, driving it down atop Rush's injury. "Keeping pressure on these kinds of injuries is crucial."

Rush had blanched to an alarming shade of white.

"Maybe that's not the best idea," Volker said.

"Do not pass out, Rush," Telford said, removing his belt. "This is your fucking mess, and damned if I am dragging your ass out of here."

"And you need your belt for what now?" Volker asked.

Telford shot Volker a disapproving look from beneath lowered brows as he wound the belt around the makeshift bandages on either side of Rush's shoulder.

"I would never dream of inconveniencing either of you in such a manner," Rush replied.

Telford yanked the belt tight around Rush's shoulder and buckled it to maintain pressure on both sides of the injury. Rush choked back a sound deep in his throat as Telford dragged him into a sitting position.

"How does it look?" Telford asked Volker.

"Um, as bandages go, I've seen better."

"I was talking about the detector," Telford said.

"Right," Volker said hastily. "Just us," he said, after studying the A-corder for a few minutes.

"Let's get out of here," Telford said, pulling Rush to his feet so quickly that Volker was slightly suspicious that despite his protestations to the contrary, Telford wouldn't mind it if the man actually did pass out.

"Right after we download their database," Rush said, snapping himself out of Telford's grip and heading toward the nearest monitor. As he went, he pulled a hard-drive and a goa'uld-to-Earthware adaptor out of his pocket.

"You have a gunshot wound," Telford hissed.

"I prefer to think of it less as an injury and more as an investment," Rush said, his right hand clapped to his left arm.

"An investment?" Volker echoed, his voice rising.

"On which I would like some kind of return," Rush clarified.

"Can we please go?" Volker snapped, his eyes flicking back and forth between the pair of them.

"How long is this going to take?" Telford asked.

"Depends upon the size of the database," Rush said. "You realize it's something we can, potentially, give to Kiva."

That seemed to decide Telford.

"Fine," he said shortly.

Rush snapped his adaptor and hard drive into a nearby monitor, and began setting up the transfer.

Telford took up a position near the door.

Volker stayed on the floor, his gaze determinedly fixed on the unchanging display of his A-corder.

He was claiming the thing for personal use.

In compensation.

For being offered as unsuspecting bait for a freaking flying, cannibalistic, alien, parasite snake.

"So," Rush said, drawing out the word in a slow pull that broke the silence. "I wasn't aware that it was possible to manually prevent a Goa'uld from reaching the nervous system once it had entered the skin."

Volker looked up, his gaze switching from Rush to Telford.

Telford didn't look at either of them. "I've seen it attempted, but I've never seen it done," he said.

"You've never seen it done?" Volker echoed. "Thanks a lot."

Telford said nothing, his hands wrapped around his weapon.

"Get off the fucking floor, Volker," Rush said.

"The 'fucking floor' suits me just fine right now," Volker replied, still watching the lifesigns detector, absently rubbing his burning shoulder.

"Leave him alone, Rush," Telford said, looking into the darkness of the hallway.

"Yes well, if you have no interest in learning the subtleties of Goa'uld databases, then by all means, continue to sit on the floor contemplating the smeared remains the thing that would have dug itself into your central nervous system and enslaved you."

Volker turned away from both of them and threw up the remains of Lucian Alliance field rations all over the floor.β

"Sensitive, Rush," Telford said. "Really. Fucking. Sensitive."

"Sensitivity is not my forte."

Volker spit several times, trying to rid his mouth of the taste of bile.

It didn't work.

He got to his feet unsteadily, then reached out, wrapping his fingers around the edge of the monitor bank where Rush was standing.

"Subtleties?" he said, his voice rasping.

"Indeed," Rush said in a manner that bordered on conciliatory.

Volker looked at the monitor below Rush. It looked anything but subtle. He could see a string of hieroglyphics that ticked over, indicating percent completion.

Rush navigated to a different screen and opened a Goa'uld equivalent of a text editor. He typed out short string of characters, the final one rotated ninety degrees to indicate a question.

Volker looked at him, his eyebrows raised.

Rush raised his eyebrows right back.

Volker pulled out Jackson's pocket dictionary, flipping through the thing to try and decipher some of the unfamiliar words. Finally, he had it.

You. Knowledge. Here. Incremental destruction. Mind. Control.

He assumed that this translated into something like: 'do you have any idea how this place might erode coercive persuasion?'

Unfortunately, at the moment, the only Goa'uld he could think of were of the two-word-begging-for-one's-life kind of constructions, which meant he was going to have to answer verbally.

