

# FORCE OVER DISTANCE

cleanwhiteroom

Book One

# Prologue: Circuit

September, 2007

The day is crisp and clear. Visibility stretches for miles out over the blue expanse of San Francisco Bay. Sunlight filters through trees that extend a laced canopy over University Drive. A few stray leaves swirl in the breeze that blows in off the water.

David Telford adjusts his sunglasses. He crosses his arms over his chest. He is content to wait here, leaning casually against this white Prius, for as long as is required.

The sedate cut of the buildings and the unhurried aspect of those who pass between them set his thoughts on edge. He finds something satisfying in being surrounded by the profligate intellectual resources of one of the preeminent institutions of higher learning created by his species. This is something that humanity has done on its own—for itself and by itself. It remains untouched by external influence. Mostly.

He smiles faintly, fingering the flashdrive in his pocket. The wind hisses around the frame of the car. It lifts his hair. He can smell the sea.

He's needed this. His nerves are overtaxed after spending so long offworld, undercover. Here, he can relax—even if only for a few moments. Here, he can watch the array of students trail through and around their white towers and their beautiful landscaping. Here, no one will try to kill him. Even while he appreciates the civilized veneer of Berkeley's campus, he's also capable of recognizing that there's an elevated element in the struggle in the dirt, in crawling, in clawing one's way to an objective—a certain poetry to subterfuge, to the tragedy of an unavoidable betrayal.

He prefers not to think of those things here.

He prefers not to think of them now.

Ultimately, this isn't enough for him, and it never will be—these white walls, bleached to blinding by the afternoon sun. There is more out there, more even than the stargate program can pursue. Access requires something more.

An empire.

An Alliance.

Finally, Telford sees the man he's been waiting for.

Rush is unmistakable. He's wearing a brown jacket over a white collared shirt. His sunglasses are square-framed and expensive, much like the pair that Telford himself is sporting. With the longish hair and the hint of a beard, the only way he could further conform to current standards in California professorial fashion would be to acquire a pair of Birkenstocks. It is only the contained energy of his movements that looks out of place—not only on this campus, but in the context of the state, the coast, and even, Telford thinks, the planet.

He likes him immediately.

Rush looks miserable and harassed and energetic, and like everything about him is a lie—from the square-framed shades to the white Prius Telford is leaning against; together the ephemera of his life form a civilized veneer over something deeply, uncomfortably Faustian.

"You must be the hard sell," Rush says as he approaches. The prominence of his accent takes Telford by surprise.

"What gave it away?" Telford asks. He holds out his hand. "Colonel David Telford, but, please, call me David."

Rush ignores the proffered hand.

"You can call me Dr. Rush," he says. "Get away from my car." He slams the disorganized pile of papers and books he's carrying atop the Prius and starts fishing through his pockets, looking for his keys.

Telford doesn't move from his position immediately adjacent to the driver's side door. He reaches into his jacket to pull out a carton of cigarettes. He draws one out, then offers the package to the other man.

"Cigarette?"

"No, thank you," Rush says. "I've quit."

"Admirable," Telford says mildly.

"Not really," Rush replies. "It won't take."

"You don't mind if I—"

"No, David," Rush says, twisting his name into an insult, "I don't mind if you smoke, but kindly get the bloody hell away from my car."

Telford smiles around the cigarette he's holding delicately between his teeth. He can't help it. He loves the attitude. He really does. Rush is going to be perfect. "You haven't even found your keys yet."

Rush glances at him.

Telford pulls out his lighter, unhurried.

The major players at the SGC all have them—every single one. O'Neill has Carter, Mitchell has Jackson, Sheppard has McKay. Behind every great leader is a great scientist. And Telford, well, his plans are more ambitious than anyone guesses. He knows, however, that he can't do it alone. He's going to test the very bounds of human thought. He's going to balance between interplanetary alliances. He's going to unlock the mysteries of the fabric of existence. And Rush—Rush is going to help him do it.

The other man just doesn't know it yet.

Rush finally pulls out his keys and displays them to Telford. Obliging, Telford backs away a few steps. Rush opens his car door and unceremoniously dumps his books on the passenger seat. Then he stands there, staring at the interior of his car, hesitating.

Telford lights his cigarette.

Rush looks over his shoulder, fixing him with a gaze that is difficult to meet without dropping his eyes. "You're terrible at this, you know. Dr. Jackson was much more effective."

Telford smirks. "I don't think so," he says, holding up a flashdrive.

Instead of getting into his car, Rush turns to face him. "I was under the impression that I had to sign some kind of confidentiality agreement."

"This isn't strictly legal," Telford says, "But—I trust you."

"You don't even know me."

"Of course I do," Telford replies. "I know things about you that you don't know yourself."

They stare at each other for a moment through their shades. A sudden gust of wind lifts the leaves around them in a swirl, lifts the edges of their clothes and the edges of their hair.

Telford tosses Rush the flashdrive.

Rush catches it left-handed. The crack of the plastic against his wedding ring is like a spark going to ground—like a circuit closing.

# Every Door Comes Open

December 28th, 2010

He is afraid.

Rush sprints through dark halls, tearing over straight stretches then tethering his forward inertia into the arc of rounding a corner with a well-timed placement of his hand on the molded edge of intersecting corridors. He changes his direction without appreciable slowing.

Something more than exertion closes his throat.

They have been boarded.

He's not yet sure how it happened, and the mechanism by which this has come to pass is not terribly high on his queue of priorities, though that detail may be something more than an intellectual curiosity; indeed, it may become very fucking salient in very short order. An alien presence on the ship is something that has always seemed to hang like a threat—over him, over *Chloe*—

There is only one option for them now.

His boots are so worn that he can run in near silence over the deck plating, covering long stretches under dim light.

Even if he is successful, there is no guarantee that this will end well.

He is approaching the neural interface room when a shredding pain begins behind his eyes and in his temples. It pulls him up short, one hand coming to his head as he wrenches himself to a stop and then backwards, as if he'd been struck.

It's not a moment too soon.

He hears them then, the irregular beat of their steps on the metal deck plating.

There is nowhere to go.

The hallway is open and featureless.

He backtracks, his hands sliding along the walls.

"Nick."

The cognitive dissonance produced by Gloria's voice *in this moment* is so intense that he comes to a stop, unsure what to do, what to *think*.

"In here." She is standing inside an unfamiliar recess in the wall. Her eyes are frightened.

He steps laterally into the small space. The back wall is alight with a faint blue glow. A quick sweep of his eyes over the illuminated text tells him that he's standing in a power relay station. A relay station apparently concealed under normal circumstances.

He faces the AI.

She looks back at him.

The space is very small.

They are too close to one another.

In the cross-corridor, only *meters* from his current position, a group of blue aliens passes through the intersection of two hallways. They don't notice him.

"What are you going to do?" Gloria whispers.

He looks at her over the tops of his glasses and says nothing.

He does his best not to feel assaulted by the disheveled sweep of familiar hair.

He hasn't seen her for months. Not for *months*. Until she had shown up this evening, on the bridge, in the midst of an ephemeral knot of human chaos, suggesting what was already in his own mind.

"I was beginning to think that you were a stress-induced hallucination," he whispers.

That remains a possibility.

"If that's true, you must admit, I'm an unusually helpful one," she whispers back.

"Debatable," he replies, edging toward the corridor.

"Wait," she says.

He feels a spike of pain in his head and ducks back, waiting for another complement of the blue aliens to pass.

A few seconds faster and he would have beaten them to the chair room.

He feels a brief flare of familiar frustration at Young's obstructionist tendencies. If the man didn't have the need to violently oppose *anything* that he suggested purely on principle—scratch that—purely *on instinct*, as the man hadn't ever evidenced much in

the way of a well-thought-out worldview, then maybe they wouldn't have half the problems that currently faced them.

"You never answered me," she says. "What are you going to do?"

He doesn't *want* to answer her.

"What happened to Dr. Franklin?"

She looks away.

"He was not an excellent candidate for use of the neural interface," she says finally. "He did not have an application-layer firewall."

Neither will he.

Not this time.

"You don't say," he replies. After a few seconds he edges back into the hallway.

She does not stop him.

He turns the corner, picks up his pace, and makes it to the neural interface room with no further trouble. The AI is waiting for him there. He seals the door, and disables the entry mechanism.

"Nick," she says, speaking from behind him. "You are—" she hesitates.

He looks at her.

"Unlike Dr. Franklin, *you* are an excellent candidate."

He would rather not find out precisely what she means by that statement, but based on what he already knows, he can guess. He goes to the monitor bank, scanning through the local cache of programs, wishing he had his laptop as he looks for something, *anything* that could form a barrier between his mind and Destiny.

"Nick, what are you doing?" she says. "There isn't time for this."

That may be true. Several options exist that might shield his mind—firewalls, various forms of buffering—but all take time to configure and even if that were not the case, all cut him off from too much of the CPU. They cut him out of too many systems, and he needs full access if he is going to retake the ship on his own.

Doors must come open.

They must be vented into space.

"They are attempting to disable the FTL drive," Gloria says, an edge of fear in her voice.

He drums his fingers once on the top of the monitor. He looks at the chair.

Go, Young had said. *Sit. Be my guest.*

He smiles faintly.

He wonders what Young is doing now. Whatever it is, he's certain it's both ineffective and involves an assault rifle.

"They will disable the drive," Gloria says. "I can't prevent it."

He's not certain he believes her. She wants an apposition of their minds without the firewall. She wants access through every cognitive port that he possesses.

She wants this.

But then, in a way, so does he.

He always has.

The chair has called to him, subtle and persistent, from the day on which he first encountered it.

But there is a reason he has never used it.

"Can *you* act as my firewall?" he asks.

"Yes," she replies, going very still, her voice flat.

"*Will* you?" There is an edge to his tone.

They face each other in silence.

He's bargaining with her and he's not sure how she's going to respond to that. If she says no, there is nothing he can do.

It also occurs to him that, perhaps, this is not a skill he wants to model for her.

She looks back at him out of Gloria's now emotionless features.

"This time," she says. "But *only* this time." There is a significant ring to the words, as if she's certain that this will not be the last time he sits in the chair.

A small muscle in his cheek twitches.

"It must be now," she says.

He nods shortly and rounds the monitor bank. As he crosses the floor, he feels the metal against his feet, feels the air against his skin. He fixes his eyes on the chair.

He turns.

He sits.

Immediately before the bolts engage, he can hear the roar of a distant sea.



## Chapter Two

*"Something of the emptiness  
we spin through  
silts and settles  
so that we can walk  
a little further  
out into the fog."  
-Mark Haddon*

January 4, 2011

When he heard Rush's name, Young's eyes flicked up from his bowl of processed protein to take in Eli at the next table, the kid's hands mid-flight in some expansive gesture, before dropping his gaze back to his spoon.

"Call me crazy," Eli said, his voice carrying easily, "But seriously. You guys. Destiny—" he paused dramatically, forcing Young's eyes up again. "Destiny *likes* him."

"Destiny likes him," Scott repeated, deadpan.

"I know. I *know*. I realize how that sounds. But I'm telling you, ever since—"

"Impossible," Greer cut in, leaning forward, fingers forming a blade that pressed into the table, tips down. "You want to know how I know that?"

"Uh—"

"I know that because *no one* likes that man." Greer sat back.

Young looked down again, but not before he caught the forced half smile beginning to form on Eli's face.

"Talk to me when you work for the guy," Eli replied. "Er, work *with* the guy." Young could almost hear him rolling his eyes.

He scraped the last remains of his dinner out of the bottom of the bowl and limped out of the mess. His left knee and his ribs reminded him with every step that it was perhaps too soon to be resuming his normal routine. He clenched his jaw, pressing onward through corridors that hadn't yet regained full power since the attack a week before.

Though he had been heading in the direction of the bridge, he turned aside at the observation deck, intending to rest his injured leg. He couldn't help the sigh of relief that escaped him as he settled on the small bench in front of the glass. The ship spread out before him, a dark and solid platform around which the blur of the stars flowed as they traveled forward at FTL.

It had been close.

When he shut his eyes he could still see them through the veil of sparks that had rained down as one of the lighting panels blew. Their skin had been a cold blue shimmer under Destiny's emergency lighting, and their movements had drawn up a primitive terror from somewhere deep in his mind. A small contingent of them had boarded the ship, slipping through shields that had faded to almost nothing under continuous bombardment. He had been on point, James to his right, the rest of his team behind him in a fan.

There had been no cover.

He took a deep breath and reached forward, grabbing the cool railing that ran around the perimeter of the deck, bowing his head under the memory of gunfire. He could feel the spectral kickback of a rifle against his shoulder.

"You're fine." He wasn't sure if he was talking to Destiny or himself, but he gave the railing a squeeze that blanched his knuckles and then pulled himself to his feet.

Young made his way past the chair room, and after a few more minutes of walking, he turned onto the bridge.

"Hey," Brody said, looking up briefly from where he sat in the central chair, studying displays. "How's the leg?"

"Better," Young said shortly, running a quick glance over Park and Volker.

He sighed.

"Yeah," Brody said, his tone one of tired understanding. "He's not here."

"You know," Volker said, "I thought that once we were all on the same page with the bridge and cracking the code—that he'd stop avoiding us."

"I don't think he likes us," Brody replied, not looking up from his work.

"He likes us," Park said, "I mean," she made a helpless, circular hand gesture, "in his way."

Young pulled out his radio. "Rush, this is Young. Come in please." He released the button.

"Rush here."

Young raised his eyebrows.

"Lucky you," Volker said, glancing up from his console.

"Rush. Here. What can I do for you, colonel?" Young could hear Rush struggling for a calm delivery but his irritation sharpened his diction.

"Where are you right now?"

"Control interface room."

"I thought you were supposed to be repairing the weapons array with the rest of the science team."

Young waited expectantly.

No response.

Thirty seconds passed, quiet except for the occasional tap of fingers on touchscreens. Young crossed his arms, leaning against the instrumentation panel that Eli seemed to favor, taking some of the weight off his leg.

"Rush," Young said into the radio, his voice rising slightly in warning.

A darkened array of monitors across the room suddenly lit up, drawing Young's gaze with a flash of gold and blue.

"Is that the—" Volker began.

"Yup," Brody said, his eyes still fixed on the screen in front of him.

Park was already in place at the newly activated console, scanning through—well, whatever it was that the science team scanned through. Young made his way over to stand behind her shoulder. He couldn't be sure, but it looked like at least their primary and secondary arrays were back online.

"This is good news, I take it?" Young asked the room in general.

"Everything's online except the main weapon," Park replied. "All three arrays are up. Power flow is stable."

"I wish he would explain how he does this stuff," Volker said. "Even just one time."

"You mean this wasn't you guys?" Young asked.

"Nope," Brody replied.

Park looked over her shoulder, meeting his eyes almost guiltily.

"Rush," he said again, cracking the name like a whip into the radio.

"You're welcome. Rush out."

"He's been in a bad mood all day," Park said, and he couldn't quite tell if the expression on her face was sympathy or apology.

"Well that makes two of us."

He left them to their work on the bridge and headed toward the control interface room, his limp becoming more and more pronounced as he went. Much as he would have liked to head back to his quarters, he couldn't stand the idea of leaving Rush to his own devices for too long. He slowed down as he approached the CI room, his steps becoming quiet against the deck plating. Young rounded the corner silently and stopped just inside the room, leaning against the doorframe.

The room was dark. The only light came from the consoles, radiating up in a pale blue glow. Rush perched in front of the main interface, leaning forward, his left hand rubbing the back of his neck.

Young considered several openers and discarded them.

"You missed dinner. Again."

Rush didn't show any surprise at his statement, as though he'd been aware of Young the entire time.

"I wasn't aware that you were keeping tabs on me," Rush said, still not looking up. "Again."

Young sighed.

"Good work with the weapons array, although it might be nice to clue the rest of your team in on what you're doing."

"Yes, well. Maybe next time."

"How's it coming with the main weapon?"

"It's not looking promising." Rush's hand brushed delicately over the small wounds left by the neural interface device. "The main weapon was designed for use in conjunction with the chair."

Young grimaced faintly.

"But we've used it without the chair before," he pointed out. "You figured out how to unlock the firing mechanism months ago."

"That," Rush said, finally raising his eyes away from the console, "was a workaround. When I fired the weapon four days ago from the chair it—reset the system."

Young clenched his jaw, trying not to let the evasive quality in Rush's tone bother him.

"So make another workaround."

"Absolutely," Rush said, digging the heel of his hand into his eye socket. "Fine. Done. No problem. I'll just crack and dismantle the six adaptive algorithms that are currently locking me out of the ship's central processing core, shall I? I'm certain *that* will have no negative repercussions."

"What do you need?" Young asked. "Some help from Earth? You want Eli down here?"

"I don't need anything. Anyone."

"Well, *I* need that main weapon working," Young said, "and preferably before we drop out of FTL again."

"Someone can just sit in the chair again if it comes to that," Rush said, his fingers coming to his temple and then raking through his hair.

"No."

"It very well may be the only way."

"I said *no*."

"All right then." Rush spread his hands in an expansive gesture, his mouth quirking into that half smile that Young hated. "By all means. I'll just rewrite the laws of physics to suit your whims."

"That chair could have killed you."

"I assure you, colonel, I'm well aware of that."

"Are you?" Young said it so quietly he wasn't sure if his words were capable of crossing the few feet between them.

Rush's hands halted in midair. Young watched them, hovering uncertainly over the consoles, until he forced his gaze upwards. There was a sharpening behind Rush's eyes and for the first time Young could feel the entire force of the other man's intellect narrowing down and pressing into him, cold and precise, like a screwdriver between the blades of a clam shell.

"Just fix that weapon."

He could feel Rush's gaze on his back as he turned away.

That night, he dreamt of the attack.

*The 0300 drop out of FTL wakes him and the first wave of weapons fire impacts the shields with a distant and ominous sound before he finishes pulling on his jacket. He sees them from the window in his quarters—two ships, maybe more, opening fire at close range.*

*There is no mistaking them.*

*The familiar boxy shape of their craft belongs to the aliens that had taken Chloe.*

*Chloe and Rush.*

*He skids into the hallway, already running. He sprints toward the bridge, calling for Scott on the radio.*

*"Everyone to their stations." He shouts to be heard.*

*"Understood," Scott replies.*

*When he arrives, the bridge is lit up with a golden glow, trajectories and vectors projecting across screens in moving arcs. Chloe catches his eye as she darts from Eli's station to one of the forward consoles, bare feet flashing, her expression tight with fear.*

*"Report," he snaps.*

*"We're taking heavy damage." Rush is behind him. "Shields down to thirty percent."*

*"Thirty percent? How is that even possible?"*

*"Something is draining a massive amount of power from core systems." Eli's voice cuts across the sudden shrill of an alarm. "It's being sequestered somewhere, but—"*

*"So we should prepare for boarding?"*

*No one answers. He looks at Rush, only to find the man focused intently on thin air somewhere to his right, head cocked, as if he is listening to something Young can't hear.*

*Great. That's all they need right now.*

*"Scott," he says, lifting the radio, not taking his eyes off the scientist, "it looks like we may be boarded. Send two of your team to arm the civilians. I'll meet them in the mess and take command of them there."*

*"How much time do we have?" he asks Eli.*

*"Five minutes." Chloe responds instead. "Maybe less. I'm rerouting power to the areas of the ship that are taking the most damage, but it's a temporary measure at best."*

*"Keep doing what you can. Greer's team will buy you as much time as possible."*

*The door swishes open behind him and Park bursts into the room, followed a few seconds later by Brody and Volker.*

*"Brody," Rush says, as his eyes snap back into focus with the hiss of the door shutting. He points to the console where he's standing, and then makes for the exit with his quick, ground eating stride. Young grabs his arm and spins him around as he passes, shoving him back a few steps in the direction of the others.*

*"Where do you think you're going?" His frustration finally spills over, and he bites the words out in a contemptuous snarl, unable to restrain himself despite the gravity of their situation.*

*"There's no time for this!" Rush shouts, coming right back into Young's personal space, his face twisting from surprise to anger in the space of a heartbeat. "Let me go."*

*"Nobody leaves this room," Young replies, loud enough for them all to hear. "Nobody opens this door. For anything. You got that?"*

*A sudden burst from the nearest ship finds its way through the weakened shielding, rocking the ship down to the deck plating. Young is thrown into a metal railing and feels a sickening crack in his left side from the impact. He hits the ground hard, the wind knocked out of him, the wail of multiple alarms loud in his ears. Beside him, Rush struggles to right himself as the metal continues to shift beneath them. Instinctively, Young manages to catch the scientist's ankle as he goes for the door. He pulls, bringing Rush down. He gets a boot to his jaw for the effort, but not before he manages to drag Rush back inelegantly, one hand around his belt, his upper body half-pinning the other man's legs.*

*"Guys!" Eli yells back at them, "Seriously? Come on!"*

*In that moment of distraction, by chance or by design, one of Rush's elbows finds Young's broken ribs and connects solidly. Pain shoots down his side, loosening his grip, and with a burst of energy Rush makes for the door.*

*It opens for him as he approaches.*

*Young watches him from the floor as he pauses for a split second, a bright silhouette against the darkness of the corridor, as if he's listening for something. Without a glance backward, Rush turns and disappears down the corridor.*

*"What the hell was that?" Eli shouts.*

*Young pushes himself to his feet, his hand pressed against his ribs. His radio crackles.*

*"Sir, this is Greer."*

*"Go ahead."*

*"Sir, Rush just ran past us like a bat out of hell."*

*"I know, sergeant. Just—" He needs to pause a moment to catch his breath. "Let him go."*

*"Understood."*

*"That makes one of us," Eli snaps over his shoulder.*

*"Eli," Young snaps right back. "Less talk, more work."*

*He brings his fist down on the door controls and leaves the room. Greer is waiting for him in the hallway.*

*"Nothing gets through to them, sergeant." He meets Greer's eyes, and tilts his head back in the direction of the door. "They're the only chance we have of making it out of this."*

*"Yes sir."*

*He forces himself into a run, pain tearing down his side with every step, to meet James at the mess. Wray has already organized a makeshift blockade of tables and is herding people behind them as James and her team keep watch near the entrance. They had chosen the mess as the most defensible position during the Lucian Alliance assault—it is large enough to hold everyone, and has only one entrance.*

*That also makes it their last resort.*

*"Sir, we have contact!" Scott's voice over the radio is nearly drowned out by gunfire. "I repeat, we have been boarded."*

*A scream breaks out from somewhere behind him, along with a surge of chatter from the civilians.*

*"Quiet," Young yells into the sudden panic. "Those with weapons position yourselves immediately behind the barriers. Those without—to the back."*

*He crooks his fingers and James falls in beside him with the rest of her team. Another shot wracks the ship, throwing them off balance, sending a jolt of pain spreading through his chest.*

*"Becker." He gestures for the other man's weapon. "Let me borrow your rifle." The sergeant hands it over without comment, gamely pulling his handgun from his belt.*

*The team hasn't even moved into position in the hallway when they see them, rounding the corner in a group.*

*A panel overhead explodes and he struggles to make them out through the sparks that rain down in a shimmery curtain. They are just as he remembers them—the ungainly*



*limbs, bending unnaturally as they advance, their skin an alien blue under Destiny's emergency lighting.*

*"Form up," he roars. He feels more than sees James snap her rifle up at his side. In a split second they are organized and firing down towards the approaching party.*

*There is no cover.*

*The aliens fire back with some kind of plasma-based weapon, slow to charge but obviously powerful, and his team splits down the middle, pressing themselves against the side of the corridor to let the barrage pass. There is no opportunity to regroup. From his position in the front, he has a clear line of sight down the corridor and continues firing. He sees one of the aliens fall, then a second, before the first member of his own team goes down.*

*James hits the deck with a sickening crack and as he moves to cover her, he feels a bolt of pain shoot up his leg, knocking him back with the impact—*

The dream cut off abruptly as he came back to consciousness with a start. He sat up, hands shakily wiping the cold sweat from his face. His breathing came in ragged gasps.

"Damn it." He scrubbed the back of his hand across his eyes.

"Colonel Young, please respond," TJ's voice rose from the radio, sounding slightly breathless. He wondered how many times she had called him. Without getting up, he reached over to grab the radio from the table.

"Young here."

There was a pause, and then, "Sorry to wake you, sir."

He hated that she could still read him so well.

"Don't worry about it, TJ. Go ahead."

"Lieutenant James has regained consciousness," she said. "You had wanted to be informed—"

"I'll be right there."

On his way down to the infirmary the halls were mostly deserted. It was twenty three hundred hours, and only those on the night shift were up and about. He gave Brody a nod as he passed him. A few minutes later he stopped to chat with Airman Dunning before arriving at the infirmary.

TJ smiled at him as he made his way over to James, picking his way through empty beds.

"Sir." James attempted to sit as he approached.

"At ease, lieutenant." He held up a hand. "How's the shoulder?"

She gave him a half smile. "Still pretty sore, but TJ tells me I'll live."

"Good to hear," Young clapped her briefly on the knee.

"I saw you take a hit." She looked away. "Covering me."

"Nothing to worry about, lieutenant. As you can see, I'm already up and around."

"Yes sir."

"You do what you need to get back on your feet."

"Sir, can I ask you—"

He raised his eyebrows.

"Well, it just—looked pretty bad." She paused, uncertain. "I thought—"

She was quiet, and he nodded at her.

"I thought we were going to lose the ship."

The ache in his leg was nearly unbearable. He took a few steps to his right to perch precariously on the edge of her bed. She shifted to give him more room. Young looked down at his hands.

"Me too." He felt a humorless smile flash across his face, too fast to reach his eyes. She stared at him, startled. He looked up, away from her, eyes fixed on the ceiling. He sighed.

"Rush. It was Rush." He forced his eyes back to hers, forced himself to smile. "He saved our asses."

"*Rush*? How?" She was almost successful in hiding the quick flicker of distaste that flashed over her features.

"He sat in the chair. Apparently he was able to fire the main weapon and restore shields." He raised a shoulder in a half-shrug. "Somehow he plugged himself into the internal sensors and was able to isolate the aliens that boarded us using force fields. Then he vented the atmosphere in those compartments."

"Is he, um—" She didn't finish her question, but Young understood what she meant.

"He's fine," Young replied. "Or, at least he *seems* to be."

"Huh." James' expression was suddenly shuttered. Young wondered what it was that she didn't want him to read on her face. "Lucky."

"I guess so," he replied.

"Luckier than Franklin."

"Yeah. I guess so," he repeated.

An awkward silence settled between them for a few seconds. Then Young stood. "I'd better go," he said. "You need your rest."

She gave him a brief, strained smile. "Yeah, sure. Of course."

"Take care," he threw back over his shoulder.

TJ moved to intercept him as he left but he waved her off, ignoring her raised eyebrow. He had nearly made it back to his room when he ran into Eli, almost literally, as the kid rounded a corner, his face glued to the screen of the laptop he was carrying.

"Whoa," Young said, holding up a hand.

"Oh. Hey," Eli said, shoulders drooping in relief. "I was looking for you. Do you have a minute?"

"Sure," Young replied, "but I've got to get off this leg. Come on." He motioned Eli in the direction of his quarters. Eli seemed to barely be able to contain himself, and Young had a hard time keeping up. As soon as they reached their destination, Eli wasted no time in setting up his laptop on the low table in front of his couch.

"What's got you so worked up?" Young asked, resisting the urge to groan as he took his weight off his abused knee.

"So you *know* I don't like the spying, right? Because—"

"Eli." Young forestalled the rant with a raised palm.

"Anyway," he continued, "you have got to see this. If I try to explain it—" the young man just shook his head.

Young watched as he pulled up the file. The picture was clearly from a kino, hovering over a long stretch of empty corridor. Closed doors lined the hallway. Eli reached over, obstructing his view for a moment as he hit the play button.

For a moment nothing happened. Then, as Young watched, the harsh yellow light in the corridor faded down to a soft blue glow in a slow-moving wave that propagated down the long, straight line of the hallway as far as the kino could see.

"I didn't even know we *had* mood lighting," Eli murmured next to him.

"Eli, what—" he broke off.

Beneath the kino, Rush had stepped into view, his normally quick stride a bit slower than usual, one hand reaching up to rub his shoulder. The kino descended to follow him, bringing more of the corridor ahead into view. They could see the leading edge of the lights dimming ahead of Rush, matching his pace as he moved forward.

"What the *hell* is he doing?" Young murmured.

"I don't think he's doing it," Eli replied. "In fact, I'm not sure he's even *aware* of it. He's looking down."

It was true. The scientist's head was angled down, one hand gripping his shoulder. He looked as exhausted as Young felt.

"Keep watching," Eli said. "Right here."

A door to the man's right suddenly slid open, spilling golden light into the hallway before it muted down to the same blue glow as the overhead lights. Rush paused, startled, and glanced briefly at his hand, as if wondering whether he had hit the door controls by accident. Then he looked up into the room, the kino catching him in profile as he crossed his arms over his chest.

"Oh I don't think so," Rush said quietly, in the direction of the room.

Rush glanced sideways, noticing the kino for the first time. He reached out a hand, blocking the camera for a moment, and then the kino was sailing back the way it had come, the picture bleaching as it took a few seconds to adjust to the suddenly elevated light levels.

"Damn it." Young closed his eyes. "That's the chair room, isn't it?"

"Yup," Eli said shortly.

"What the *hell* is going on?" Young fixed Eli with a pointed glare. "Don't tell me he's secretly running the ship. Again."

"I really don't think so," Eli said, sounding almost excited. "I think maybe the ship is trying *to communicate* with him. It's almost like it was inviting him in, you know what I mean?"

"I don't really consider turning the lights off wherever he goes to be behavior I would characterize as *friendly*," Young commented.

"But it wasn't turning them off," Eli said, leaning forward, his hands slicing through the air. "It was turning them *down*." He paused. "He gets headaches, you know."

Young stared at Eli for a good three seconds.

"You think the ship was trying to make him *feel better*?"

"No. Well—kind of." Eli sighed. "Maybe? I mean, when you put it like that it sounds stupid, but—"

"Look," Young said, forestalling the coming monologue. "Keep an eye out. We have no idea what the repercussions are going to be following his use of the chair. Frankly, I'm more interested in preventing him from cutting the rest of the science team off from control of key systems than I am in the ship developing some kind of—*attachment* to him. If that's even possible."

"Okay," Eli said, drawing out the word like he thought Young had come to the entirely wrong conclusion.

"Get some rest," Young said, standing to usher Eli out.

The door shut behind the young man, and for a long moment Young rested his forehead against the metal, eyes closed. Below his skin he could feel tiny vibrations. He ran a hand over the smooth surface.

"Do you talk to him?" he whispered to the ship.

For a long moment, he was quiet.

"Why won't you talk to *me*?"

There was of course, no answer.

Young sighed and picked up his radio. "Lieutenant Scott, come in please."

"Yes sir, go ahead."

"I want someone posted outside the chair room. No one goes in or out without my permission."

"Understood, sir."

"Lieutenant—"

"Yes sir?"

"Especially not Dr. Rush."

"Got it."

By the time Young's radio went off again at oh five hundred, he had only managed to get a few hours of sleep.

"Colonel Young, this is Rush, do you read?"

"Damn it," Young growled, barely conscious, fumbling in the darkness for his radio.

"Go ahead."

"Colonel, can you please clarify the reason a *guard* is posted outside the chair room?"

"Just a precaution, Rush," he replied.

There was a long silence. He wondered what Rush was doing. The possibilities ran through his mind—glaring at the radio, throwing something at a wall, trying to get past whomever was posted outside the chair room—

"Rush," Young said into the radio.

"If you want me to bring the main weapon online, that requires rerouting the control systems away from the primary interface." Young could almost *feel* the effort the other man was putting into controlling his tone.

Young was not entirely sure how to respond to that.

"Which is the *chair*," Rush snapped, his tone scathing.

"You can work on it later," Young said, "With the rest of the science team."

"Later," Rush echoed icily.

"Yes, later," Young said, mirroring Rush's earlier condescension. "With the science team."

No response.

Young tried to go back to sleep, but ultimately it was a wasted effort. He shaved and showered, then made his way down to the mess for the early meal shift. He took a seat opposite Camile Wray.

"Camile."

"Colonel Young," she responded coolly, flicking a quick glance up at him from her bowl of mush. Something she saw made her do a double take. "You look exhausted."

"I'm fine."

"How are the repairs coming along?"

"Pretty well, I would say." Young gave his protein mix a brief stir. "We've got all three weapons arrays up and running and the shields are almost back to full power. There are still a few problem areas that people are working on."

"What about the main weapon?" Wray forced down another mouthful of her breakfast.

"Rush is tackling it. He thinks they need to interface with the chair to fix it."

"With the *chair*?" She frowned, her eyebrows furrowing. "Are you sure that's wise?"

"No," Young said shortly, "I'm not sure. But Rush tells me it's the only chance we have of getting the thing back online."

Wray sighed.

"Yeah," Young said in agreement.

They ate in silence for a few moments, focusing on getting the meal over with as quickly as possible.

"We could really use another foraging mission," Wray said, finally reaching the bottom of her bowl.

"True. I'll see if Rush or Eli can't program that into Destiny's computer in the near future."

She nodded at him as she left the table. Young watched her go. As she was leaving, Rush rounded the corner at a rapid clip, nearly taking out Wray in the process. He grabbed her arm to right her as she stumbled.

"Pardon."

"Sorry."

Young rolled his eyes.

Wray disappeared into the hallway, and Rush strode across the room and grabbed a bowl of processed protein from Becker. From what Young could tell, it seemed that his plan was to eat it as fast as humanly possible while literally standing in front of the airman to give the bowl back to him with minimal time wasted.

Becker was watching Rush with a sort of resigned amusement, and Young got the feeling that this was not an unusual occurrence.

"Where's the fire, Rush?"

The scientist looked over at him, eyebrows raised.

"Sit," Young said, gesturing at Wray's now vacant seat.

"I'm extremely busy, colonel."

"So what else is new?"

Rush narrowed his eyes slightly.

"Sit. We have to talk about this plan of yours."

"I'm not sure what you're referring to." Rush was abruptly exuding an air of practiced nonchalance that sent chills down Young's spine.

He didn't trust that tone.

He'd heard it too many times before.

"Interfacing with the chair," Young said, trying to keep his sudden unease out of his voice.

Rush gave him a sharp look, but sat down opposite him, nearly throwing his half empty bowl onto the table. "So, tell me colonel. What are your terms? Under what conditions will you *allow* me—"

Young held up his hand before Rush could work himself up to full volume. "Stop being so melodramatic."

Rush gave him an irritated sigh and lowered his spoon, watching the white paste drip slowly back into the bowl.

"My conditions are as follows. One, the entire science team is involved. Two, someone is to be stationed outside the door at all times, in case of emergency. Three, no one sits in the chair."

"One, I will involve Eli and no one else. Two, what do you think someone outside the room is going to do? And three, fine."

"This is not a negotiation, Rush."

"Fine. Everyone but Volker."

"Rush."

"Perfect." Rush slammed his spoon down on the table with a metallic clang. "And what time would you like to start?"

"Any time." Young's voice was perfectly controlled. "Just let me know, I want to be there."

"Let's say half past nine then, shall we?"

"Great."

"Yes. Great." Rush stood.

"You didn't finish your breakfast."

"Be my guest, colonel."



Rush stalked out of the room. There was a scatter of nervous laughter after he disappeared from sight as the room let out a collective breath.

"Carry on people," Young said, gathering up his empty bowl along with Rush's partially empty one, and handing them to Becker.

He looked in on Scott's mini-boot camp for civilians and finished up some odds and ends until it was time to head down to the chair room. He met up with Eli and Brody on the way. The two of them were chattering about internal rheostats and capacitors. Well, Eli was chattering; Brody was mostly offering monosyllabic statements of agreement. Young fell in behind them with a nod.

They entered the chair room to find a flurry of activity. Laptops opened like butterflies atop Ancient monitors. Young leaned against the doorframe next to Greer, watching Park and Volker boot up systems around the periphery of the room. The chair sat dormant in the center of the space.

"Sir," Greer greeted him.

"Sergeant," Young replied. "How's it going?"

"I feel like I'm becoming an expert at this, sir"

"At—" Young prompted him to elaborate.

"Watching other people watch computers."

Young's mouth twitched slightly. "Well, as far as I'm concerned, it beats alien incursions any day of the week."

"Yes sir."

Young gestured with his head. "Take up a position right outside the door."

Greer nodded, moving a few steps back. Young leaned against the doorframe just inside the room, trying to take a bit of weight off his injured leg.

"Where's Rush?" Volker asked from his position behind the main console. "We're pretty much good to go here."

"Right here, Mr. Volker," Rush answered from behind Young's shoulder as he strode through the doorway.

Rush hadn't taken more than two steps into the room when the overhead lighting dimmed and the chair activated with an ominous humming sound, restraints opening with an audible snap.

Rush flinched as though he'd been slapped and threw up a hand in front of his face. At the same moment, acting on instinct, both Young and Greer stepped forward to yank him backwards, away from the chair. Greer shoved Rush toward Young and moved out front, his weapon at his shoulder. Young's injured knee nearly buckled under the sudden strain, but he used the wall at his back to stay upright and gritted his teeth as he rebalanced himself and Rush.

He could feel the scientist's heart pounding underneath the hand he had fisted his shirt.

No one spoke.

In the center of the darkened room, the chair continued to hum. Waiting.

## Chapter Three

Rush tore himself free from Young's grip with an affronted hiss.

"You realize it's a *chair* for god's sake?" he snapped at Greer, who was still sighting down the barrel of his rifle. "It's *bolted to the floor*. Exactly what do you think it's going to do?"

"Tell that to Franklin," Greer murmured back, not lowering his weapon.

"This is ridiculous." Rush glared at Young as he said it, and Young wasn't sure if the scientist was seeking agreement or leveling a jab at him.

Whatever he was looking for, he didn't find it on Young's face.

Rush moved forward again, heading over to the console where Eli was standing.

Young let him go.

"You realize how creepy that was, right?" Eli asked, as Rush approached. "I mean, even *you* have to admit that was like maybe a nine on the creepiness scale."

"Eli."

"What? That freaked you out. I know it did."

Young looked skeptically at Rush. The other man was loading some kind of program onto the laptop open over the main console. He looked distinctly *un*-freaked out.

"I'd rank it more like an eight point five," Volker said after a moment's pause.

"I give it a seven," Brody added. "Tops."

"No way," Eli said. "A *seven*? Are you kidding me?"

"Why are the lights off?" Park asked.

"Ambiance?" Volker suggested.

The banter between the science team had relaxed Greer somewhat. After a nod from Young he backed away from the chair, lowering his weapon. They stood shoulder to shoulder in the doorway.

"I really *hate* that thing," Greer said quietly.

"Join the club, sergeant."

Young watched their progress for the next half hour. Other than the initial activation of the chair after Rush had entered the room, nothing out of the ordinary occurred. Just as the science team had successfully accessed the core systems of the neural

interface, Young was distracted by the appearance of Lieutenant Scott, approaching at a fast clip.

"What's going on, lieutenant?"

"It's Wray, sir." Scott was slightly out of breath. "She was due to use the communication stones this morning." Scott paused, and Young nodded for him to continue. "She's back. Apparently Colonel Telford is on the other end, waiting to switch with someone. Homeworld Command wants to talk to you."

Young sighed, rubbing his forehead. He glanced over at the science team, now having some kind of conference around the main interface console.

"All right. Lead the way, lieutenant."

He followed Scott down the long hallways to the otherwise bare room containing the Ancient communication stones. He arrived to find Wray pacing back and forth, one arm wrapped around her ribcage.

"Camile," he said, drawing her attention. "What's going on?"

"I'm not sure." She pursed her lips. "It could be anything. We know the trouble with the Lucian Alliance is escalating." She shot him a rueful look. "If we're lucky, it will be something to do with resupply. I think Homeworld Command is close to attempting a dial-in to Destiny using an alternative power source."

He raised his eyebrows. "Since when are we lucky?" he asked her.

She sighed.

"Let's see what they have to say." Young turned to Scott. "Lieutenant, you want to do the honors?"

Scott nodded shortly and sat down at the table. He picked up a stone and placed it on the glowing surface of the communications device. Young watched the momentary sense of disorientation pass over his features as Colonel Telford's consciousness entered his body.

"David," he said in greeting, as Telford stood.

"Everett." The word was clipped and brisk.

"Welcome back."

Telford gave him a brief nod. "We need to talk." Telford looked over at Wray, obviously waiting for her to take the hint. She raised a disdainful eyebrow before turning on her heel to leave them alone in the room.

"Take a seat, David," Young said, dropping into a chair. He couldn't completely hide the grimace that passed over his features at the change in position.

"You're injured?" Telford managed to look offended rather than sympathetic. "*Again?* How?"

"We had an incursion a few days ago. I took some fire."

"*Damn* it, Everett. You need to report these things *as they happen*. We've had no contact with Destiny for four days until this morning—"

Young held up a hand. "We cut off our use of the communication stones until we put enough distance between us and the craft that launched the attack. I was concerned about *our* people ending up on their ship. As far as we know, they still have possession of the stone they took from Rush."

"What's your status?"

"We've almost completed repairs. We're still working on getting the main weapon online, but shields and the defensive arrays are up and running. Homeworld Command will have my full report within twenty-four hours."

"We'll be needing more than that." Telford leaned forward over the table. "We're going to be making another attempt to dial Destiny—this time from the alpha site. Colonel Carter and Dr. McKay were recalled to Earth to run the operation, and they've figured out a way to power the gate using a series of ZPMs."

"Is it safe?"

"They aren't sure. They need to talk to Rush."

Young laughed shortly.

"We need him to use the stones."

"Good luck. He hasn't used the communication device for—what, a year now?"

"I wonder why," Telford said dryly.

Young looked down at his hands. "You're never going to get him to agree to go back."

"Maybe not *voluntarily*."

Young's eyes snapped to the other man's face. "What are you saying, David?"

"You know as well as I do that if Carter and McKay come here to assess feasibility, he's going to run them around in circles. He knows these systems better than anyone. He completely snowed the first science team we sent, and that was after he'd only been

here for a few *weeks*. We *still* don't know what he did or how he did it. And he's much more experienced now."

"Maybe," Young said, frowning. "But Carter and McKay are—"

"Excellent scientists, I know. But politically? They're no match for Rush. He's going to outmaneuver them."

"David—"

"He needs to be on *Earth*, Everett. With no opportunity to manipulate systems, no way to undermine—"

"Rush wants a supply line as much as anyone," Young pointed out. "I doubt that he would sabotage any effort that could provide us with materials to fix the ship."

"Even if he's replaced as head of the science team the *second* additional personnel come through that gate? Because that's what's going to happen." Telford brought his hand down on the metal surface of the table.

"That's not your call to make, David." Young said quietly, "unless *I'm* being replaced as well."

Telford gazed at him steadily.

"That decision has not been made as of yet."

"I see."

"Get Rush to use the stones, colonel. That order comes down from General O'Neill."

"I'm not going to force *anyone* to switch consciousnesses with another person."

Telford leaned back, looking away. "You may not have a choice in the matter."

"And what is *that* supposed to mean?"

"We've been studying the Ancient communication device. If an individual has used the stones, even one time, there may be a way of replacing that person without activating a terminal on this end."

Young shook his head, his hand curling into a fist. "*That*," he said pausing pointedly, "is a can of worms you do *not* want to open, David."

"We'll be the judge of that."

"So—what, then? You're just going to yank Rush back, with no warning, against his will, if I don't get him to cooperate?"

"That's the plan," Telford said.

"That's a terrible plan."

"The man is obstructionist at *best*. At worst he's actively sabotaging your attempts to get home. He's a master manipulator and a danger to this entire mission. I don't see why you, of all people, are defending him."

Young rubbed his jaw. "The man is a lot of work. I'm the first to admit that." He eyed Telford speculatively.