"Do we really have to worry about this now?" Volker asked.

"It's always good practice to cover one's tracks in alien systems," Rush replied, as if double-speak was something that came to him without effort.

"Yeah," Volker said. "Okay." He pulled out his A-corder, switched back to his emission spectra, and pointed at the naquadia.

Rush typed something out that didn't look quite right to Volker, even with his limited experience with the language.

"Sometimes," Rush said, "unusual words or words with foreign influence are spelled phonetically."

"Good to know," Volker replied, glancing at Telford as he mentally sounded out the Goa'uld word.

Radiation.

Volker nodded.

Rush typed the word 'how?'

Volker shrugged at him, absently rubbing his shoulder as he looked up at the ceiling, trying to think of a way to communicate a more complex idea.

"The thing I find hardest about these systems," he said finally, "is not knowing the mechanism by which these things work."

"You're going to have to be more specific," Rush snapped.

Telford looked at them. "How long?" he said.

"Only five minutes," Rush said. "Their records are far from voluminous or meticulous."

"I can't judge the value of potential solutions to a problem," Volker said, "without understanding the nature of the problem first."

"Yes," Rush said. "I'd make improving your knowledge base a priority."

"Great," Volker said. "Thanks for that."

They watched the numbers tick by in silence for a time, Rush edgily keeping an eye on the data transfer.

The process was nearly complete when Rush sat abruptly, grabbing onto the console to steady himself.

"Rush," Telford snapped. "You faint and we leave you here."

"Promises, promises," Rush replied looking slightly unsteady as he unhooked the hard drive and adaptor as the transfer finished.

"Now can we go?" Volker asked.

"If you insist," Rush said.

They passed back into the corridor, their boots scraping quietly over the dusted floor, as they climbed the inclined hallway back toward the airlock.

As he faced the thing for the second time, Volker felt another wave of nausea at the idea of reentering it.

But there was no other choice.

They stepped into the dark opening, their flashlights cutting through the darkness. Telford swung the door shut behind them, sealing them inside.

The wall of glyphs lit up.

Volker waited, counting his breaths, enduring the shaking of exhausted muscles.

Ten breaths.

Twenty.

Thirty.

"Rush?" Telford asked. "I'm not feeling any pressure change."

"I noticed," Rush replied, sounding breathless. "I believe that—the ah—"

"Rush," Telford said sharply.

"I believe that the area beyond this airlock may have flooded while we were otherwise engaged."

"What?" Volker said, choking on the word.

Behind him, he felt Telford shift, attempting to open the door behind them. "Can you unflood it?" Telford asked his voice strained, clearly having no luck with the door.

"I—" Rush said, sounding more than a little bit faint.

"No," Telford said, as close to panic as Volker had ever heard him. "Rush, don't you dare —"

Rush fell in a space that was too confined to really permit any such thing. He slammed into Volker, who overbalanced into Telford who hit the posterior wall with a resounding clang and they all went down in an oppressive, struggling tangle.

He could not move, he could not straighten, pinned between Rush and Telford. He thrashed wildly, overcome with panic, lost in a sense of confinement, buried under water, sealed in a small coffin-like space, unable to get out he had to get out he could not but he had to he had to, he—

"Dale," Telford shouted, his flashlight falling, the light moving irregularly over the walls, their bodies that were too close—

"Dale," Telford said again. "We can get out. We can."

Volker took a deep breath, pressed against the glowing panel of lights, mostly on top of Rush.

"We can get out," Telford said. "It's fine."

He was gasping, pressing himself against the lighted wall as Telford pulled Rush away from him, creating a small space.

"We can get out," Telford repeated slowly.

"Yeah," Volker finally managed. "Yeah."

"And we will," Telford said.

"Yeah," Volker said, trying to force his voice into a normal range.

Telford reached forward, arranging the flashlights on the floor in a crisscrossing pattern. There wasn't enough room in the confined space for three people to sit. Telford was crouching, balanced on the balls of his feet and the tips of his fingers, over Rush who was propped against the opposite wall.

Volker tried to breathe past the tightness in his throat.

"Why don't you take a look at those glyphs," Telford said carefully. "See if you can't find a way to figure out if we can expedite things getting un-flooded."

"Okay," Volker said shakily, "But Rush—Rush would be better."

Telford nodded, tipping Rush's head back and slapping his face several times with careful deliberation.

No response.

"I'm thinking maybe you want to give it a shot," Telford said.

Volker took a deep breath and reached into his pocket for Daniel Jackson's pocket manual.

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