"And I'm not saying I disagree with your assessment. But—" he paused, leaning back, crossing his arms over his chest, "I have to admit, I looked into his background a bit, last time I used the stones."

"Did you," Telford said, looking away.

"Do you know what Rush did before he was recruited to Stargate Command?" Young asked.

"The same thing that any of them do," Telford said. His tone was flat, his expression guarded. If he was surprised by Young's apparent non sequitur, he didn't show it.

"He was a college *math* professor."

"What's your point?"

"I'm just wondering where he learned it all."

"Learned what?" There was no question about it—Telford was actively avoiding his gaze.

"Learned to *read* people—to *manipulate* them like he does. I wonder why he feels it's *necessary*." Young paused. Telford still failed to meet his eyes. "Tell me, David, did you interact with him much on the Icarus base?"

Telford shifted minutely in his chair before looking up. "Not any more than I interacted with any other scientist."

"See," Young leaned forward. "I find that interesting. Because I'm *sure* he was a high profile Lucian Alliance target and as you were under their influence at that time—"

He left the sentence unfinished.

"What exactly are you implying?"

A frozen silence descended between them.

Young let it stretch out, uncomfortable and long.

"Nothing," he said, finally, his tone neutral. "Just making an observation."

"I have to get back," Telford said shortly. "We'll be expecting that report within the next twenty-four hours. When you deliver it, you can let us know when Rush will be using the stones."

Telford didn't wait for his reply, but reached over to disconnect the stone he had placed on the interface. After a few seconds, Young found himself looking into the face of Lieutenant Scott.

"That was quick," Scott observed. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah," Young responded. "There's a new plan to dial Destiny in the works."

"So what else is new?" Scott asked wryly.

Young was about to respond when his radio crackled.

"Colonel Young, come in." It was Greer.

A feeling of dread pressed down on his chest at the sergeant's tone. It was an effort to lift the radio.

"Go ahead."

"Sir, we have something of a situation in the chair room. I think you might want to get down here."

"Damn it," Young whispered, closing his eyes.

"Sir?" Scott murmured. When Young opened his eyes again it was to Scott's outstretched hand. He took it, hauling himself to his feet.

"Let's go, lieutenant."

When they reentered the room, it was not immediately apparent that anything was wrong. Greer prowled the edges of the monitor banks in an uneasy perimeter along the back wall as the science team manned their stations. Rush stood near the chair, a pair of pliers in one hand, clearly worked up about something.

"Hey," Eli said in Rush's direction, frustration evident in his voice, "I *can't*, okay? It's not a *static system*. It's in some kind of dynamic equilibrium and if I *upset* that—"

Eli and Rush locked eyes.

"Yes," Rush said, looking away. "I'm aware."

"What the hell is going on here?" Young demanded, interrupting their exchange.

Rush sighed, his hand going to the back of his neck.

It was Eli who answered his question.



"We had to interrupt the power supply running from the chair to the main weapons array, but there was no way to circumvent the adaptive algorithms protecting the chair's central programming. We had to sever the connection manually."

"And?" Young prompted.

"And so when Rush approached the chair to open the panel, he kind of—got trapped behind a force field?"

"What," Young roared.

Eli and Park flinched.

"I told them it was a bad idea," Greer said from the periphery of the room.

"Rush," Young growled his name, advancing toward the scientist.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Rush said, holding up a hand.

Young stopped where he was.

Rush reached out toward Young, extending his pliers. About six inches from where Young was standing a transparent golden field came into view for a moment as the pliers grazed its border, then vanished again as Rush withdrew them.

"Hurts like hell when you touch it," Rush admitted.

"Damn it, Rush."

Rush shrugged.

"How long is it going to take to get this thing down?" Young turned toward Eli.

No one spoke.

"The fact is, colonel," Rush said quietly, "the field derives its power directly from the chair and ultimately, therefore, from the central core. Which *means*," Rush paused, giving him an inscrutable look, "that dismantling the field is going to be difficult. In the extreme."

"But not impossible." It was a statement, not a question.

"No," Rush said, looking away. "No. Not impossible."

Some of the tension left the room at Rush's words, but Young couldn't bring himself to be relieved. It *was always* this way with the other man. The scientist had a hold over him that Young couldn't quite identify. Though they existed in an uneasy equilibrium, continuously on the verge of tipping into violence, Young felt a sort of proprietary interest in keeping Rush alive—as if by doing so, he could somehow atone for—

For something that defied atonement.

"Who do you need?" he asked Rush. "Carter and McKay are both on Earth. We can get one or both of them on the stones if you think it would be helpful."

"Either would be acceptable," Rush said quietly, "although McKay, I think, has more experience with this form of technology."

"Done," Young said, nodding to Scott, who left the room immediately. "What else?"

"We could try to reduce ship-wide power levels," Park commented from behind a console. "Fire the weapons, turn systems on. It might cut the power to the field."

Rush shot Park a skeptical look. "Possibly. I'm not convinced it's worth it. We're certainly being pursued. We're likely to drop out of FTL long before enough power is drained to make any kind of impact on this field." He swiped the border of the field with his pliers.

"Fine, we'll hold off on that for now," Young said. "What about you? Can you do anything from in there?"

Rush shook his head and held up the pliers. When he was sure he had Young's attention, he threw the pliers at the control panel at the back of the chair. They were deflected by the same golden energy field.

"Too bad," Young said.

"You're telling me."

"Hey!" They were both distracted by Eli's excited shout. "I think I've got something. The power flow is changing at least—"

Young strode over to stand next to Eli's shoulder. Unfortunately, other than the rapid shifts in color and trajectory of a set of lines, he couldn't make much sense of what he was seeing.

"Changing *how*?" Rush snapped.

"The field harmonics are fluctuating," Brody answered.

"Which means what?" Young asked, his frustration mounting.

"Not sure," Brody responded.

"I would clear this room of nonessential personnel." Rush glanced at him obliquely and then paced back and forth behind the invisible shield perimeter a few times.

"Greer, Park, Volker—out." Young snapped. He caught Rush's eye, and at a subtle head nod from the other man, he added, "Brody, you too."

"Gee. Thanks," Brody said as he stood.

Young's eyes followed them out, only to be distracted as the field surrounding the chair flared to life, glowing visibly in the dim light in the room.

"Oh crap," Eli said. The words were so quiet that Young could barely hear him over the few inches that separated them.

In that same moment, the field collapsed inward by several feet. Rush was knocked back as it discharged. He hit the ground hard, head impacting the deck plating with an audible crack.

"*Rush*." Young was forward as far as he could go without touching the field.

No response.

"*Damn it*, Eli," Young spun around. "Did you do that?"

"No! No, I don't think so." Eli grabbed his laptop from the top of the console as he approached the edge of the field. "Is he okay?"

"No idea," Young said shortly.

"This is so not good," Eli said. He tilted the laptop, angling the screen to give Young a clear view. "See this?" he continued. "This power fluctuation was *designed* to partially collapse the field. It came from *Destiny's mainframe*."

"So it's what—herding him?"

"Yeah," Eli said, clearly rattled. "Pretty much."

"That's great." Young dug his fingers into his temples. "That's just great."

"Rush," Eli tried again. "*Rush*. Come on. God, I hope he's not dead. Is he even *breathing*?"

Young looked closely, eyes narrowing as he walked away from Eli around the perimeter of the now marginally visible field. He sat, putting himself as close as he could get to Rush, who was now lying at the base of the chair. After several seconds he was able to see the scientist's chest rise and fall.

"He's breathing," Young reassured Eli.

"Should we call TJ?" Eli asked, his eyes flicking constantly between his computer and Rush.

"No," Young murmured. "What's she going to do?"

"Yeah, good point."

Young got as close as he could to the faint golden glow.

"Rush." He tried again, low and urgent. "*Rush*, come on. Wake up."

The scientist's eyelids flickered.

"*Rush*," Eli joined him, his voice equally insistent. "Come *on*, man."

Rush's hands came up to his head, and he turned away from them, pushing himself up into a sitting position with his back supported against the base of the chair. Young looked away briefly, knowing that if their positions were reversed, he wouldn't want to show any weakness in front of the scientist.

"Are you all right?" Young asked after a few moments.

"Fine," Rush said briefly. "How long—?" He made a vaguely circular hand gesture.

"Less than five minutes," Young replied.

Rush finally looked up, his expression darkening as he took in the field, glimmering a faint yellow under the dim lights. It created a dome approximately ten feet in diameter.

"It's visible now," Rush sighed. "Perfect."

"What difference does that make?" Young asked.

Rush dropped his head back down into his right hand, massaging his temples, while gesturing vaguely at Eli to explain.

"It's not good," Eli said quietly as he dropped into a cross-legged position next to them.

"The field is now stretched over a smaller area, but is drawing the same amount of energy from the core, so—"

"It's stronger," Young finished for him.

"Yeah." Eli compressed his lips.

"Why is this happening?" Young asked. "Why *you*. Why *now*?"

Rush looked at him, his expression closed. "Apparently I've made myself available."

Young glared at him. "Not helpful," he said.

"It's as helpful as anything else is likely to be," Rush replied, pulling one knee into his chest. He glanced up at the chair.

"You are *not* thinking what I think you're thinking," Eli said.

Rush raised his eyebrows.

"Um," Eli said, drawing out the word, "are you *crazy*?"

Rush smirked at them both.

"Don't answer that," Eli said.

"No one is sitting in that chair," Young said, shifting out of his kneeling position to sit on the floor a few feet from Rush. He straightened his injured leg. "That's an order."

"Yes yes," Rush replied, tiredly. "Why don't you just order the field to drop while you're at it then?"

"Don't be a smartass," Young replied, but he couldn't put much venom into it, not when Rush looked so miserable.

"Giving up already? That was quick." They all turned to see Volker poking his head in the door.

"Volker?" Young said, twisting, "I thought I told you—"

"Definitely *not* Volker," the scientist said, striding into the room.

"Rodney," Rush said in greeting.

"Like I said," McKay commented, approaching them, "definitely not Volker." He looked at Rush. "You look terrible, Nick. Will no one lend you a razor?"

"I have more significant problems at the moment, I'm afraid."

"I know, just observing." McKay snapped his fingers at Eli. "Hey, math boy. Laptop please. Let's get going."

Eli scrambled to his feet, and handed his laptop over to McKay, who promptly snatched it out of his hands and headed immediately for the main console.

"You know what your problem is, colonel?" McKay asked as he snapped adaptors into Eli's laptop.

"I'm sure you're about to tell me," Young said from the floor next to the force field.

"Yes. Your *science* team is being run by two mathematicians. There's a reason it's not called a math team."

"Hey," Eli said indignantly. "I was an engineering major."

"Oh, *I'm* sorry," McKay said. "Did you graduate? Because normally the use of the word 'major' implies that you have a degree of some kind."

Eli rolled his eyes.

"Watch and learn, math boy," McKay said, eyes tearing over text on the monitors.

Young looked back at Rush who was watching McKay through narrowed eyes. As if he felt Young's gaze on him, Rush looked over.

"I think I might like you better than him," Young said.

Rush smiled faintly. "That would be a first."

"I know," Young said dryly. "That's why I mention it."

"So, tell me about this power fluctuation," McKay said to Eli. "What did you do?"

"*Nothing*," Eli shot back. "It just *happened*."

"I don't think so," McKay scoffed. "Nothing 'just happens' in systems like these."

"Fine," Eli replied. "Then what 'happened' is that Destiny initiated a command to collapse the field by twenty percent."

"No no no no no. See—"

A mechanical trill from Eli's laptop cut McKay off. They both looked down, eyes glued to the screen.

The field glowed a brighter gold, and Rush and Young both shot to their feet. Rush was edging as far back toward the chair as he could get without actually sitting in it.

"Oh crap," McKay said, looking up at Rush.

The shield flared again, collapsing inward by several more feet. Rush flinched back as it progressed toward him. He overbalanced, catching himself with his left hand on the arm of the chair behind him. Almost immediately, several loops of black organic material shot out from the arm of the chair, closing over and around his left wrist.

"What the hell is *that*?" Young shouted.

Rush reacted immediately, stepping forward off the base of the chair, angling himself away from it, twisting his arm and shoulder at an unnatural angle to do so.

"Thank you, Rodney," Rush said over his shoulder. "You've been tremendously helpful."

"Come on, come *on*!" McKay was whispering under his breath as he tried to cut power to the chair. "Sorry," he called in response to Rush's comment.

"This is *messed up*," Eli said, standing shoulder to shoulder with McKay, watching the monitors.

Rush had braced one foot against the base of the chair and had twisted his body around his left shoulder, bringing right hand to left elbow in order to exert the

maximum leverage possible. Every few seconds another loop of material shot out of the arm of the chair, further securing his wrist.

Young could see it was a losing battle.

Rush seemed to come to the same conclusion and he stopped struggling, his eyes casting around the space near the chair until he spotted the pliers he had discarded earlier. Untwisting his body, he went for them with his right foot and managed to drag them within reach.

"McKay," Young snapped, "*now* would be a good time."

Rush had the pliers in hand and was examining the left arm of the chair by pivoting around his left shoulder. Young watched, faintly surprised that the scientist ignored the obvious and didn't go for the straps directly, but instead attempted to remove the panel from which the material had emerged. His features were set in absolute concentration.

For a few moments Young paced back and forth in front of the shield, not wanting to distract either Rush or McKay.

The panel Rush had been working on clattered to the deck plating.

"Power levels are spiking," Eli snapped.

As if he had expected Eli's pronouncement, Rush stepped back onto the base of the chair, most of his weight supported by his left forearm, which was now entirely immobilized. His body was bent in a painful looking arc, right arm drawn in against his chest, trying to avoid touching the chair.

"Aren't you supposed to be *cutting* power?" Young growled in McKay's direction.

"*Not helpful*, colonel," McKay snapped back.

Young turned back to Rush just in time to see another strap shoot out of the base of the chair. "*Left ankle*," he shouted at the scientist, and Rush slid his boot forward just in time to avoid being caught. Young moved as close to Rush as he could.

"When the shield collapses," he said, "You're going to have to stay absolutely still."

"*Obviously*," Rush said through clenched teeth, "but I can't hold this position forever."

"Give McKay a chance," Young replied.

The shield flared and stabilized a few inches from the base of the chair.

Rush held steady.

"Hang in there," Young said. He turned back to McKay and Eli. McKay's mouth was set in a grim line. He looked up as Young approached.

"The ship is fighting me," McKay said quietly before Young could speak. "This isn't a protective network of interlocking algorithms preventing manipulation of the chair. This is a full-blown *AI* embedded within Destiny's CPU. Even if I *could* dismantle it, which I *doubt*, I can't predict what the consequences of that would be for the ship as a whole."

"We always suspected that something like this might lie at the heart of the mainframe," Eli said, equally quietly.

"So you can't get him out," Young said.

"No." McKay whispered. "Not a chance."

Young looked at Eli, who shook his head.

"But," McKay said, "he may be able to get *himself* out, once he actually sits in the chair. If it," the scientist paused, waving a hand vaguely, "you know. Doesn't kill him."

"Okay," Young said, forcing a strength into his voice that he didn't feel. "Keep learning what you can."

He walked back over to the chair.

Rush turned his head to look at Young.

Young wasn't sure what to say. He swallowed.

Rush gave him that superior smile—the one Young had always hated.

"I'm never going to let you live this down, Rodney," Rush raised his voice and looked briefly over at McKay before straightening slightly and dropping purposefully into the chair.

The restraints closed immediately with an ominous clang.

The neural interface bolts did not engage.

Young glanced back over his shoulder, locking eyes with Eli who shrugged at him nervously before looking back down at the monitor in front of him.

"This is new," Rush murmured, watching as a panel emerged from the side of the chair near his left shoulder and projected a grid of blue-white light over his neck and the side of his head.

"Eli?" Rush asked, only a slight tick at the corner of his mouth betraying any anxiety.



"It's scanning you," Eli responded quickly. "It just ID'd you as—not Ancient. Hopefully it's not pissed about that. We're getting your vitals, and what looks like some kind of biochemical analysis."

"That can't be right," McKay said from beside Eli.

Rush's eyes flicked to Young, and then back toward the device that was scanning him.

Young had to admit that, although the military personnel often accused the scientist of cowardly self-interest, the man certainly had the capacity for equanimity under pressure.

"Eli?" Rush asked again.

"Um, so actually I think it's not so much analyzing something biochemically as performing an organic synthesis?"

"I do *not* like the sound of *that*," Young said.

"For what purpose?" Rush cut across Young impatiently.

"Not sure, but I bet we're going to find out any minute here." McKay's eyes were glued to the screen.

With a sudden hiss, the panel near Rush's shoulder opened and a hydraulically powered projectile launched itself at the side of the scientist's neck, just above his clavicle, carrying thin tubing behind it. Rush flinched, biting his lip, but didn't make a sound.

Young grimaced.

"Rush?" Eli asked uncertainly.

"Yes yes," Rush said, squeezing his eyes shut. "I'm fine."

"You're getting some kind of salt solution right now," Eli said.

"Normal saline, actually," McKay corrected. "Hopefully it's not a million years old and contaminated with Ancient bacteria."

"Ugh," Eli said.

Rush eyed the pair of them incredulously.

"Rush," Young said quietly. "We'll get you out of there."

"I find your platitudes infinitely reassuring. By all means, continue."

"I'm serious," Young said.

"I'm aware," Rush said dryly.

Young doubted that Rush noticed when the fluid in the tubing changed from clear to a pale phosphorescent green, but the scientist's eyelids seemed to grow heavier.

"Rush," Eli said sharply.

"Eli," Rush answered, his diction losing some of its precision.

"You're getting the synthesized compound now." Eli rounded the monitor bank to stand next to Young. "How do you feel?"

"Tired," Rush slurred, his eyelids flickering.

"Hey," Eli said, waving his hands, trying to catch Rush's attention. "Hey, you need to stay awake. *Rush.*"

No response.

"I'm reading delta waves on the monitors," McKay called out. "He's out cold."

The sudden crack of the neural interface bolts engaging caused Young to jump.

Beside him, Eli jerked back a few feet involuntarily, and Young reached out to steady him, a hand on his shoulder. Eli pulled away almost immediately, rejoining McKay behind the consoles.

"What have we got?" Young asked the pair of them.

Eli pressed a series of buttons and projected a display into midair. "We've got his vitals, which appear to be stable," McKay said, gesturing across the display from left to right. "We've got something that seems like the equivalent of an EEG, which is showing delta waves, and we've got sympathetic activation, which I'm assuming translates to a rough gauge of pain and or panic. He just dropped to nothing, probably as a result of whatever he was injected with."

Young grabbed his radio. "TJ, this is Young. Can you get up to the chair room?"

"Be right there," she responded quickly.

"Bring your kit," he added.

"Of course," she said.

Young rubbed his jaw, looking up at the displays. He found it odd that the ship had drugged Rush before activating the neural interface. "Any idea what Destiny wants with him?" Young asked, glancing over at the other two.

"Not clear," McKay murmured, "although, another readout just popped up. Let's see—"

Young stepped in to peer over McKay's shoulder.

"Ah," McKay said after a few minutes. "I think this is a representation of the Ancient genetic code." He pointed to a rapidly progressing list of characters running across the top of the display. "And this is Rush's." He pointed to a second series progressing across the bottom.

"It's comparing them," Eli said quietly. "Maybe it's trying to learn about us?"

"Maybe." McKay frowned. "But from the limited briefing I got, it seemed like it trapped him *specifically*."

As they watched, the characters scrolling across the screen came to a halt, and a new window opened. It was uncomplicated, displaying what looked like a single progress bar.

"What does that say?" Young asked, pointing to the only words on the screen.

Eli sighed and looked down.

"Percent complete." It was McKay who answered him. "I think it's planning to modify him. On a genetic level."

"*Damn* it."

## Chapter Four

Young perched on a stool in the neural interface room behind the main console, his good leg hooked around one of the metal rungs. TJ stood next to him, her eyes on the glowing displays projected in midair. Eli and McKay-as-Volker murmured over a laptop, going through a newly unlocked portion of the central mainframe. Greer was posted just inside the sealed door, his rifle held loosely in his hands, his eyes rarely leaving Rush. The five of them had been there for just over six hours by Young's count.

"Colonel," TJ said softly, catching his attention. "His vitals still look stable. Permission to grab some dinner for everyone from the mess?"

"Hang on, TJ." Young turned toward Greer, motioning with his head for the sergeant to join them. The three of them approached Eli and McKay.

"How's it looking?" Young asked.

"Genetic modification is eighty-five percent complete." McKay grimaced and rubbed his jaw. "We've got about an hour left before it's done with—well, whatever it's doing."

"Okay." Young's voice was clipped, and he saw TJ give him a startled glance out of the corner of his eye. "Here's what's going to happen." He crossed his arms. "By now, the entire ship knows that Rush is back in the chair. They do not, however, know about this." He pointed at the progress bar that was tracking the extent of the genetic changes. "It's going to stay that way. At least for now."

Greer and TJ responded with quick nods—that was all he needed from them.

"More secrets," Eli said. "Good times."

Young cocked his head, and Eli nodded wearily in response.

McKay didn't meet his eyes.

"McKay," he said. The other man's name was both a question and a warning.

"Look," the scientist said, his shoulders hunched. "This isn't really something I can easily leave out of a report, you know? I mean, what with the umm, shall we say 'aggressive' technology? The dubiously safe genetic transformation of a human into an *Ancient*? A 'partial-Ancient' I grant you and, true, they're physiologically similar to us but *still*—" McKay broke off as Young raised a hand, palm up to try and stem the verbal onslaught.

"I know John Sheppard," Young said quietly, "and from what he's told me, you're a man of your word, who has been known, on occasion, to circumvent the chain of command."

"I'm sure that's not all he's told you." McKay rolled his eyes. "But let's cut to the chase, shall we? I'm going to need a damn good reason to keep this out of my report, and you know it."

"How about that on a mission like this one, undermining confidence in the chief scientist could lead to significant loss of morale and potentially cost lives."

It was true as far as it went, but Young was fairly certain that it wasn't going to fly with McKay.

"Nice delivery," McKay said, getting to his feet, "but I destroy people's credibility all the time. It's actually a specialty of mine."

"The recent attack on command headquarters by the Lucian Alliance demonstrates that there are significant intelligence leaks within the command hierarchy."

This was *also* true. Unfortunately, McKay didn't look at all swayed.

"Look," McKay said, pointing his finger directly in Young's face. "Nick Rush is an arrogant asshole. I don't really like him that much. I'm the first to admit it. But in the interest of arrogant assholes *everywhere*, I am not going to stand by and let you use this as an excuse to get rid of him, or whatever euphemism you want to use, because he happened to be unlucky enough to be both irritating and modified to interface with this ship." McKay paused to take a breath. "Don't think that the entire mess where he got swapped with Telford and then almost murdered went unnoticed even if it happened *billions* of lightyears away from Earth. Or Pegasus. My point is, that no one would ask any questions if he happened to be killed using the chair, but telling everyone he's been somehow modified and then barring him from access to critical systems, which he'll *always* find a way to circumvent because he's a *brat* when it comes to workarounds, and then ultimately executing him as a security risk is so much more *messy* than just killing him now. All of this," McKay said, his eyes sweeping over everyone in the room. "*All of this* is going into my report and is going to be dealt with in a civilized way. Not—however you people are doing things out here these days."

"Are you done?" Young asked him, letting just a hint of the irritation he was feeling seep into his tone.

"For now."

"I'm not going to kill him," Young began, crossing his arms.

"Do I look reassured?" McKay mirrored his gesture.

"Let me finish. There *are* morale concerns, which are considerable, and there *are* tactical concerns. There's also a third problem, which I would have preferred *not* to mention." He grimaced faintly, and swept his eyes over the other four. McKay's stance softened somewhat. "It goes without saying that this piece of information doesn't leave this room. I was informed earlier today by Colonel Telford that Homeworld Command is working on a way to replace people on Destiny using the communications *stones without* using the terminal. Meaning that they may be able to replace people against their will."

"What?" TJ gasped.

"That project was cancelled," McKay interrupted, shaking his head. "Carter pulled the plug on it as soon as she was placed in command of the RSM. Resupply Mission."

"According to Telford," Young said, "it's continued. Not only that, but they're *days* away from piloting it. On *Rush*."

"Shit," Greer said.

"Does he know?" Eli asked.

Young shook his head. "If they learn that that *this* is going on," Young motioned over his shoulder toward the chair at the center of the room, "they'll likely move up that timetable and extend the duration they keep him for. *If* they're planning on letting him come back, that is."

"Those stones have been nothing but trouble," McKay said, looking away. "God, I bet that's what Bill Lee has been working on for the past two months. But if Carter doesn't know about this—who could they possibly swap him—" McKay trailed off.

"I'll give you one guess," Young said wryly.

"Telford," McKay said. "There is something *wrong* with that guy."

Young ignored the comment. "Right now, we have to decide what to do about this mess," Young said, glancing over at the neural interface device where Rush still sat, immobilized.

"Okay," McKay said, "let's say I agree to this, at least for the time being. Once I'm back on Earth, I'm going to need some kind of evidence that this is the right way to proceed."

"Such as?" Young broke in.

"Such as boy wonder over here letting me know that Nick is still *alive* for one," McKay shot Young a dark look.

Young wasn't sure he could blame him for the sentiment.

"I'll look into this from my end," McKay continued. "If I find any evidence that your theory about the stones is correct, I'll do what I can. If I *don't*," McKay paused to give Young a hard look. "I'm going to reassess withholding information about the genetic changes."

"Fair enough," Young said. "I'll send Eli through on the stones to report to you in three or four days."

"Make it three."

Young nodded. "Get back to the SGC. There's nothing more you can do here."

"Says the colonel to the *astrophysicist*?"

"What I *mean* is," Young said, hearing an edge creep into his tone, "that you're just going to end up having to further redact your report. Eli can handle things from here on out, unless you think there's any chance of coming up with a way to reverse—" he waved a hand in the direction of the monitors, "whatever bullshit is happening here."

"Fine," McKay said. He turned to Eli, who was still seated at the control panel. "What a delightful workplace environment."

"Um," Eli said, glancing at Young and then back at McKay.

"Are you going to be able to bring them up to speed?" McKay asked.

"No problem," Eli said.

"Sergeant, escort Dr. McKay back to the communication stones," Young said, catching Greer's eye. "Then swing by the mess to grab some dinner for the four of us and report back here."

Greer and McKay left the room. Young turned to Eli. "You still figure we have an hour before anything happens?"

"Yeah," Eli nodded. "The rate of—modification hasn't changed so, barring any weirdness, that should be about right."

Young turned to TJ. "Take a break. Be back here in fifteen."

She nodded and left the room, her hair catching the corridor light as she passed through the doors.

Young and Eli sat in silence for a few moments before Eli couldn't take it any more.

"You know," he said, looking over at Young, "I can't figure out why this didn't happen to Dr. Franklin when he sat in the chair."

"Maybe it did," Young said darkly, feeling his guts twist at the mention of the other man.

"No." Eli was emphatic. "Definitely not. I'm not sure if McKay and I made this clear, but the neural interface is not active right now. At least—not in the way that we've seen it active before. It's not dumping any information into his brain."

"What do you think that means?" Young asked.

Eli shrugged and gave Young a wan smile. "I don't know. But, if I had to guess, I'd say it's *waiting*. It's waiting until he's changed."

"How extensive are these changes likely to be?"

"Very extensive. He's going to be over sixty percent Ancient."

"How does that compare to the gene therapy they're doing on Atlantis?"

"That's *one gene*," Eli said. "Here? It's going to be more like tens of thousands of genes."

They were both silent for a span of minutes.

"So—are we talking about something like what happened with Chloe?" Young asked, still trying to get a handle on the implications of the situation. "The person we know is going to start to disappear?"

"There's no way to tell what it's going to be like," Eli said, his eyes fixed on Rush.

"Personally, I'm hoping he gets nicer."

Young glanced at him obliquely. "You are not."

"I admit nothing," Eli said.

Greer walked back into the room with four bowls stacked on a tray. TJ was behind him with water, having met up with him somewhere along the way.

"Take a break, Eli," Young said. "Fifteen minutes."

"Eh, I'm good." Eli grabbed a bowl.

Young nodded. "Okay. Want to let us in on what you and McKay uncovered?"

"So," Eli said, downing a spoonful of protein mixture, "a new part of the database opened up when Rush sat in the chair this time. Or I guess, when he was, like, assaulted by the chair. Trapped. Kidnapped. Whatever. We got access to some info describing Destiny's CPU, which has always been—very protected from our inquisitive little programs and attempts at influencing systems. Destiny's always been—locked down in tiers. When we came, we had access to nothing. When Rush cracked the code and found the bridge, we got more. This time, we got some details about the



computational structure of the ship. *We've suspected* that Destiny had some kind of AI buried in its inner workings but now we can confirm that for sure. The adaptive algorithms that were locking Rush out of fixing the main weapon are part of a totally legit, computationally expensive artificial intelligence. It's designed to monitor and interact with the people on board the ship. Its purpose is likely to protect the ship in the event of some kind of incursion. We never triggered any kind of defensive measures from the AI. But we *have* interacted with it. I'm pretty sure it's the AI that sets the countdown clock and generally plots our course. This explains why it's always been *such* a pain to mess with a freaking *timer* that has an annoying and terrifying habit of stranding people on planets, not that I know that from personal experience or anything."

"Okay," Young said, "but why did it not respond when Rush cracked the code and took control of the ship? You would think that that kind of thing would get its attention, especially since he's not an Ancient," Young said.

"I'm not sure," Eli replied, swallowing another spoonful of protein mix. "But ah—I think that maybe we should consider the possibility that it *did* respond, and he just didn't mention it."

"Classic Rush," Greer murmured.

"Yeah," Eli said, "but to be fair, I'm not sure that revealing that invisible computer programs are talking to you is a smart plan, especially if you're already a little bit on the eccentric side."

"Continue," Young said, waving Eli on.

"Okay, so only by having an Ancient sit in the chair can you unlock access to every system on the ship and use Destiny the way it's meant to be used. I think that this was probably a safety mechanism, to some degree, like it would prevent the ship from falling into the wrong hands, but it's also integral to operating the ship efficiently."

"So why is this happening now?" TJ asked. "The ship could have done this at any time, and to anyone who sat in the chair. To Franklin, or Chloe. Or to Rush himself for that matter, last week."

Eli shrugged. "I can't tell you for sure, but it's possible that it tried with Franklin and *realized* it was unsuccessful. Or partially successful. It may have taken the ship a while to figure out that we're not actually Ancients."

"So—when it's done with the modifications, you think it's going to try an information dump?" Young asked.

"I don't know," Eli said, looking down at his protein mixture. "Maybe. It seems likely."

"What if it doesn't let him out?" TJ asked quietly. "It might be able to sustain him for quite some time."

Young hadn't even *considered* that possibility.

"Yes," Eli said firmly. "It's going to let him out. It's a very invasive—" he waved his spoon in a circle, searching for the right word. "*Scary* technological interface, but it's designed to work with a humanoid species and that makes me think there are limits to how far it's going to push him. Plus, it doesn't make any sense to invest so much effort to change him if it's just going to kill him via dehydration or—whatever."

"So you think the chair is being careful." Young stated.

"I think it's being *very* careful." Eli replied.

"That is creepy as *hell*," Greer added.

"Yeah," TJ agreed.

Young took a few bites of his protein mix, turning everything over in his mind. He agreed with Eli's assessment that the chair was unlikely to end up physically killing Rush. He was less clear on whether the person who came out of the chair would be the same person who had gone in.

They continued to eat in silence. When they were done, Greer resumed his place near the door. Eli returned to reading the newly unlocked database, while TJ kept a watchful eye on Rush's unchanging vitals. Young absently rubbed his injured knee, his eyes straying back and forth between the other three, avoiding the chair.

"Three minutes," Eli said quietly.

Young pushed himself off his stool. In his peripheral vision he saw Greer straighten at his post near the door. Young over moved to stand next to TJ.

"Any change?" he asked her.

"Not yet."

"Okay," Eli said. "It's done."

As soon as he said the words, the displays in front of them changed. Young could see variations in amplitude and frequency begin in nearly every parameter that was being modified.

"His heart rate is rising," TJ said quietly. "His pressure is falling."

"That isn't a good thing, I take it," Young said.

TJ glanced at him. "No," she said. "It's not a good thing."

"The neural interface is charging up," Eli called across to them. A few seconds went by and Young could hear the ascending mechanical hum they'd all come to associate with the device.

"The EEG is showing mixed frequencies with sawtooth bursts," TJ said, loud enough for Eli to overhear. "It's like he's in REM sleep."

"This is crazy," Eli said, his eyes still glued to his monitor.

"What's going on?" Young asked, limping over to stand next to Eli.

"So it's not doing an information dump," Eli said, finally looking up. "The transfer is going the other way. It's learning about *him* by inducing some kind of dream-like state. It's hard to tell from this—but if I had to guess, I'd say it's looking at his memories."

"Hopefully it's just *looking*," Young added darkly, "and not *taking*."

"Whatever it's doing, it's stressing him considerably," TJ commented. "He can't handle this for very long."

"How long are we talking about?" Young asked.

TJ crossed her arms. "His vitals are progressively deteriorating. No more than five minutes."

Young felt the abrupt, sickening sensation that came with dropping out of FTL.

The lights dimmed to near blackness.

The vibration of the deck plating under their feet ceased.

"Aw crap," Eli said, rapidly switching displays on his laptop. "We just lost power ship-wide. Or—mostly. We're okay in here, actually."

Young's radio crackled. "Colonel Young, this is Brody."

"Go ahead."

"We've got massive power failures all over Destiny, including life support, weapons, shields, sensors, and sublight engines. You name it, it's down."

"Damn it," Young hissed. He looked at Eli. "Do you think Rush is doing this?"

"I'm relatively sure he's not doing it *on purpose*, but there is no way that this is not related."

"We need sensors and weapons back, Eli," Young growled.

"Oh *really*?" Eli snapped, rounding on him, "well, we also need *life support* back. I can't fix *anything* if there's no power. I'm—"

The lights flared to full brightness and Young flinched, his hand coming to his eyes. At the same time he felt the reassuring buzz of the sublight engines engaging beneath the deck plating. A mechanical shriek echoed throughout the ship, tearing through a speaker system that Young hadn't known existed.

"What the hell is *that*?" Greer had to shout to be heard.

"I don't know," Eli yelled back. "Some kind of sound system? It's news to me, whatever it is."

Young's radio crackled. Brody's voice was barely audible over the noise. "We've got systems activating all over the ship. Everything is back. I don't even know what most of this stuff *is*."

TJ had her hands over her ears and Young followed suit. As he listened through the barrier of his hands, the sound began to fade into something more intelligible. He heard hints of voices talking over one another. As he listened, musical phrases faded in and out through the static.

Slowly the sound resolved into something recognizable.

Young dropped his hands.

"What *is* that?" Eli asked, finally.

For a long moment no one answered as they listened to the clear sound of a solitary piano.

"That's Rush," Greer said quietly, his thumbs hooked over his rifle strap as he looked at the ceiling, "doing his thing."

"His thing?" Young echoed.

"Look at this," Eli said over the music, pointing at the screen of his laptop. "We've got internal sensors, we've got an intercom system, we've got research labs, plus the *entire* ship database and mainframe are unlocked. Shields and weapons are at one hundred percent, the main weapon is back online and we've got backup power generators coming online all over the place. And that's just—the obvious stuff."

"So you're telling me that this is a good thing."

"Are you *kidding*? This is awesome."

Young's radio came to life again. "Colonel, we may have a problem." It was Park this time.

"Go ahead, Dr. Park."

"It's the FTL drive. It just started powering up."

"What about the four hour window?" Young asked.

"It's a conceptual limit, not a hardwired restriction. Plus, the cold restart may have upset Destiny's internal clock. If that drive powers up fully after being off for only a few minutes—well, best case scenario, we blow the drive. Worst case, we blow the ship."

Young looked over at Eli, who was shaking his head.

"Have you tried to manually override?"

"Yes. No effect. Any chance of getting Rush to help us out with this one? Is he still in the chair?" Park asked hopefully.

"He is. We can't communicate with him though."

"Eli?" Young asked, turning toward him. "How long do we have, can you tell?"

Eli grimaced. "No." He grabbed his radio. "Park, are you seeing what I'm seeing? This is not the normal startup sequence."

"Yeah, I read that."

Eli turned to Young. "I think this is Rush." He turned to his laptop. "I *hope* it's Rush. Otherwise we're in trouble."

"How long until we jump?" Young asked.

"Um, twenty seconds?"

The music overhead shut off.

"Eli," Young snapped.

"I don't know. I don't *know*."

The ship shuddered and Young cringed as he felt the sickening drop in his stomach that came with an FTL jump. Young looked around to see Greer, TJ, and Eli hunched uncomfortably, waiting for gravitational shear forces to rip through the ship's hull.

Nothing happened.

"Are we good?" Young asked Eli after a few long seconds.

"Yeah, I think we're good."

"Well shit," Greer added for good measure.

They breathed a collective sigh of relief. Young caught TJ's eye, and closed a hand over her shoulder. She smiled weakly back at him.

"How are we doing here?" Young asked, looking up at the screens TJ had been studying.

"His vitals have stabilized again," TJ murmured. "And his EEG is registering almost no activity. He's got extremely low amplitude waves. I'm not really sure what that signifies."

"It doesn't sound *good* though," Young commented.

"Not the best, no," TJ murmured back at him.

They all looked up as the diffuse golden force field surrounding the chair flickered and then dropped.

"Oh hey," Eli said, "this looks promising."

Young watched as the midair displays turned from a golden-orange to blue. A panel opened and a touch screen interface slid out of the back of the chair near Rush's left shoulder. Eli launched himself out of his seat and made a beeline for the panel. As he went by, Young grabbed the back of his shirt.

"Not so fast," Young said, pulling him back.

"Hey," Eli said, pulling away from him, "I don't think he's going to be able to get out of the chair on his own. Not this time. There wouldn't be an interface if we weren't supposed to *use* it."

"Okay," Young said. "We're going to *look*." He gave Eli's shoulder a gentle shake. "*Look* but not *touch*."

They walked forward cautiously.

The chair hummed quietly.

Young kept himself positioned slightly in front of Eli.

"Are you—getting anything out of this?" Young asked after they had studied the Ancient writing on the panel for a few minutes.

"It's another interface device," Eli said, from his position slightly behind Young. "My guess? It's going to let whomever touches it connect directly to Rush."

"Connect as in—"

"As in mentally."

"Ah."

"Fun times," Eli said. "I'm sure his brain is totally normal."

Young sighed. "Any clue what we have to do?"

"Not really. I can check the newly accessible portions of the database."

"All right." Young grabbed Eli's shoulder, steering him back away from the chair. He looked over at TJ. "His vitals are stable for now, right?"

She nodded. "For now," she echoed warningly. "We should try to get him out in the next few hours."

Young nodded. "Give it an hour, learn what you can." He turned to TJ. "I'll be back in twenty. Call me if anything changes."

He limped out into the corridor, heavily favoring his injured leg. He was on his way to the bridge when the sound of his own name stopped him.

"Everett."

The voice was familiar.

It was cutting.

It was both tonally flawless and contextually impossible.

He turned slowly and came face to face with something that looked out at him from behind the hazel eyes of his ex-wife.

Its hair was shining under the fluorescent lights. Its mouth was tight and unhappy. It watched him from beneath lowered brows.

"Emily," he responded scanning the corridor. "Although—I doubt that's who you really are."

It leaned against one of the bulkheads, its white shirt glaring under the lights.

"Perceptive," it admitted, "though, it's not exactly rocket science."

He crossed his arms.

He wished the ship had chosen someone else to impersonate so perfectly.

Anyone else.

"What, no appreciation for my adoption of human colloquialisms?" It quirked the right side of Emily's mouth, stealing her self-deprecating smile.

"You must be Destiny." Young kept his voice perfectly even.

"Your approximation is barely adequate," it said. "I'm the AI at the center of Destiny's mainframe."

He uncrossed his arms, coming to a casual parade rest, trying to appear unruffled, though he suspected it was a bit late for that. "So—are you going to tell me something useful? Such as how to get my chief scientist out of your god damned chair?"

It raised an eyebrow. "You already know how to get him out."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because, Everett," it said, managing to lace his name with Emily's most disdainful tone, "you're asking the wrong question."

He looked at her steadily.

"The question you should be asking," Destiny-as-Emily said, "is not *how* to pull him out, but *who* is going to do it."

"Does it matter?"

"Yes." It brushed Emily's shoulder-length hair out of its face.

Young tried to control his mounting irritation. "Can you stop being so damn cryptic?"

It looked away.

"It's complicated. I'm sure eventually Eli will explain it to you in excruciating detail. For now, suffice it to say that whoever pulls him out of that chair needs to be a match for him in terms of force of will."

"Force of *will*?" Young repeated skeptically.

"A handful of people on this ship are capable of separating his mind from Destiny," it said. "But only two people on this ship are capable of *keeping* them separate."

"So—this is going to be a long-term thing?" Young asked, eyebrows lifting.

"Don't assume that we share a common concept of time, Everett. We share—very little."

"Yeah," he said. "I get that. You seem more interested in *taking*."

It looked at him silently for a moment before speaking. "He will not leave this ship again."

"And the person who pulls him out of the chair?"

It gave him another inscrutable look, adopting Emily's most stoic expression.



"Okay," he said after a moment. "I'll play along. Who are the two?"

"Lieutenant Johansen and yourself."

"TJ?"

"Yes. She would be my choice."

"And why is *that*?" Young snapped.

"Many reasons, not the least of which is that she hasn't tried to kill the man in question," it replied.

He considered it for a moment, assessing TJ as a counterpoint to Rush. She was kind where he was calculating. She was straightforward where he was manipulative. She was an excellent soldier, whereas Rush was probably the most difficult individual he'd ever had under his command. TJ wouldn't hesitate if he asked her to do this. She wouldn't question him even for a second.

"What about Camile Wray?" he asked, "or even Eli?"

"Neither would succeed in grounding him against the pull of the ship. You would lose them both."

Young looked away from the AI, down the long corridor that spread out in front of him.

When he looked back, it was gone.

"That's *it*?" He glared at the spot Emily had occupied. "That's all I get?"

He stood for a moment, trying to shake the feeling of dread that had settled around his chest like a band. He believed without a doubt that the ship, or the AI, or *whatever* he had just spoken to, was correct in its assessment. He couldn't picture any member of Destiny's crew standing up to Rush on a regular basis except for himself. Rush would walk all over Eli—hell, he already did that on a regular basis. He'd tear through Camile Wray at her weak points, which were admittedly few, but present nevertheless. Rush and Greer were about as compatible as nitroglycerin and a hammer—Rush liable to go off at any second, and Greer endlessly pounding away.

No.

The AI was right.

It would be him or it would be TJ, which really wasn't a choice at all.

Except.

Except he knew which one of them Rush would choose.

It didn't matter. This wasn't Rush's choice to make. It was his.

He turned back the way he had come, pulling his radio off his belt. "Mr. Brody," he said, his voice betraying none of the turmoil he felt, "what's our status?"

"The FTL drive looks fine despite the abnormal startup," Brody responded. "We've got lights on all over the ship, with sealed off areas showing mild power drains. My guess is that we're going to find some interesting stuff behind closed doors."

"Let's keep that on hold for now," Young said, hoping that Park and Volker hadn't gone exploring already.

"Understood," Brody replied.

"Mr. Brody," Young said after a short pause. "I may be—unavailable for the next few hours. Should any emergencies arise, contact Lieutenant Scott."

The silence stretched a bit before Brody answered. "Understood, colonel."

Young limped back along the hallway, his knee burning after so many hours without rest. He nodded to Greer as he reentered the chair room. Nothing had changed since he had left. Rush was still perfectly motionless, eyes closed, the rise and fall of his chest just barely detectable. There was nothing of the almost demonic energy that made him so formidable whenever he and Young clashed.

Young was going to save his life.

Again.

And Rush was almost certainly going to hate him for it.

He turned to face Eli. "So, what have you found?"

"Um, I thought I had an hour?"

"What can I say? Things change."

"Meaning—" Eli said, letting the word trail off.

"Meaning I want to know what you've found," Young said.

"In fifteen minutes? More than I expected," Eli admitted, "but that's what you get when everything's accessible."

Young raised his eyebrows.

"Like I said before, the ship was *designed* to be handled this way. Someone sits in the chair, and it almost sounds like a permanent cognitive connection is created between this person and the ship. The problem is that within this connection, the ship is more

powerful than the individual it's linked to. They call this person—well, I guess something like 'sentinel' or 'watcher' would be the closest translation, but that sounds a little too 1990s TV, don't you think?"

"Eli."

"Okay, we'll just call this person 'Rush.' Anyway, so presumably Rush is now linked to the ship, and Destiny is sort of pulling on his mind. I'm not too clear on why that's the case. Maybe it's lonely? But it needs him to function optimally. So to counterbalance the pull of the ship, he has to have someone else pulling back, keeping him in his physical body. Or else he dies."

"He *dies*?" TJ echoed sharply.

"Well, not right away. But people aren't ships, obviously. They have to eat and sleep and stuff." Eli shrugged apologetically.

"So whoever volunteers for this job ends up mentally linked to *Rush*?" Greer asked. "*Permanently*?"

"I think so," Eli replied.

Greer whistled quietly. "Not gonna be a lot of takers on that one."

The four of them were silent for a moment.

"It's okay," Eli said, running a hand through his hair. "I'll do it."

"Are you *nuts*?" Greer asked.

Young shook his head. "No. No way."

"Look, *someone* has to, right?" Eli replied. "I mean we aren't just going to let him *die*." He looked up at Young for several seconds. "Are we." It wasn't a question.

"No." Young said shortly. "*I'm* going to do it."

They stared at him, eyes wide, mouths slightly open.

No one spoke for a good ten seconds.

"Oh *hells* no," Greer said. "Sir."

"*You*?" Eli asked incredulously. "That seems like probably the worst idea in the history of ideas."

"He's going to hate it," TJ murmured.

"He's going to hate it *anyway*," Young replied. "And as for why—has it occurred to any of you that even if we successfully manage to dial back to Earth, Rush is likely to be

unable to leave this ship? I'm sure whoever pulls him out of that chair runs the same risk. I can't ask that kind of sacrifice from anyone but myself. And I won't."

Eli looked away, clearly uncomfortable.

Greer and TJ watched him impassively.

"So let's do this," Young said to the three of them. "No point in waiting."

Eli cleared his throat. "So, presuming that you're successful, are we telling the rest of the crew about—" he waved his hand in the direction of the chair. "The mind-melding thing?"

Young shook his head. "Not yet. Let's see how this plays out."

They nodded at him.

Young turned to Eli. "Tell me what to do."

Eli shrugged. "I'm pretty sure you just walk over there and stick your hand on the panel."

"I was hoping for something a little more informative."

"Yeah, well weren't we all?" Eli shrugged. "It's not supposed to be difficult."

"If anything happens to me," Young said, looking at TJ and Greer, "you're to follow the orders of Lieutenant Scott."

They nodded at him. TJ took a breath, on the verge of saying something, but she stayed silent. After holding her gaze for a few seconds, Young turned to face the chair.

As he approached it, he studied the panel. It had the color and sheen of obsidian. It was perfectly sized for a human hand.

Or the hand of an Ancient.

For the last six hours, he had avoided looking at Rush. Even now, faced with the prospect of looking into the man's *mind*, he couldn't quite bring himself to do it. Instead, he reached out to lay a hand on the scientist's shoulder.

It was warm under his fingers.

But then, of course it would be.

"Sorry about this," he whispered, tightening his grip briefly before letting go.

Young positioned himself directly in front of the panel and pressed his hand down.

For a moment, he experienced only the sound of his own breathing and the familiar darkness of closed eyelids in a dim room.

And then—

His mind tore outward into an indefinable darkness, caught by forces it could not control and that seemed to exist unopposed, drawing him into a mental space with borders that were hidden if they existed at all. His thoughts raced through his own internal circuitry and he could feel them there and he could look into the darkness that was the software and the hardware of Destiny and he could recognize his own weak reflection hosted by something that was alien and dark and obscure.

It was easy to recognize Rush. The bright borders of his mind were the only edges definable in this expansive dark. The only boundaries that existed.

He waited.

He assessed.

When he could stand the obscurity no longer he pried at those borders in a mental rending comprised of pure instinct, until—

His eyes snapped open to the sound of releasing restraints. He staggered, his fingers closing on the arm of the chair.

"Are you all right?" TJ steadied him briefly, her hands on his shoulders, a solid presence at his back before stepping laterally to kneel down in front of Rush.

*Rush.*

There was a strange ache in his wrists that was difficult to ignore.

He pulled his hands away from the chair, struck by a sudden wave of revulsion for its formless mental darkness.

"Dr. Rush?" TJ said quietly. "Dr. Rush, can you—"

"TJ," Young said, mangling her name. "*Move.*"

Young leaned forward, grabbed Rush's arm and pulled it around his shoulders. He slid his own arm behind the scientist, lifting him bodily out of the chair. Greer was across from him in a moment and together they moved the scientist a few paces away.

The pain that shot up Young's wounded leg was both immediate and removed.

"Stop." TJ's voice was sharp, and cut through his increasing disorientation. "*Stop.* Put him down. He's bleeding."

They lowered Rush to the floor. TJ dropped into a crouch next to Young, tearing the worn fabric of Rush's shirt up to the elbow on both sides.

"Shit," Greer said.

A metal bolt of some kind had clearly passed through each of Rush's forearms beneath the restraints, cutting through at least muscle and soft tissue, if not bone, several inches above the wrists.

"How was *that* necessary?" Eli asked the air above them.

TJ was rapidly disinfecting and tightly bandaging the injuries with gauze.

Young watched her, wishing he could be *sure* that it was Rush who was injured, rather than himself. The echo of TJ's fingers over his forearms threatened his sense of self.

He tried to pull back and create some kind of mental space between himself and Rush. He got a spike of pain to his temples for the effort and Rush twitched faintly beneath TJ's hands.

The other man was barely conscious but the force of his mind was *already* drawing Young in.

"Doctor Rush?" TJ called, rubbing the scientist's sternum with her knuckles, watching for a reaction. Rush managed to open his eyes again, and Young could *feel* him try to focus on TJ.

"I think he's still pretty heavily drugged," Young told her when he had regained his equilibrium enough to speak normally.

"Doctor Rush, can you answer me?" TJ was leaning in, flashing her penlight in Rush's eyes.

Young flinched.

"Doctor Rush, I need you to talk to me if you can," TJ said again.

He *wanted* to talk to TJ—or—*Rush* wanted to—

With a mental crack that resembled nothing so much as a breaking dam, Rush began to speak.

Speaking *Ancient*.

As soon as he heard it, Young realized that the other man was *thinking* it as well.

"Oh *hell*," Young whispered, trying to shut out the alien images coming from Rush's mind that flipped through his waking vision like a transparent series of still frames.

"Uh oh," Greer murmured.

"Eli," Young said, "are you—getting any of this?"

"My spoken Ancient isn't that great," Eli said nervously, "and he's either slurring like crazy or speaking in dialect. He's also not making much sense, as far as I can tell."

"Humor us," Young growled, grabbing Rush's wrist and gently pinning it to the deck as the scientist made an attempt to pull away from TJ. "And cut it out," he snapped at the scientist after another bright, disordered streak of images that didn't belong to him.

TJ shot him a veiled look that clarified into something overtly concerned. "Are you all right?"

Young nodded.

"Okay," Eli said, kneeling down next to Young. "Um, something about taking the first road or ship, or possibly costal road, or possibly the first edge, or maybe arriving at the edge via—"

"Can you," Young said, making an effort to pitch his voice normally, "give us a streamlined sample of this, Eli?"

"And when the suffering arose from a sea of their own making they split against two edges. The first was a breaker of surf and the means by which time and its working might be defeated by infiltration. The second was to find a road that is of its own making." Eli looked up nervously. "I told you. Not making sense."

They all looked over at a distressed hiss from TJ, who had moved down to Rush's feet.

"This is bad," TJ said, locking eyes with Young.

"Yeah," Young said. He didn't have to look. He could *feel* it. "More bolts."

"Yup," she answered grimly. "Both feet." She was pulling off Rush's boots, which had clearly been ruined by their encounter with the chair. "This is going to be a nightmare."

Eli quietly asked Rush a question in Ancient, and to Young's surprise, he felt the scientist's mind grasp the meaning of the question and respond.

"I asked him if he felt any pain," Eli said, before Young could ask. "He said his knee hurts. But I'm guessing," Eli looked sideways at Young's cramped position. "That it's actually *your* knee that's hurting."

No one said anything for a moment, except for Rush, who continued his litany.

## Chapter Five

His wrists *really* fucking hurt.

Young sat on the edge of a gurney in Destiny's infirmary, elevating his injured leg and trying to maintain his mental equilibrium. He watched TJ from the corner of his eye as she reorganized her chemical shelf for the third time since he'd started paying attention a few hours previous. It was now well past midnight and although they had been together in the infirmary for the better part of the evening, they hadn't spoken much.

It was probably for the best, Young reflected, since at the moment he wasn't entirely confident in his ability to carry on a normal conversation that lasted more than three minutes.

He looked over at Rush, who was unconscious on the gurney across the way. The man hadn't so much as twitched for the past four or five hours, but Young could feel the constant pressure of his mind and a vague ache in his forearms and feet that would not recede. Physical distance and a few hours to adjust had helped him separate himself from the unconscious ebb and flow of the other man's mind, but he still didn't feel anywhere close to normal.

A cold knot had formed in his stomach at the thought of what was going to happen when the scientist woke up. He tried to avoid imagining worst-case scenarios, although that was his usual habit. He'd already come up with three or four that were gut-wrenchingly awful. The bottom line though, was that whatever connection he had formed with Rush was one *hell* of a lot stronger than anything he'd been prepared to imagine.

He couldn't believe that the connection was going to get any weaker when Rush regained consciousness.

That was the main reason, though there were others, that he didn't want TJ around when he and Rush had their initial conversation. Unfortunately, she was proving very difficult to get rid of. Young had been entirely unsuccessful so far in his attempts convince her to take a break for food or rest. He surmised that part of it had to do with the fact that it was difficult for her to gauge how stable Rush really was.

Young couldn't help but wonder if on some level, like McKay, she didn't fully trust him where the scientist was concerned.



He narrowed his eyes slightly as he watched her lining up the bottles of different medicinal plants she had collected.

As if she could feel his scrutiny she turned to look at him over her shoulder.

"I think that may be the most intensively organized pharmacy I've ever seen," Young said.

She looked down with a faint smile, embarrassed.

Before she could reply, Young plowed ahead. "TJ, you can't tell me you need to be here right now. Get some rest. That's an order. I'll stay with him."

She shook her head. "Something could go wrong," TJ argued, "and go wrong very quickly. We still don't know the full extent of what happened to him."

"So you're going to stay awake continuously?" Young asked, raising his eyebrows. "Go," he said. "I'll radio you if anything happens." His voice made it clear that this was not a request.

He could tell from her stance that she was still considering refusing his order, but after a few seconds of indecision she nodded.

"I'll be back on shift in four hours," she said, "and then *you're* going to get some rest."

"Sure."

"And you'll radio if anything happens." It wasn't a question.

"Of course."

She turned and made her way out of the infirmary. Young gave her a good ten minutes to make sure she wouldn't be stopping back in before he slowly eased his leg down off the gurney.

He closed the inner set of infirmary doors.

He walked back to stand next to Rush, crossing his arms.

He'd had hours to consider whether his planned course of action was wise.

He didn't see much point in agonizing over it further.

Young laid a hand on Rush's shoulder and shook him gently.

Rush's eyelids flickered.

Acting on instinct, Young gave him a cautious mental shove through the link they now shared. He braced one hand against the bed at the disorientation that came with the sensation of waking up when one was already awake.

"Hey," Young said, as Rush opened his eyes. "You're not going to have to relearn English, are you?"

"What?" Rush asked, his thoughts slamming against Young's mind in a wave of confusion as he brought a hand to his eyes to block out the overhead light.

Young's head ached in synchrony.

"Do you know where you are?" Young asked, trying a second opener that was a little more straightforward.

Rush stared at him.

Young stared back.

Within the span of something like two seconds the other man had snapped back to full alertness, recognized his surroundings, and realized that something was terribly wrong.

"Rush," he said, one hand extended to forestall something undefinable. "*Shit*. Just—"

He could barely hold himself together as the full force of Rush's intellect engaged.

It was no *wonder* the man was difficult to follow on a good day. Young had no idea what he was supposed to be taking from the rapid, nonlinear, *nonverbal* swirl of Rush's consciousness, he had no idea if *anything could* be taken from it by anyone except for Rush himself, but—

Panic though, *that*, he could understand.

"Just—" he tried again.

Rush launched himself off the gurney toward the infirmary doors. Young, mostly panicked *himself* and only vaguely possessed of the idea that it would be a bad idea for Rush to leave the infirmary, tackled the other man, bringing them both to the floor. Debilitating pain exploded in his feet as he got the full force Rush's sensations.

He tried to speak, but couldn't.

He tried to *think*, but couldn't.

He was so distracted that he didn't see Rush's right hook coming until it smashed into his left eye.

That seemed to focus them both.

"*Damn* it, Rush."

Young fell back, his hand coming up to his face.

Rush managed to twist out from under him and put several feet of space between them.

Of course, he couldn't go far.

They faced each other, both on the floor, breathing heavily. Young felt the pain from Rush's injuries receding somewhat, and his own knee and eye demanding his attention. Rush was calming down but it was still impossible for Young to follow the other man's thoughts.

A few long seconds ticked by.

"Hi," Young said finally, one hand still clapped to his face.

"What the *fuck*?" Rush snapped.

Young wasn't sure if that question was rhetorical, or if the scientist wanted an answer. If the other *man did* want an answer, then Young really had no idea what he was going to say. He decided not to say anything and instead raised both hands, palms open, hoping to either calm Rush down or ward him off. Maybe both.

"I can hear you *in my head*," Rush snapped.

Young found it extremely difficult to think.

"Yeah," he replied. "I know."

"You *know*?" Rush gave him an incredulous stare. "Is it just you? Or everyone?"

"Just me. I think."

Rush didn't respond, but Young could feel the scientist's thoughts coming together and then fracturing into multiple paths. The man was looking for any kind of answer from his own mind and finding—nothing.

"You have no idea what happened, do you?" Young asked, his voice and his thoughts quiet.

Rush looked away and shook his head once.

"What *do* you remember?" Young asked.

He didn't get an immediate answer but he got a stream of images from Rush, flashes of things he'd worked on, equations, dimly lit terminals—all of it non-linear. In a manner that was not at all transparent to Young, Rush settled on their breakfast conversation about the chair interface.

"That was sixteen hours ago." Young replied to the image before Rush had a chance to verbally answer him.

"Fantastic," Rush said, pressing his fingers to his temples. "So d'you care to fill me in, then?"

"You don't remember sitting in the chair?" Young asked, hoping to trigger a memory.

"No," Rush said shortly. "I'm fairly certain I wouldn't have volunteered for any such thing."

Young's lips quirked in a humorless smile. "You were trapped." He focused on his own memory of the event—of Rush behind a transparent golden field.

The other man's response was immediate, unexpected, and intolerably intense.

His mind tore into Young's, seizing on the memory and then flipping through the incident like a rolodex, leaving disorder in his wake. Rush's mind was every bit as powerful and destructive as Young had imagined it would be.

He was panicking.

Or Rush was.

They both were.

But if he didn't *do* something there wasn't going to be anything left of his *own* mind.

He pushed back with all his strength, trying to shut Rush out of his head.

They stayed locked like that for several seconds, the mental battle as brief and fierce as their physical one had been moments earlier. Finally, with an almost palpable sensation, Rush gave way, jerking back as if he had been slapped.

They faced each other again, breathing hard. For the time being, Young was alone with his thoughts.

"Stay the fuck out of my head," Young growled.

"Out of *your* head?" Rush repeated, as if the words were being torn from his throat.

"You want *me* to stay out of *your* head? I don't even know how the hell this *happened*, let alone how to keep my thoughts to myself."

Young forced himself to take several deep breaths.

Rush inched backward, away from Young, until he was leaning against the infirmary wall. He looked utterly miserable.

"Sorry," Young murmured.

"Don't be fucking *sorry*," Rush snapped. "I've been trying to block *you* out since I regained consciousness."

"Fair enough," Young replied. "You want me to *keep* blocking you out?"

"Yes," Rush hissed.

Deciding that this was as close to a truce they were likely to get, Young maintained the block and plowed ahead verbally. "I'm not sure how much you got from that—" he wasn't really sure how to describe Rush's mental assault, so he just waved his hand near his head.

"Very little," Rush said shortly. "Astonishingly, your thoughts are somewhat difficult for me to follow."

"Thanks," Young said wryly. "I think. Anyway, during the attempt to repair the main weapon, you got close to the central interface chair, and it trapped you behind a progressively shrinking force field. We couldn't get you out in time and you ended up having to sit in the chair. Any of this coming back to you?"

"Unfortunately, no," Rush said, rubbing his temples again. "I'm surprised I'm at all coherent, considering what happened to Dr. Franklin."

"Yeah," Young drew the word out cautiously. "So, your experience with the chair—well, it wasn't exactly the same." He paused, wondering how much to tell the other man. The benefit of holding anything back seemed to be pretty limited at this point.

"In what way?" Rush asked.

"Eli's theory is that it modified you so that you could interface better with Destiny."

"Modified?" Rush's tone was irritatingly controlled, given that the man had just been abducted by a piece of technology, drugged, injured, genetically modified, and then had regained consciousness to find himself with a direct mental line to arguably his least favorite person on Destiny with the possible exception of Volker. The other man was giving *nothing* away.

"As in genetically modified," Young answered.

"Ah," Rush said. "And how extensive are these—" he waved a hand, "modifications?"

"Sixty percent of your genome," Young said. "Give or take."

"Ah."

They were silent for a moment.

"That doesn't really explain hearing your thoughts," Rush said, "unless telepathy was an undisclosed Ancient skill."

"Right," Young said, suddenly uncomfortable. "Someone had to pull you out of the chair," he continued, leaving out the details of what he had learned from the ship itself. "That someone was me and this is the consequence." He made a sweeping gesture to take in the space between both of them.

Rush looked at him with narrowed eyes.

"Look," Young said, fighting against the build of an insidious headache. "If you don't believe me you can ask Eli. Tomorrow."

"I will," Rush said.

"I'd expect nothing less," Young replied.

They sat in silence for a few more moments before Young got up and walked the few paces over to Rush's side. He knelt down next to him.

"This is fucked up."

"I concur."

There wasn't much of a choice in the matter, so avoiding eye contact and clamping down as hard as he could on the block between their minds, Young gritted his teeth and pulled Rush off the floor. His knee barely held up under the strain of lifting what was, essentially, one hundred and fifty pounds of dead weight, but once he made it to a standing position he was able to walk the few steps required to deposit Rush back on his gurney.

They didn't look at each other.

"You need anything?" Young asked.

"No." Rush shook his head.

Young sighed and turned away. He filled a cup with water and grabbed an extra blanket from one of the empty gurneys. Returning, he dropped the blanket unceremoniously on the end of Rush's bed and put the water down on a nearby table, within the scientist's reach.

He crossed his arms.

"You're a lot of work," he said. "You know that, right?"

"It's been mentioned."

"I've got to call TJ." He pulled out his radio.

"Wait," Rush said quietly.

Young paused, eyebrows raised.

"Does she know about this—" he used two fingers to motion between his temple and Young.

"The link between us? Yes. She, Eli, and Greer know about the link and the genetic modifications. They've got orders to keep it under wraps for now."

Rush nodded tiredly. "Maybe we can just—leave it blocked."

"Maybe," Young said skeptically, "but I don't think now is a good time to experiment."

"Possibly not," Rush agreed, and Young took down the block.

Young spoke into his radio. "TJ, are you still awake?"

"Yeah." She responded almost immediately, but Young knew from experience that she had indeed been asleep.

Rush raised an eyebrow at him.

"What?" Young hissed, knowing that Rush had picked up on his previous relationship with TJ after only a few seconds, and that it was most definitely news to the other man.

Rush smirked at him.

"If you weren't in on *that* piece of gossip, you need more friends," Young growled.

Rush gave him a tired shrug as Young turned back to the radio.

"He's awake," he said shortly.

"I'll be right there," TJ replied.

Young crossed his arms, trying to think of nothing, staring out into TJ's well-organized pharmacy.

"It won't work," Rush said.

"What won't work?"

"Thinking of nothing. You can't think of nothing for a prolonged period. Focus on something innocuous."

"So you're being helpful now? That's a new one."

"Fuck off," Rush snapped, putting his own point into practice by concentrating on the pain in his forearms and feet with a vindictive intensity.

Young had to fight to maintain his own equilibrium as the pain Rush was feeling bored into his consciousness.

Young considered putting the block back in place, but figured that was very likely what Rush was trying to get him to do. He gritted his teeth and kept his shields down.

They waited in silence until TJ arrived.

She caught Young's eye as she opened the infirmary doors and he gave her a subtle nod to indicate that everything was under control. He caught the familiar scent of her hair as she passed him. He couldn't keep it from Rush.

"How are you feeling?" TJ asked the scientist.

"Fine."

"Bullshit," TJ replied, cocking her head to the side, tired enough that her professional veneer cracked slightly. Her word choice startled a faint smile from Young.

It startled the same expression from *Rush*.

Young was abruptly hit with a wave of confused familiarity as he felt Rush try to integrate his newly borrowed insight into TJ's body language.

Young stood, feeling pain tear through his injured leg.

Rush twitched in response.

"I've gotta get some sleep," he told them. "TJ, you're okay down here?"

She nodded. "I've got it covered."

Young made his way slowly back to his room, practicing maintaining his focus on what he was doing, rather than letting Rush's sensations or waves of indecipherable thought distract him. He had only moderate success, especially when TJ was changing the bandages on Rush's feet.

When he arrived back at his quarters, he was too exhausted to do anything other than lie down on his couch and close his eyes.

He woke to the sound of someone banging on his door. A glance at his watch showed that he hadn't been asleep for more than four hours. In the back of his mind he could sense Rush, like the man had always been there, dreaming about something that seemed to involve math and Ancient doorways.

"Damn it," he muttered.

Young pulled himself to his feet and opened the door to find Scott standing there with his fist raised, mid-knock.

"Sorry to wake you, sir," Scott said.



"What is it, lieutenant?"

"We dropped out of FTL about five minutes ago."

Young brought a hand up to massage his temples. "How did I miss that?"

"With respect, sir, you're exhausted."

"Anything coming up on sensors?"

"No other aircraft. We're orbiting a moon that—well. Eli says there's something special about its magnetic field that's distorting our sensor signature, so we might avoid attracting any drones. There's some sign of vegetation, so we thought we might take a look."

"I'll be right there," Young said.

"What about Rush?" Scott asked. "Should he—"

"He's off duty," Young replied.

"There's a rumor going around that he was hurt pretty bad."

"He was," Young said shortly, "but he'll be fine."

*Probably* he would be fine.

Scott nodded briefly.

"I'll be there in five," Young said.

He had time for a quick shave before heading down to the gate room. Eli was already there, yawning as he went over the kino footage from the new planet.

"How does it look?" Young asked, coming up behind him to peer over his shoulder.

"Awesome," Eli said, "plants everywhere, drones nowhere, creepy aliens *also* nowhere and a few hours on the clock."

Young nodded and turned to Scott. "Assemble a team," he ordered. "Check ins every twenty minutes."

"You want to bring TJ in on this?" Scott asked.

Young thought about a potentially supplemented pharmacy.

Then he thought about a potentially crashing chief scientist.

"No," he said to Scott. "She's needed here."

Young stayed long enough to see Scott, Greer, James, and Park go through the gate. Then, clapping Eli on the shoulder, with a brief, "call me if anything happens," he limped down the hallway toward the supply room.

On his way, he turned over the problem of Telford and the communication stones. In addition to the looming threat of involuntary replacement, he now had another significant problem. He was due to give his formal report on the recent attack in less than three hours and he suspected that using the stones might have significant repercussions for himself and for Rush.

Delivering his report in person was out of the question, but failure to deliver his report would only give Telford more ammunition in his campaign to replace Young and get an alternative team onto the ship.

Try though he might, he couldn't come up with a solution that would last more than three or four days.

Young nodded to Airman Dunning, who was on duty in front of the supply room as he hit the door controls.

He wound his way through stacks of crates until he found the box he wanted. He knew its precise location.

After all, he had packed it.

Spare uniforms, like spare anything else, were hard to come by. All their desert fatigues were in a common circulation, and most of what was set aside had belonged to crew members who had died. Or—

Who had been killed.

Young released the metal clamps on the lid of the crate. He reached inside and removed Riley's black outer jacket. He spread it over the surface of a nearby bin. Pulling out his pocket knife, he carefully cut the sergeant's name off the shoulder, leaving a neat black rectangle where the patch had been. Fishing through the other man's belongings without looking, his hand finally found what it was looking for. He pulled Riley's black, military issue boots out of the bottom of the crate.

He replaced the lid of the crate and left the room.

If Airman Dunning was curious about what he needed the boots and jacket for, he didn't show it.

Young made a brief detour to his quarters and picked up his electric razor on his way to the infirmary.

He limped through the infirmary doors a few minutes later to find TJ pouring over something displayed on her computer terminal.

"How's he doing?"

She looked up, dark shadows under her eyes. "He's okay," her voice was quiet. "Sleeping at the moment."

"I know," Young said quietly.

"Ah." She shifted in her seat. "You can tell?"

He nodded shortly and leaned against the edge of her desk. "What are we looking at, long term?" he asked.

"His wrists are going to be fine. His finger dexterity and sensation are all intact. The bolts didn't break any bones—they passed through the space between the radius and the ulna in his forearms," she said, fingering her own wrist. "The damage to his musculature and nerves seems to be minimal."

"What about the feet?"

"So that's a bit more complicated. He's got a broken metatarsal in each foot. The injuries aren't severe, but I don't think they're going to heal very well. He really should stay off them, but there's no way that's going to happen."

"No kidding." Young rubbed his jaw. "Talk to Eli, see if he can think of something. He's good with that kind of thing."

TJ nodded.

"What about the genetic changes?" Young asked.

"Too soon to tell," TJ said. "If Chloe's any indication, these sorts of things need some time to propagate through the body."

"So we wait," Young said quietly.

"We wait."

"In the meantime," he said, shifting the gear he was carrying and laying the bundle down on TJ's desk. "I found him some shoes and a shirt."

"Yeah, his boots are a lost cause," TJ said, smiling ruefully. "And his shirt was starting to look a little too bloodstained even before I tore the sleeves open. I think he just has that one outfit."

"Yeah, he and Eli were both working right up until the last minute. Neither of them had anything except their laptops."

"Figures," TJ said.

"Tell him he needs to shave," Young said, handing over the razor. "I cannot handle the beard."

"This is not going to be a thing," TJ said sternly.

"*What's* not going to be a thing?" he asked.

"You know what I mean. I'm not your go-between," TJ said.

"Just—don't tell him that I told you to tell him. Problem solved."

TJ bit down on a smile. "Isn't he going to find out anyway?"

"Not if I never think about it again," Young said dryly.

"Seriously," TJ said. "Colonel. We need to talk about this mental link."

"Later," Young said shortly. "I've got a lot on my plate at the moment."

TJ nodded. "Later," she said turning the word into a warning rather than an agreement.

Young nodded and turned to go.

"Stay off that knee," TJ called after him as he exited the infirmary.

Reflecting that there was only a small chance that he would be able to heed her advice, Young headed back to the gate room to check on the progress of the team on the planet.

Eli perched on a stool, backlit by the open gate as he monitored the away mission. He sat chin in hand, looking like he was about to fall asleep—a good sign in Young's book.

"How's it going?" Young asked him.

Eli jerked into alertness, startled. "Fine," he said, blinking quickly. "Boring."

"Boring is good," Young told him.

Young unclipped his radio from his belt.

"Sergeant Greer, this is Young, do you read?"

"Loud and clear, sir."

"Sergeant, I need you back here, if Scott can spare you."

"Understood," Greer replied.

"We're doing fine, colonel," Scott added. "We could use another kino sled."

"I'll have Eli send one through once Greer gets back," Young replied.

"Thanks. Scott out."

Behind him, Eli entered the commands to disengage the gate so that Greer could dial back in. The wormhole snapped off almost immediately.

"Kino sled?" Young said in Eli's direction.

"Yeah, yeah," he replied. "I'm on it." He slid off the stool. "You gonna be here?" The last word was converted into a yawn.

Young nodded.

"Be right back," Eli said, vanishing through the door.

Young didn't have to wait long for Greer to come through the gate.

"Sergeant," Young said in greeting as he came through.

"Colonel," Greer answered.

"I need a favor," Young said quietly, keeping his pose casual to let Greer know that this 'favor' was outside the normal chain of command.

"Name it," Greer said, dropping the 'sir' but not the formality of his own stance.

Young glanced at the door to the gate room.

"I want to be clear. This is not an order. You are free to refuse."

"Got it," Greer said, relaxing his posture subtly.

Young looked at his watch. "In about an hour, I'm due to make a report to Homeworld Command. I need you to go in my place."

"That doesn't sound like a favor," Greer said quietly, his eyes flicking to the open door.

"The favor comes in when I ask you to lie about the contents of the report."

"What do you want me to tell them?"

It wasn't an overt acceptance but Young could tell that Greer was leaning in that direction.

"They're going to want a report on the battle that happened a week ago. McKay may have informed them about the incident with Rush and the chair. I need you to downplay that as much as you can."

Greer stepped in and lowered his voice. "When they ask me why *you're* not delivering the report in person—"

Young nodded. "Tell them I'm in the infirmary. Tell them I was seriously injured by an energy surge during the repair of the chair."

The doors slid open with a mechanical hiss and Eli walked into the room, dragging a kino sled behind him. "Secret conference?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"No," Young said. "Just a regular conference."

"Sure," Eli said skeptically. "A really quiet, really close together, *regular* conference."

"Sergeant," Young said, motioning with his head for Greer to follow him out of the gate room.

"Bye guys," Eli called after them.

Young caught a hint of a smile in Greer's expression.

"He really keeps morale up around here, doesn't he?" Young asked.

"That he does, sir."

Young and Greer spent the next hour going over Young's report before the sergeant reported to the communications room. Young walked him halfway there, stopping off at the infirmary along the way, just in case it was Telford who came through to take Greer's place.

"Good luck," he wished Greer as they parted ways.

"Not gonna need it," Greer said.

"Haven't you learned *anything*, sergeant? Never say things like that."

Young watched the other man go, then acquiesced to TJ's insistence that she take a look at his knee, given that he was stuck in the infirmary anyway. She changed his bandages, remarking that the plasma burn was healing as well as could be expected, but that he still had a significant amount of soft tissue damage, which would take several weeks to fully resolve.

Fortunately it was *not* Telford who took Greer's place, but a junior scientist on Bill Lee's team. Young spent the next two hours monitoring the progress on the planet via radio, and trying to neither watch Rush sleep nor pay attention to his dreams, most of which were a mercifully obscure mixture of math and Ancient. He found that he was getting progressively better at functioning with Rush's consciousness churning in the background of his mind. Asleep, the other man had less capacity to derail Young's focus.

The situation was far from ideal but it certainly could have been worse.

Greer reported back a few hours later without much new information, other than the fact that Telford had been visibly annoyed by Young's failure to show up for the briefing. Young spent the rest of the day monitoring the progress of the team on the moon. By early afternoon everyone was back on board and the ship jumped to FTL with an expanded food supply.

The remainder of the day passed quietly. Around fifteen hundred hours he'd given the okay to start a preliminary exploration of the newly accessible parts of the ship. It was supposed to be a cataloguing mission, but Young was suspicious that it was going to *stay* a cataloguing mission. He hadn't yet been successful in beating the "look-don't-touch" mantra into his people. Most of Destiny's crew was made up of civilian scientists, and Young supposed that he was lucky to get the amount of cooperation he did.

But, maybe that wasn't saying much, seeing as they had staged a mutiny about six weeks into the mission.

He blamed Rush for that.

Mostly.

Volker and Brody had uncovered some intriguing looking machinery in several previously locked rooms. So far they hadn't found anything unambiguously useful other than several additional power generators that were running at only a fraction of their maximal capacity. According to Brody, there was some chance that the backup generators would be enough to amplify the power channeled to the gate and allow them to reach Earth.

Young wasn't holding his breath.

Rush woke up around nineteen hundred hours.

Young managed to do a pretty passable job of filtering out sensations and thoughts that occasionally leaked through their link. Unfortunately, any time Rush got to his feet for more than a few seconds the tenuous unconscious filter he'd developed held up about as well as a leaf in a tornado. He had to spend half an hour working on holding a partial block in place so that he didn't hit the damn deck every time Rush decided it would be a good idea to try standing up.

Rush also made intermittent attempts to block *him* out, but as far as Young could tell, the scientist was having a much more difficult time of it. Rush was expending a great

deal more mental energy than Young and his attempts at holding any kind of block were exhausting and ineffective.

Young wasn't sure what to make of that.

Rush was pretty pissed about it; that much was clear.

It wasn't until Young finally made it back to his quarters to get some rest around twenty-three hundred hours that he realized he hadn't actually checked in on Rush in person at any point during the day. Whether that was because he constantly was receiving a vague sense of the man's wellbeing, or because he subconsciously wanted to avoid the scientist, he wasn't sure.

Nor was he inclined to contemplate that distinction at length.

He sat down on the edge of his bed, shut his eyes, and concentrated on his link with Rush, trying to get a sense of what the other man was doing.

With an almost physical snap, he could suddenly feel the slight heat of a laptop against his hands. He could smell something like crushed grass that came from TJ's small pharmacy and in front of him he could see lines of code as he attempted to model the frequency changes in Destiny's shield harmonics.

Rush stopped typing.

//?//

Young had startled him.

//Sorry.// He replied automatically to Rush's wave of confusion.

//Colonel *Young*?// Rush's mental projection sounded exactly like his actual voice.

//Were you expecting someone else?//

The other man didn't reply verbally, but sent back a wave of pure irritation.

"Hello?" Young noticed for the first time that Eli was sitting next to Rush. "Earth to Rush. I'm waiting for those numbers."

"Give me a minute."

//Can I *help* you?// Rush seethed at Young.

//I just wanted to make sure you were all right.//

"You're not even typing," Eli complained.

//Then why don't you stop by? Like a normal person?//

//This is easier.//



//It's also an invasion of privacy.//

//Stop being so dramatic.//

//Next time I'll drop in on you, and see how *you* like it.// Irritation was rapidly transforming into anger.

"Hey man, seriously? You're kind of freaking me out here," Eli commented.

"Eli," Rush snapped, causing the young man to jump. "I said *give me a minute*."

//Get out.// There was a hysterical edge to Rush's anger and, underneath it, a glimpse of something deeper—something vast and full of despair.

Young got out, slamming a block into place between them. He immediately lost the mental picture of the infirmary and the sight of Eli's concerned expression.

He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, and stared at the floor of his quarters.

The entire exchange had left him with a bad feeling that centered on the concern that Rush *still* didn't seem to have the capacity to block Young out, even under clear duress.

It didn't make sense.

Of the two of them, Rush seemed to have the more willful personality. If anything, Young would have predicted that Rush would be running roughshod all over him by this point.

It took him quite some time to fall asleep.

At oh four hundred his radio went off, dragging him up from the depths of a dream he didn't want to remember. He fumbled for the device in the semi-darkness, hands knocking objects to the floor before his fingers finally closed around it.

"Young here."

"Colonel, it's TJ."

"Go ahead."

"We have a problem."

"Rush?"

"Yes. He's missing."

## Chapter Six

"Missing?" Young echoed TJ's pronouncement, already scanning the room for his jacket in the faint glow of blurred starlight. "How can he be *missing*? The man can't even walk."

"I know." She sounded unsettled. "I don't understand it. He was sleeping. I stepped out of the infirmary for a few hours to get some rest, since he's been stable since he came out of the chair. When I got back, he was gone."

"Give me a minute," Young said.

He tossed the radio onto his bedside table as he pulled on his uniform, contemplating his options.

There was an easy way find Rush—he could simply lower the block he was maintaining between the other man's mind and his own. He had done the same thing only a few hours ago, however and—

Well. It could have gone better.

"Lot of work," he muttered as he shrugged into his jacket. "A *lot* of work."

In the long term, they were going to have to figure out how to live with this.

In the short term, he was going to have to *find* the guy before he did anything particularly ridiculous.

In the immediate moment, whether or not it was ethically defensible to drop his block to look for Rush was something that took a backseat to expediency.

He picked up his radio and clipped it to his belt.

He stood for a moment in the dim light and then dropped the barrier between their minds.

The sight of a room askew snapped into his consciousness. Reflective surfaces gleamed under yellow lights but the perspective would not resolve into something that made sense until he realized that Rush was lying on the floor. The scientist was flat on his back, his feet hooked over some kind of metal ledge that looked like a conveyer belt in a mechanized production line.

The end of the tape measure that had been hooked over the edge of Rush's boot abruptly retracted, recoiling into its metal housing with enough force to send a jolt of pain up Rush's forearm.

//Is your *own* mind,// Rush snarled, //so uninteresting that you feel the need to periodically *invade mine*?//

//Rush,// Young began, making an attempt to stand his ground in the face of unveiled hostility.

//For the love of god, *what do you want*?//

Young winced as Rush let loose the full force of his temper, the strength of the emotion literally rocking him back on his heels, pushing him away from the other man's mind.

He staggered in the darkness of his quarters, catching himself on the wall before he fell.

He regained his equilibrium and came right back at Rush.

//What are you *doing*?// Young demanded.

//None of your business.//

//See, there are so many things wrong with that statement, I'm not sure where to start.//

//Fuck. Off.//

The pressure of Rush's anger against his mind faded to nothing like atmosphere venting to space.

He had only that much warning.

//Rush, don't—//

The other man's consciousness detonated.

He didn't understand what Rush was trying to do, he didn't understand what it was that was happening—he only understood what he could *feel*—a sense of tearing, a sense of energy directed outwards—not at him, but *away* from him as the scientist's back arched, his eyes clenching shut, his fingers curling painfully around the metal edges of the tape measure as every muscle contracted to mirror his outward psychic projection.

Resistance was instinctive, compulsory and painful.

Young felt himself fall to his knees. He felt the splitting sensation of popping stitches from very far away. He could not speak. He could not think. He could do nothing other than offer thoughtless opposition to a burst of energy that seemed like it would never end.

'*Force of will*,' the AI had said.

This could not continue.

But it did.

The darkness of his room and the yellow glow of the lights in an unexplored region of the ship blended together.

Rush was not breathing, *he* was not breathing.

When his muscles were shaking, when his vision had faded to gray, when the leg of his pants was warm with the blood that seeped steadily from his knee—

Rush ran out of energy.

Young felt the scientist collapse back against the floor, his muscles giving out all at once. Distantly, he could hear the metal-on-metal click of the tape measure slipping out of Rush's hand.

Young took a deep breath and collapsed sideways. His knee shrieked in protest as he shifted his position to lie on the cold deck plating.

In the back of his mind he could feel Rush gasping for breath on the floor of a distant room.

It was several minutes before Young had the energy to project anything at the other man.

//God *damn* it, Rush.//

The scientist didn't answer him.

//What the *hell* were you trying to do? Kill us *both*?//

No response.

//Answer me, damn it.//

In the back of his mind he could see light glinting off the tape measure.

"No," Rush whispered aloud, a stream of incomprehensible images flickering across his mind too fast for Young to catch. "I wasn't—"

//Well you damn near succeeded in taking us *both* out.//

"You shouldn't have stopped me."

//It's a *ship*, Rush. You're a *person*. You belong here.//

//With you.// There was an unmistakably bitter edge to the words.

//Look,// Young snapped. //I'm sorry, but that's the way it is.//

//Clearly.//

They were silent for a few moments. Young tried to focus on the pain in his knee, on the movements required to get off the floor and assess his injury.

//So,// Young said. //Let's try this again. What the *hell* are you doing in some uncharted area of the ship in the middle of the night?//

//It's personal.//

//You're in an unexplored and *unsecured* area of Destiny doing god knows what. That definitely doesn't qualify as personal time.//

//This is, essentially, a machine shop.//

//And what are you *doing* in the machine shop?// Young asked, finding it significantly more difficult to maintain a civility that encompassed his entire consciousness.

//I'm making something.//

//Are you really going to make me drag it out of you? *What* are you making, Rush?//

//A solution to a problem.// Rush turned his head, trying to look away from someone who was in his mind. //After a fashion.//

Young followed his gaze to a set of metal pieces laid out neatly on the floor next to the other man. They were constructed of a dull metallic alloy and looked sturdy. They were also clearly in the process of being fashioned into something resembling crutches.

Great.

He tried to focus on the pain in his knee, rather than the fact the he felt like an absolute ass.

//Okay,// he finally replied. //Good. Although, TJ and Eli were already working on something to help you get around.//

//I was not inclined to wait.//

//Yeah, that's not really your style.//

Rush turned onto his side and dragged a datapad within easy reach. //Now that you have satisfied yourself that I am engaged in neither sabotage nor subterfuge, might I suggest removing yourself from my mind?//

Young turned over onto his back, bringing both hands to his face.

He wondered if it was possible to strangle someone from a distance.

//How did you get here?// Young asked. //There. Wherever you are.//

//How do you think?//

//You couldn't have *walked*.// Even as he said it, he knew that was *exactly* what Rush must have done.

//Oh no?// Rush replied grimly, and Young got a brief mental image of an agonizing progress through empty corridors, hands painfully gripping metal molding for support.

//God *damn*, Rush. You couldn't have waited? Someone would have helped you. / would have helped you.//

//Yes, well. It's irrelevant now.//

Rush sat, pulling his datapad into his lap. He began to typing lines of code with an intense rapidity that Young was pretty certain was meant to be a defense against further conversation.

//Where are you?// Young asked, interrupting the coding. //I'm coming down there.//

Around Rush, the machinery in the room hummed to life.

//Don't bother. I'm nearly done.//

//Do we really have to fight about every god damned detail of our daily lives? Where *are* you?// Young repeated pointedly.

//You're a much more persistent person than first impression would suggest.// Rush snapped. With a flash of irritation, he sent Young a rough mental map of where he was.

Young pulled away from his mind almost immediately, focusing again on his dark and empty quarters.

He did not reinstitute the block.

"Colonel?" TJ's voice came through the radio, edged with uncertainty. "Colonel Young, please respond."

"Yeah, we're okay TJ. I know where he is. I'm going to get him now."

"Understood. Tell him I'm going to kick his ass."

"Will do."

Before leaving, he stopped to retie the gauze that was wrapped around his knee. He yanked it tight, hoping that it would be enough to stop the persistent ooze of blood that had made it all the way down soak the top of his sock.

As he limped through empty corridors he reflected that he needed to figure out a way to actually make it through the night without getting woken up by some emergency.

In a long, otherwise homogenous hallway, a door opened ahead and to his left, spilling yellow light into the dim blue of the corridor. From inside the room in question, he could hear the quiet, intermittent buzz of the Ancient equivalent of a welder.

Young passed through the doorway, wondering if it had been Rush or Destiny that had opened it for him.

Rush wasn't on the floor anymore, but was seated on a stool next to the machine belt, his feet propped up in front of him on the metal frame. He had piled the various metal pieces he had cut next to him on the conveyor, within easy reach.

He didn't look up when Young entered the room.

The electric razor had done wonders for his appearance—he looked much more like the scientist that Young remembered from the Icarus base. The wardrobe change was striking as well—he wasn't used to seeing the scientist in the black military uniform. The overall aesthetic, however, certainly didn't suggest the crispness that the Air Force prided itself on. Rush had, of course, left the jacket unfastened and the entire thing was just slightly too large, so the other man had cuffed the sleeves once, exposing a set of wrist braces that prevented him from further injuring his forearms.

Young's impression was that Rush looked considerably less intimidating than usual.

Rush looked up, switching the welder off and glaring at him as he picked up on Young's thoughts.

"Oh come on," Young said. "Do yourself a favor and give it a rest. It's four in the morning."

Rush resumed welding.

"You need help?" Young asked.

"No."

"Of course you don't," Young said, coming up to stand beside him, "but your hands are killing me." He reached over and flipped off the power source for the welder.

Rush shut his eyes and Young could feel him try to contain a surge of pique.

"So," Young said, trying to counter Rush's irritation with projected calm, "If you don't mind," he reached forward, carefully pulling the welder out of Rush's grip, "I'll finish this."

Incredible though he found it, he could feel Rush on the verge of arguing with him.

Young picked up the metal piece Rush had been working on and examined it, saying nothing.

The silence between them lengthened.

"Would you like one?" Rush asked.

"One what?"

Rush tipped his head towards the half finished crutches lying on the conveyer and then looked pointedly at Young's knee.

"I'm good," Young said with a wry half-smile as he braced the metal against the belt where Rush had propped his feet.

"Suit yourself. Were you aware that you're bleeding?" Rush's tone was full of disdain, but his thoughts were edged with something else.

"Yeah. I noticed. It'll stop."

"Not if you keep falling on it."

Young gave an amused snort as he flipped on the welder. "As apologies go, I've had better."

"I'm not apologizing."

"Yeah, but you want to," Young said.

"Not true." Rush watched him critically as he positioned the metal. "You know how to strike an arc?"

"I've done some welding in my day."

Rush shrugged. "Don't set yourself on fire."

"I'll do my best," Young said wryly.

Despite Rush's lack of confidence in his abilities, it didn't take long for him to get the feel of the Ancient device. Under the other man's direction he made relatively quick work of welding the pieces together. Rush's design was minimalist, consisting of two metal canes with a brace for both of his forearms to take some of the pressure off his injured wrists. When completed, the crutches very much fit his aesthetic.



Young finished testing the integrity of the welding job and then handed them over to Rush, who inspected them critically.

"Time to give it a go, I suppose," Rush said, after he was satisfied they weren't going to immediately fall apart.

"Be my guest," Young replied.

Rush reached over with one crutch and adroitly flipped off the power source for the welder.

"Oh god," Young said, rubbing his jaw.

Rush raised a questioning eyebrow at him.

"You're going to be a menace on those things, aren't you?"

"It's possible," Rush said, easing his weight onto his feet.

The pain was intense, boring into his mind with a horrible tearing sensation that turned his stomach.

"And you walked here *how*?" Young asked, incredulously.

Rush didn't reply. Instead he shifted some of his weight onto his wrists and was rewarded with a shock from both forearms.

"I don't think this is workable," Young said.

"Of course it's workable." Rush took a few pained steps and bent to pick up a small notebook, stuffing it into his back pocket. "There's no alternative."

"What about—"

"No. No kino sleds. This is better."

"How is *this* 'better'?"

"Block if you don't like it," Rush snapped, ignoring his question.

Young rolled his eyes and pulled back from the link as much as he could without *actually* blocking the other man out of his mind.

They made their way slowly out of the room. Behind them, the lights shut off and the door closed automatically.

Young glanced over at Rush. "Are *you* doing that?"

"Doing what?"

Young tipped his head back toward the door.

Rush paused and turned, frowning, as though he hadn't noticed the behavior of the ship until that moment.

"I don't know." Rush replied.

"How can you not know?" Young asked.

Rush shot him an irritated look. "I'm not doing it *consciously*."

They spent most of the walk back in silence. It took them a good fifteen minutes at the pace Rush was setting. After stopping twice, they finally drew within sight of the infirmary.

"TJ is exceptionally pissed at you, by the way," Young informed the other man.

"Unsurprising." Rush tried to manage a smirk, but it came out as more of a pained grimace.

TJ was waiting for them as they passed through the doors. She had her arms crossed over her chest and her eyebrows were elevated in a manner that emanated disapproval. The infirmary lights backlit her hair, making her hard to look at without squinting.

"Yes yes," Rush said in response to her scrutiny. "I'm aware."

"Good," TJ replied. She pointed at one of the gurneys.

Rush tipped his head in acknowledgement.

Young followed the other man across the floor and leaned against a bed opposite the one Rush had chosen.

"Jacket," TJ said shortly. She pulled a blood pressure cuff off a shelf and tore the velcro apart as she waited for Rush to remove his outer jacket. After watching him for several seconds she stepped forward and peeled his jacket off one shoulder, threading the cuff around his upper arm.

"Do you *mind*?" Rush asked.

"No talking," TJ said. "It interferes with the reading."

Young boosted himself carefully onto the gurney across from Rush, trying not to jar his knee as he watched TJ unlace Rush's boots, loosening them as much as possible before she began carefully easing them off.

Young clenched his jaw.

"How did you get these *on*?" TJ asked, her expression strained.

"In the conventional manner, I assure you," Rush said through gritted teeth.

"New crutches aside," she said, "you really shouldn't be walking yet."

Rush gave her a noncommittal shrug, and she looked up at him sharply.

"If you can't handle that, I would be happy to sedate you."

Rush shook his head. "Empty threat," he commented, avoiding eye contact with her. "It would be a waste of resources."

//I'd watch it if I were you, Young shot at Rush, as he saw TJ's shoulders stiffen.

//You're about ten words away from getting dropped like a rock.//

Rush glanced at him.

Young raised his eyebrows.

"It depends," TJ said, her voice deceptively mild, "on what you consider to be a *waste*. Preserving your ability to walk seems worth it to me."

"I'd authorize it," Young added dryly.

//Traitor.//

"I'll stay here for twenty-four hours," Rush said, "at which point I'll go back on shift."

"Forty-eight hours, plus you give me your word that you won't leave." TJ countered.

"Thirty hours."

"Thirty-six."

"With continuous access to a laptop."

"Done," TJ said.

Young shook his head. "Is this a usual thing for you guys?"

Rush narrowed his eyes and then looked at TJ. "I think Colonel Young reinjured his knee," he said mildly. "You might consider examining it."

//Now who's the traitor?// Young snapped.

"Colonel?" TJ looked at him uncertainly.

It occurred to him then that he and Rush were glaring at one another.

"Yeah," Young said, switching his focus back to where it *belonged*. "Sorry."

"Let's take a look," TJ said quietly.

Young eased his pant leg up over his knee. The gauze that he had retied was nearly soaked through, but it looked like he had successfully stopped the bleeding. Dried blood was crusted down his leg.

"God," TJ said, pulling out a set of scissors from her suture kit rather than trying to unknot the bloody gauze. "What did you do, fall on it?"

"Yeah." Young winced as she tore the material away from his skin. "Kinda."

She looked at the wound critically.

A good number of her careful stitches had ripped open when he'd landed on it.

"I'm going to have to redo this." She was already opening a bottle of Brody's double distilled ethanol. "This is going to sting." Without any more warning than that she was dousing the injury in alcohol. It took a second for the pain to register but once it did, it was all he could do to hold still.

Across from him, Rush flinched, making an abortive movement with both hands toward his own knee.

Young blocked the other man out of his mind.

The relief on the scientist's face was painful to witness.

Young looked away.

"You okay?" TJ asked.

"I'm good," Young said, his voice hoarse.

"So," TJ said, pausing to open one of the suture kits in her dwindling supply. "We need to talk about what happened. With the chair." She glanced quickly at Rush before locking eyes with Young. "You've been avoiding me. You both have."

"I can't imagine what it is you want to discuss," Rush said. "I remember very little."

TJ paused for a moment, measuring out a length of sterile suture thread. "Sorry," she murmured, looking at Young. "You just need a few—otherwise it's not going to close."

"Go for it," he said, gritting his teeth and wishing for the days when they'd still had lidocaine.

He shut his eyes at the first pass of the needle through his skin.

"Your minds," TJ said, looking at Young briefly before she made another pass with the suture, "are *linked*."

"Nominally," Rush replied. "Though it doesn't make much of a difference given that it's able to be blocked."

"You can block it?" There was no mistaking the relief in TJ's voice.

"Yup," Young said from between clenched teeth after another pass from the needle.

"We're blocking it right now," Rush said truthfully, "and why wouldn't we? You think I want to feel that?" He tipped his head towards Young's knee, where TJ was tying off the short row of new stitches.

Young had to admire the man.

He really did.

Rush hadn't technically *lied* to TJ, but his entire manner, down to the set of his shoulders and the tilt of his head gave the impression of someone entirely at ease. There was no indication anywhere in his demeanor that the mental connection he shared with Young was *so distressing* to him that less than an hour ago he had panicked and expended so much mental energy that they had *both* collapsed.

TJ was giving them both a skeptical look. "So what happens the next time one of you is seriously injured?"

"I think we already have the answer to that," Rush commented, raising his eyebrows. "I spent most of yesterday unconscious and Colonel Young suffered no ill effects."

TJ looked over at Young, and he shrugged.

"And what about the other way around?" she asked, as she rewrapped the bandages around Young's knee. "This link is supposed to be about stabilizing *you*, right? So if something happens to the colonel—"

"Yeah," Young interjected before Rush could hijack the conversation any further.

"That's—a little less clear."

"Not much can be done about it," Rush said.

"Hopefully we won't have to find out," TJ commented grimly, as she eased Young's pant leg down over her handiwork. "How about any other changes?" She asked Rush delicately after a momentary pause. "Do you feel any—different after the genetic modifications?"

Rush brought a hand up to the back of his neck, but the braces TJ had rigged up for him prevented him from bending his wrist to massage his shoulder.

"My night vision has gone to shite," he snapped, considering his mostly immobilized right hand in evident irritation. "Thanks for asking."

"Anything else?" TJ asked, clearly trying not to antagonize him further.

"No," Rush said, looking down. "But it's early."

"Yeah," TJ said quietly. "I know. Just—keep me in the loop."

Rush nodded without looking at her.

"All right," TJ said. "I think we could *all* use some sleep." She eyed Young critically.

"You look dead on your feet."

"Rough day," Young said quietly.

"Get out of here," TJ murmured with a faint smile. "Get some rest."

Young nodded once at Rush as he left.

The other man gave him a barely perceptible nod in return.

He had no idea if he should unblock their link or not and he was too tired to analyze the situation. He'd give them both a break for the time being—at least until the morning.

He barely remembered stumbling back into his room.

He didn't even make it to the bed before passing out from sheer exhaustion on his couch, fully clothed.

Some divine mercy allowed him to sleep uninterrupted until almost nine hundred hours, at which point his door chime woke him.

Young got to his feet with some difficulty, his knee nearly giving out as he rounded the edge of his table. The sudden jolt of pain caught Rush's attention. Young could feel the intense pressure of the other man's full concentration before Rush shifted his focus back to his laptop.

"Great," Young muttered.

He managed to pull himself together somewhat before hitting the door controls.

Eli was standing in the corridor.

"Hey," the young man greeted him. "You don't look so good."

"Long night," Young said shortly. "Want to come in?"

Without waiting for a response he turned and made his way back to his couch, sitting down with his feet stretched out in front of him on the low table. In the back of his

mind he could feel that Rush was peripherally aware that Eli had just shown up in his quarters, but seemed to be mostly thinking about using coupled nonlinear oscillators to modify Destiny's shield frequencies.

Young was a bit disturbed that he had that much insight into the problem.

He blocked Rush out of his mind.

He motioned vaguely for Eli to take a seat. "What's going on?"

"I'm supposed to report to McKay today," Eli said. "Using the stones? Anyway, I thought I'd check in before I go. See if there's anything in particular you wanted me to ask him."

"Right." Young rubbed his jaw, glad he had blocked Rush out. "We're going to need to find out everything we can about that communication device and whatever workaround they've designed to involuntarily swap people out, because when you get *back*," Young paused to make sure he had Eli's full attention, "your new assignment is going to be preventing Homeworld Command from gaining access to Destiny through illicit use of the stones."

Eli stared at him.

"You're kidding me, right? Because other than sounding *impossible*, that also sounds, oh, I don't know, kind of *mutinous*? But then again, I do have some experience with mutiny, so I guess I'm your guy."

Young gave Eli a pointed look.

"Anyway," Eli said. "I'll get what I can from McKay and then talk to Rush, see what—"

Young shook his head.

Eli looked at him.

"Let's leave Rush out of this one."

"Umm, *why*?"

"Rush doesn't know anything about this. The second he finds out that the SGC is capable of pulling him back to Earth, I'm pretty sure we both know what he's going to do."

Eli's eyes flicked away and back. "Destroy the terminal, you mean?"

"Cutting off our only means of communication with home."

"That might be—" Eli trailed off. "That might be the best solution."

"We're not doing that," Young said, "until we've explored all other options."

They were silent for a moment.

"He might not destroy it, you know," Eli said. "Plus, can't you like, *read his mind* now? You should be able to stop him."

"You'd think," Young said dryly. "Unfortunately, my track record for preventing him from doing things that he shouldn't is pretty bad. I'm at least zero for two already, if not more, and it's been what—something like forty-eight hours?"

Eli sighed. "Even by messing around with the device *at all* I might render it inoperable."

"It's a risk I'm willing to take."

"Somehow? I knew you were going to say that."

"So—" Young said.

"Yeah. I'll give it a shot."

"Good," Young said quietly.

Eli stood, tucking his laptop under one arm. He had taken a few steps toward the door before he turned to fix Young with a penetrating look. "One more thing," he said. "Rush is linked to Destiny in a very fundamental sense. It's possible that there may be consequences for the ship itself if they try to pull him out."

"Such as?"

"Power failures would be most likely, based on all the additional power that came online when he first synced with the ship."

"Give me a worst case scenario," Young said.

"Um, we're at FTL and we have a complete power failure. There are safeguards in Destiny's power grid that should kill the FTL drive before we lose shield integrity so we *probably* won't tear ourselves apart? But we'd be sitting ducks—no shields, no weapons, no life support. We'd be able to last half a day maybe. You get the idea."

"It's a risk I'm willing to take to keep communication lines open," Young said. "At least for now."

Eli nodded and crossed the floor. Before leaving, he paused again. This time, he did not look at Young. "Just so you know—all that worst-case scenario stuff? That assumes that Rush *survives* their attempt to pull him back. So, um, keep that in mind."

The door hissed shut as Eli left.



Young bent forward, burying his face in his hands.

He couldn't bring himself to completely sever ties with the SGC.

The blow to morale would be enormous.

They would have no access to technical expertise, to doctors, to encouragement, to a whole team of people focused on bringing them home. And for what? To protect *Rush*, who had brought them here in the first place?

"Why him?" Young whispered to the empty room. "Why did you have to pick *him*? You could have chosen anyone."

After a few moments he forced himself to his feet. He spent the next hour putting himself in order. He showered, shaved, and changed the bandage on his knee before making his way toward the mess to see if Becker might be persuaded to give him his ration after the official mealtime had ended.

He was just starting to somewhat back to his usual baseline when the ship dropped out of FTL.

Lowering the block between his mind and Rush's seemed as natural as turning his head to look for the man.

//What's going on?// he asked, feeling the click of keys under fingers that were not his own cease as Rush looked up.

//How should I know?// Rush snapped at him. //I don't have a direct line to Destiny's CPU in my *head*.//

Young rolled his eyes and pulled out his radio. "Young to bridge, what have we got?"

There was a short pause, and then Volker's voice replied, "you're not going to believe this, colonel, but we've got another planet that doesn't match the age of its parent star. No stargate in sight."

//Any signs of technology?// Rush prompted Young.

"Any signs of civilization?" Young asked. "Giant obelisks, that sort of thing?"

"That would be a yes," Volker responded.

"How much time on the clock?" Young asked.

//Almost eight hours,// Rush sent.

The other man's sense of anticipation seeped into Young's mind.

His heart was beating faster than normal.

"Seven hours, fifty minutes," Volker replied.

//How did you know that?// Young asked. //I thought you *didn't* have a direct line to Destiny's CPU in your head.//

Rush sent him mental wave of uneasy dismissal.

"Lieutenant Scott," Young said into the radio, "assemble a team and be ready to go in ten minutes."

//You should go,// Rush sent. Young could feel him tapping his fingers impatiently against the edge of his laptop.

//I'm not so sure that's a good idea.//

//You should go because I should go. But I can't.//

//Are you going to be okay if I leave the ship?//

//We're not going to have a better opportunity to test this. We're not under attack —//

//Yet.//

//Furthermore, the shuttle can *turn around* if something unanticipated happens. With a stargate, it's a binary choice. We have to know if we can separate.//

Young turned and started making his way toward the shuttle bay.

The man had a good point.

//Are you *sure* about this?//

//Just don't block me out. You'll know if anything happens.//

//Why do I feel like I'm going to regret this?//

//I can't imagine.// This time it was Rush who rolled his eyes.

## Chapter Seven

Young stepped out of the shuttle onto an alien world.

He was immediately hit by a wall of heat and light.

Although the sun was only about twenty-five degrees above the horizon, it was still oppressive, and tinted the landscape with a pale red glare. His borrowed sunglasses provided some protection, but he wished that he'd been able to find desert fatigues on short notice. The black material of his uniform was already heating up.

Young's eyes swept the desolate landscape as he absently rubbed each of his wrists in turn, trying to soothe away the ache that had taken up residence there. To the south and west the land rushed away in a vast rocky plain as far as the eye could see.

The wind had already coated his fatigues with a layer of fine red dust.

//There must be extremely high levels of iron oxide in the soil here.// He could feel Rush's attention caught by the color of the landscape. //I wonder if that's natural, or a byproduct of whatever technology was used to create the obelisk.//

//And that's significant, how?// Young sent back, looking uneasily at the spire that towered above them, a dark outline against the sun.

//I find it—interesting.//

The lack of irritation in the other man's reply was disconcerting.

//Are you okay?//

//Yes yes.// There was no question about it. Rush was splitting his attention. The other man was half-reclined on one of the infirmiry gurneys. His laptop was open next to him, but he wasn't looking at it.

//Aren't you supposed to be helping Brody monitor the long range sensors?// Young snapped. //We're probably still being pursued.//

//No gate,// Rush replied, as if that was an appropriate response.

"There's something not right here," Greer murmured as they formed up outside the shuttle doors. "I have a bad feeling."

"Ruins are always like that," Young said brusquely, lifting his pack. "Let's get going. Evans, take point. We're on the clock here, people."

They turned north, Young's eyes following the spire of the giant obelisk where it jutted up unnaturally from the landscape. The loose red soil flew up in silent, delicate clouds beneath their boots as they began to jog. His knee burned with each step.

//Rush, what the *hell* are you *doing*?// Young snapped, once he had settled into the painful rhythm of a double-timed march. //You're not *paying attention*.//

Young hated the idea of taking any part of his focus off his own surroundings, especially in an alien environment such as this one. But he didn't trust Rush up there, on his own, doing god knows what.

He pulled the infirmary into focus without much effort.

//What?// Rush snapped at him, his mental projection sharpening considerably.

//Monitor the long range sensors,// Young snapped back, //and pay attention, damn it.//

//I'm so glad that now you can give me orders *in my head*.//

Rush pressed a few keys to switch displays on his laptop.

"Nick."

A woman's voice came from Rush's left, and in the scientist's peripheral vision Young caught a flash of blonde hair and a silhouette that was not TJs.

"One moment," the other man murmured, his attention now split three ways.

Rush's focus narrowed down onto the sensors as Young tried to direct his attention toward the woman instead.

As they engaged in yet another instinctive mental struggle, something happened.

An onslaught of unfamiliar images exploded across Rush's consciousness and bled into his own. The stream of images flared, brief and bright and powerful, an assault of Ancient text and images—of cityscapes and oceanscapes that were nothing that had ever been seen on Earth.

The alien images faded into a sense of strain, pulling Rush's mind somewhere Young couldn't follow.

Somewhere dark.

Young automatically pulled *back*.

He felt a bolt of pain shoot through his skull as his sense of Rush began to fade.

Young stumbled.

"Sir?"

He tore down every barrier he could find between his mind and Rush's and, with an enormous effort, he was able to pull the other man back from wherever he had gone.

//What the hell was *that*?// he shot at Rush. //Are you all right?//

//Fine.// The scientist sounded dazed.

The distant ache in Young's hands and feet had faded to nothing. Rush's thoughts were a smear of unfocused lassitude bordered with euphoric halation.

//Hey,// Young snarled, //snap out of it. The ship is *doing something* to you.//

"Sir." He realized Greer had a hand closed around his elbow. "You okay?"

"I'm good, sergeant," Young said shortly. "My knee's acting up."

//Rush, *come on*. What just happened?//

//The ship was—communicating with me.//

"You sure? We can take it slower." Greer still hadn't let go of his arm.

//?//

"Yeah," Young said, clapping Greer on the shoulder. "I'm fine, sergeant."

//You didn't get any of that?// Rush asked, his tone still disturbingly vague.

//Any of *what*? Are you sure you're okay? You sound—not yourself.//

Rush sent him a vague sense of something that *maybe* was supposed to be reassurance.

Young did not find himself in anyway reassured.

He resumed the quick step of the double-time march. They had nearly reached the base of the obelisk.

//Tell the ship to *leave you alone*,// Young snapped at Rush.

//We're fine.// Rush sounded completely unconcerned.

//Who is this 'we,' you're talking about? And you're clearly *not* fine.//

Rush didn't answer.

Young grimaced, sweeping his gaze over the obelisk that towered above them, perched on the edge of a cliff. On their shuttle ride in, they had noted a collection of abandoned buildings scattered far below the lone monument. They had set down only half a klick away from the structure, which they could now tell was made of a

metal alloy with a dull red finish. It matched the hue of the landscape almost perfectly and he could see designs, possibly even *writing*, that extended all the way up to the apex.

It seemed like the kind of thing that would give them significant metaphorical bang for their metaphorical buck, but he did not like the sound of Rush's mental projection

//Rush. Talk to me. I'm serious. Something is wrong with you. I'm about to call off this mission.//

//Stop overreacting.// Rush's projection sharpened somewhat at that pronouncement. //I was monitoring the sensor array, and received—a suggestion regarding how to do so without a computer.//

//Destiny *talks* to you?//

At Young's words Rush's consciousness split into multiple nonlinear streams of thought. It was something that Young had noticed several times over the previous days. This time, however—

Young had felt a subtle jolt of *intent* as Rush's memories fractured.

Rush was shattering his own thoughts.

He was doing it *purposefully*, to keep information from Young by obfuscating what he was recalling.

Good god. He wasn't sure whether he felt horrified or impressed.

Rush, however, was far from the top of his game at the moment, so Young was able to pull out several meaningful images from the ensuing burst of chaotic, branching thoughts.

Gloria.

Dr. Franklin.

The bridge of Destiny.

Dr. Jackson.

Gloria again and again and again—the moment he cracked the code, on the bridge, in the control interface room, in the mess, in his quarters, in the infirmary—Gloria.

Gloria.

Young had never known her name.

He knew it now.

Destiny had been talking to Rush for a long time.

//It's gone beyond talking, at this point,// Rush said, capitulating to Young's insight with unguarded, unfocused agreement.

And finally, Young felt that he was beginning to understand.

Rush hadn't been pulled away because he was *talking* to Destiny, the way Young himself had confronted the ship in the form of his ex-wife a few days ago. They had been separated because, for a moment, Rush had *become* Destiny.

And now Young was having trouble fully reestablishing his link with the other man.

//Do *not*,// Young sent forcefully, //do that again.//

//Which part?// Rush asked, his tone still vague, but carrying a note of satisfaction.

//Stay out of the ship,// Young said.

//Relax,// Rush said into his mind. //You can reestablish your mental chokehold when you're done down there.//

//Don't be so dramatic.//

//Go fuck yourself,// Rush replied distantly.

"That's great," Young muttered under his breath, looking up at the obelisk. "That's just great."

//Are you going to be okay like this for—// Young checked his watch. //Six hours, presuming we don't get attacked?//

//Absolutely.//

//I don't know if I can pull you out again from down here.//

//I never asked you to do any such thing.//

Young grimaced as he felt Rush return to monitoring the long-range sensors.

Without a computer.

Thankfully there was no repeat of the alarming fade-out of Rush's mind that had happened earlier. Nevertheless, his sense of the other man dimmed significantly.

Young slowed his pace as they finally reached the base of the giant metal structure. His team followed his lead. They stood at its base for a moment, studying the spire.

"Fan out," he ordered, "and look sharp. Evans, James, get as much kino footage as you can of those inscriptions."

He wished that Eli were here, and not back on Earth reporting to McKay.

"Greer and Thomas, you're with me. Let's take a look around." Young glanced back over his shoulder at Evans, who was pulling a kino out of her pack. "Whatever you do, don't touch that thing."

Evans nodded as James fired off a crisp, "Yes sir."

"It's too quiet," Greer murmured next to him.

"I noticed," Young said. "No animals. Hardly any plant life."

"What the hell happened here?" Greer asked.

"Nothing good," Young replied, his eyes roving restlessly over the horizon line.

They formed up and made their way over to the edge of the cliff, their footsteps muffled by the thick layer of red dust that coated the entire landscape. Once they had reached the edge they were able to overlook the ruins of what had once been a small community. A handful of buildings, sloppily constructed of a dull gray metallic material, were clustered forlornly out away from the base of the cliff.

There was something familiar about them, but Young couldn't quite place what it was.

The structures were clearly abandoned, and had been for some time.

"Looks more like a base camp than a settlement," Greer observed. "Constructed out of some kind of ship, maybe, that crashed into this cliff?" He glanced over at Young.

"It would had to have been a pretty substantial ship," Young said. "There's a lot of metal down there." The buildings were small and low to the ground with hardly any space between them.

"Thomas, can you send a kino down this rock face?" Young asked.

The young man nodded shortly and unpacked one of the spheres and its corresponding remote from his pack. He sent it down over the cliff edge.

//Any thoughts, genius?// Young snapped in Rush's direction as he stared out over the dilapidated spread of metal structures far beneath them.

Rush was slow to respond, and Young could feel him tense as he made an effort to separate himself from the ship enough to answer verbally.

//They look familiar,// Rush said slowly, hardly any of his attention directed Young's way.

//Great. Thanks for that.//



Young and Greer looked over Thomas's shoulder as he directed the kino down the side of the cliff.

As they watched, the little machine soared over the red rock face until it reached a massive object made of dark matte metal, mostly buried in the rock face.

"Well shit," Greer said, as Thomas moved the kino out away from the rock face to get a better view. "That could definitely be a ship. But—" he trailed off as they studied the image displayed on the kino remote.

Young shivered slightly in the heat.

"The question is," Young finished for him, "how did a ship that massive drive itself so far into a solid wall of rock?"

//Rush,// he snapped. //Come on. You were the one who wanted to come down here so much. Pay attention for thirty seconds. I need your take on this.//

With a slight muscular tremor, Rush separated from Destiny. Young augmented his efforts, pulling on the other man's mind as much as possible. Finally, after several seconds, Young could sense Rush looking critically at the kino footage with more than ten percent of his attention.

//This is disturbing,// Rush said absently as his mind flowed over the problem like water, entertaining ideas and then discarding them just as quickly. //Greer is right. That's certainly a ship. But it didn't crash here. Not exactly.//

//What about all the wreckage that formed those structures?// Young asked.

//Removed later,// Rush said shortly. //From the inside, not the hull. Direct the camera toward the base of the cliff.//

"Thomas," Young said, holding out his hand to take the remote. The young man handed it over, and Young did as Rush suggested, sending the kino down toward the abandoned settlement and the detritus that surrounded it. As he inspected the piles of material, a loose sense of organization seemed to emerge. Sheets of metal were grouped together, as were what looked like a slightly foreign equivalent of electronic circuitry.

//They were sorting it,// Young commented to Rush.

//Yes,// Rush replied absently, his entire attention now focused on the footage.

Young panned slowly to the right across the different piles, identifying beamwork and semi-transparent surfaces that looked something like glass.

In the back of his mind, he could feel Rush's hands clench painfully on the sheets beneath him.

//What's wrong?//

//Keep panning.// Rush said tightly.

Young didn't question him.

Only a few seconds went by before Rush said, //There. Stop.//

Young examined the pile of material, consisting almost entirely of what looked to be solar cells of some kind.

As he looked at it, he felt a flood of wordless alarm from Rush, coupled with a surge of tailored information.

The metal alloy of the beamwork, the appearance of the viewscreens, the design of the circuitry had all combined to give the scientist the suspicion that they were looking at a ship of Ancient design. But now, Rush had positively identified part of the ship's FTL drive.

There was no question. The ship was Ancient in origin.

//A seed ship?// Young asked.

//The seed ships weren't manned. Or they weren't *supposed* to be.//

//So someone *else* took it apart?//

//Possibly, but whoever dismantled the thing knew what they were about. They were unquestionably familiar with the technology.//

Young's feeling of unease intensified, but he still didn't understand what had Rush so worked up.

//Something else is bothering you.//

//As *usual*,// Rush shot at him, anxiety coloring his mental projection, //you fail to identify the most critical question. The state of the wreckage below indicates that the ship did not *crash* into that cliff. The material displacement of such a massive vessel would have shattered the structural integrity of the rock face. Even if you didn't conceptualize it in such manner, you know it to be the case. It's what made you uneasy as soon as you saw it.//

Young grimaced.

//In addition, the viewscreens you can see at the base of the cliff aren't so much as *cracked*. Everything is in perfect condition. In addition, I'm sure you failed to notice

that there are no components of the ship's power supply or shields in amongst that material.//

//Can you calm down, please?// Young could feel his own heart racing in response to Rush's spiraling anxiety.

//"Don't tell me to fucking 'calm down'."// Now Rush was actually speaking out loud as well as projecting. // "The ship is embedded so far into that cliff that we weren't even able to identify its design until examining the removed material. There's only one way that I know of for it to get there, colonel."// Rush gave his title an instinctively venomous twist.

//And what is that?// Young asked with as much patience as he could muster.

// "A *phase* based technology."//

//?//

Rush looked up as TJ poked her head around the open doorway in the otherwise empty infirmary. They regarded each other silently for a moment until Rush looked away.

//I have *no* sympathy,// Young shot at him. //Just calm the hell down.//

"Hi," TJ said uncertainly.

"Hello," Rush replied, reaching up to rub the space between his eyebrows with his index and middle fingers.

"You okay?"

"Yes yes. Sorry."

"Talking to the colonel?"

"Yes," he looked away from her. "Ideally it wouldn't have been out loud."

"Well," she said quietly. "It'll come with practice."

"Stop being so nice," Rush said, without any of his usual snap. "It's irritating."

TJ rolled her eyes, but Young could tell she was fighting a smile as she ducked back around the doorframe.

//Phase technology?// Young asked, glad that TJ had stepped in and prevented Rush from losing his shit entirely.

Young's own track record in that department left quite a bit to be desired.

// $p = \hbar k$  and  $E = \hbar \omega$ , correct? So if one shifts the matter wave to be exactly ninety degrees out of phase with its surroundings, then they no longer interact and can occupy the same space at the same time.// With this, Rush sent him several graphs of what looked like sinusoidal waves shifting in position relative to each other.

// $\hbar$ ?// Young asked him incredulously.

//Look, if I can pick up on Tamara's body language, a *completely useless skill* by the way, is it too much to hope that you can pick up some physics?  $\hbar$  is the notation for Dirac's constant.//

//Stop wasting time,// Young snapped at him.

//Yes, you're right. Explaining this to *you* is *certainly* a waste of time.//

//So what are we talking about? Invisible enemies? Like what happened at Stargate Command with the Reetou something like five years back? How does that relate to the ship in the cliff?//

//It's almost certainly *how* the ship got there in the first place. Something either sent it out of phase and pulled it back into phase once it was inside the cliff or, more likely, the cliff, maybe even the entire planet briefly went out of phase relative to the ship. The ship flew through it, or was pulled in, and then was trapped when the planet went back in phase.//

//So we're potentially on a phase shifting planet?//

//Yes, and we should get out of here as soon as possible. Get James and Evans to take the shuttle and pick up those FTL parts while the three of you check the interior of the ship.//

//Last time I checked, *I* was in command around here. Not you.//

//Now who's wasting time?//

//The obelisk is a priority.//

//Yes well, it's also probably part of whatever technology it is that makes phase shifting possible. You had better hope to *god* that you haven't already triggered it.//

"James," Young spoke quietly into his radio, "Evans. Pack it up and head over to our position."

"Understood," came James' crisp reply.

"What are you thinking, sir?" Greer asked.

Young didn't reply for a moment, his eyes scanning the surface of the cliff. "In a minute, sergeant."

Young set down his pack, trying to estimate how much rope they had between them. The upper portion of the exposed ship was maybe fifty to seventy-five feet below their position at the cliff top, and the best entry point was maybe twenty-five feet below that. It was a long way down a very sheer cliff face.

When James and Evans had reached their position, Young motioned for them to gather around the viewer.

"Okay people," he said, "We're positioned on top of wreckage from a crashed vessel."

//Inaccurate,// Rush snapped from the back of his mind.

//Says the guy who lied about finding another Icarus planet.//

"It is most likely the wreckage of one of the Ancient seed ships." He paused, watching James' eyes widen. From slightly behind his left shoulder, Greer gave a low whistle.

"How do you know?" Evans asked.

Young zoomed on the metal below. "That's part of an FTL drive. This is our number one priority. We need those parts. James, Evans, Thomas, you're going back to the shuttle to salvage as much of the drive equipment as you can. Take anything else that looks useful, we'll sort it out later. Stay alert for anyone active down there. By all looks of things, they're long gone, but you never know."

They nodded at him.

"Greer and I are going to be rappelling down the cliff. I want to get a look at the interior of the ship."

"How did it get stuck there?" James asked with a note of unease in her voice.

"That's a question for Rush and Eli to answer later," Young replied. "Let's go, people."

The other three moved out, their footsteps muffled by the omnipresent dust.

"Got much climbing experience, sir?" Greer asked, uncertainly.

"Tons," Young said dryly. "Yourself?"

"Oh you know," Greer gave a half shrug. "Here and there."

"Great." Young started digging through his pack.

//You're going to have Greer belay you from the top?// Rush commented, still succeeding at holding his mind separate from the ship, //good luck with that.//

//Thanks,// Young said, rolling his eyes, //but we don't have a lot of options, as time is an issue. Unless you have a better idea?//

//This isn't really my area, though certain principles of mechanics do apply. Maximize the surface area over which force is distributed.//

//Wear a harness?//

//And use two lines, if you can, one that's anchored somewhere and one that Greer is belaying with. See? You *are* picking up some of my skill sets.//

//That's not a skill set. It's common sense, which is not a characteristic I usually associate with *you*.//

Rush shot him a wave of irritation.

"You have a knife with you?" Young asked Greer. "We should at least make harnesses."

Greer passed his knife over and Young started sawing through strips of line. It took about ten minutes to assemble two relatively rudimentary harnesses out of the line and carabineers they were carrying with them.

"Mind if I keep this?" Young asked Greer, holding up the knife. "Might come in handy down there."

"Be my guest." Greer tossed him the sheath, and Young clipped it to his belt.

A few minutes later, Young was standing with his back to the edge facing Greer, who had dug a shallow trench down into the soft dirt to brace his heels in. They had anchored one of the lines to a rocky projection twelve feet from the cliff's edge. Greer's harness was clipped to the anchor, and he was holding the other line. Both lines were attached to Young's harness.

"Ready?" Young asked Greer.

"As I'm going to be."

Young looked over his shoulder down at the base of the cliff. He could see the shuttle had landed and the other three members of the away team were loading it up.

It was a long way down.

//Pull your sleeves over your hands.// Rush's heart was beating as fast as Young's was. He was digging his hands into the gurney sheets again.

Young pulled on his jacket sleeves until he was able to cover the palms of his hands. It wouldn't work as well as gloves would have, but it would provide some protection. Greer copied his motion.

//Don't distract me,// Young ordered Rush.

//As though I need to be told.//

Young looked at Greer. The other man nodded to him.

He took a deep breath and stepped over the edge.

Young inched down, proceeding carefully, slowly playing out the line between his hands. He could feel slight shifts in pressure as Greer did the same. He tried to focus on the red rock immediately below his feet and not on the dizzying drop below him.

He realized that his concentration on the rock face was extraordinarily intense.

It occurred to him that this was certainly due to Rush's influence.

Maybe it was the other man's scientific training, or maybe it was simply the combined power of both their attentions, but Young had never experienced this level of focus. The sensitivity of his sensations was doubled and, though he had been climbing for almost five minutes, he had yet to feel any fatigue. His knee wasn't even bothering him.

Then, he felt his attention shatter as something distracted Rush.

Destiny shuddered.

The infirmary lights flickered and the hum of the engines increased in pitch.

With a sudden shock of alarm, Rush pulled away from Young's mind entirely.

Young slipped slightly as a bolt of pain sliced through his temples. He slid three or four feet before Greer caught him on the belay line.

//Rush?//

No answer.

"Damn it." Young was suddenly aware of the terrible burn of fatigue in his shoulders and arms.

The rock beneath him shuddered slightly.

His radio crackled.

"Something's happening." James's voice came over the radio. "Don't think you can see this, colonel, but the base of the obelisk just lit up."

"Shit." He looked up to see a violent swirl of clouds condensing rapidly in the upper atmosphere over their position. Lightning flared in bursts and fans. "*Shit.*"

He stepped down, increasing his pace, but he slipped again as his boot encountered a particularly smooth patch of rock. Greer caught him on the belay line once more.

Without warning, a towering column of white light shot out the top of the obelisk. It stayed cohesive all the way through the atmosphere, like a laser with a monstrous diameter. It was absolutely noiseless.

Like being hit with a wave while standing in the surf, Rush was back with him.

//Cut the belay line and tell Greer to run.//

//Why?// Young was already tightening his grip on the anchor line with his left hand and pulling out his knife.

//DO IT.//

The tension in the line made it easy to slice through. Young sheathed his knife and grabbed his radio. Above him, he saw Greer looking down at him.

"Run." Young snapped.

"I'm not leaving you here, sir."

"You move your ass! Get away from that thing. That's an *order*, sergeant!"

//Go,// Rush said.

Young went.

Rush grabbed his crutches and vaulted off his gurney. Their combined adrenaline was enough to for them both to brush aside the flare of pain as the scientist's feet hit the floor.

Young slid down another five feet. Another ten. The friction of the rope heated up the sleeves of his jacket.

"Hey, wait a minute!" Young heard TJ in the back of his mind as Rush cleared the infirmary doors. They shut and locked behind him.

The ground beneath Young trembled again and, with a sickening sensation deep in his chest, Young felt the tension on the line go slack.

He was falling.

From far away, he heard a woman's scream.

The rope, still attached to his harness, trailed above him like a long ribbon.



Everything he was getting from Destiny suddenly went dark as Rush tore into his mind, bringing them closer than they had ever been since the first time the scientist had tried it.

This time, Young let him in.

Rush twisted them in the air and slammed Young's hands into the cliff face. His fingers tore at the rocks, pulling at ledges, catching on small plants. Feet, knees, chest, they all pressed in, slowing his descent. One hand finally gripped a tiny ledge. Then the other.

The rope sailed down past him, swinging wildly from the back of his harness.

He looked for purchase against the rock with his feet, finding one foothold, then another. His breath was ragged in his throat.

They were together. So close they didn't have to talk. Young knew without asking that above him, the ground had shifted out of phase. Knew that that phase shift was what had severed the line. Knew that the affected field was going to advance until it had covered the planet.

Where Rush had come up with that information was immaterial at the present.

The radio crackled, loud in the quiet air.

"Hang on, sir, we're coming for you right now."

It was James. Young felt a surge of relief that was almost immediately killed by Rush. From their current position it would be a physical impossibility to get into the shuttle. They would have to climb down the last fifteen feet to stand on the upper edge of the trapped ship.

Rush looked out to their left and, seeing a promising looking hand-hold, shifted his weight to the right, and then lunged for it, a move substantially more risky than Young had been prepared for. For one heart stopping moment they were in free space and then they were slamming back into the rock, wedging their left hand into a crevice. Right hand joined left, and again feet found purchase.

They looked up and saw a line of distortion moving slowly down the face of the cliff.

This time the right hand was first, then left leg, and without much trouble they had descended two feet, then an easy four more. They kept going, knowing it would be hard to keep ahead of the wave. Behind them, they could hear the hum of the shuttle engines getting louder.

Six feet above the exposed hull of the ship the rock face was exceptionally smooth. As though the surface had liquefied where the ship had entered. With no alternative, they dropped straight down.

The shock of hitting the metal plating was too much for Young's knees and they buckled, pain shooting from his injury up to his spine. Shakily, they pulled hands underneath them, then feet. Absently Young noticed that blood was oozing out from beneath all of his fingernails. Rush pulled their gaze up.

The shuttle hovered in front of them.

"Sir!" James yelled to be heard over the dull roar of the shuttle's engines, her eyes wide, her face pale. "Sir,*now*!"

They looked back to see the edge of the visual distortion caused by the phase shift advancing rapidly toward their position. Young gathered his strength for one final push, and together they surged forward, taking two strides to the edge of the projecting metal before launching into free space.

They crashed into James, landing in a tangle of limbs. Thomas dragged them both back from the opening in the rear of the shuttle as Evans accelerated away from the cliff face.

Rush pulled back again, leaving Young with a momentary feeling of disorientation, like standing firm while watching the tide recede.

On Destiny, Young felt Rush open his eyes and pull himself off the floor where he had apparently fallen during the time he had been helping Young hang on to the cliff. He was alone, in a corridor near the FTL drive.

"Greer?" Young yelled to the rest of his team.

"Heading his way now, sir," Evans yelled back.

James had already unclipped the long length of rope that was still attached to Young's harness. Pushing herself to her feet she hooked the carabineer onto the doorframe of the shuttle and started winding the rest of the rope around her arm.

"I've got a visual on him," Evans yelled back. "It's going to be close." Young stepped up behind her shoulder to see Greer running flat out, staying maybe fifty feet ahead of the advancing wave.

"Ready?" Evans yelled back to James.

"Ready," she confirmed, finishing a knot that put a loop in the end of the rope. She started lowering it out of the open back of the shuttle.

Evans slowed to match Greer's speed, staying slightly ahead of him.

James gripped the doorframe and looking out of the back of the shuttle. "Slow down!" she yelled to Evans. "He's almost got it." Young grabbed the slack of the line that was piled on the floor behind James, motioning for Thomas to do the same.

"Now," James shouted to them as the line went tight. Young and Thomas started hauling the other man up as Evans slowly gained altitude. Young saw James suddenly drop to her knees, one arm anchored around a cargo strap, the other reaching out.

Greer's hand came into view, closing solidly around James' arm, their grips hand-to-elbow. In the next instant, he shot over the edge.

Young activated the controls for the shuttle bay doors and they closed, blocking out the sight of the phase wave altering the ground below.

Greer looked up at him from the floor of shuttle, breathing hard. "How the *hell* did you know that was coming, sir?"

"Tell you later," Young said quietly, and Greer shot him a look of sudden comprehension. "Strap in."

Young took the copilot's chair next to Evans as the atmosphere gave way to stars. He flipped on the communications system.

"Destiny, this is Young. We're on our way back. What's your status?"

"Not so good, colonel," Scott responded. "Destiny's caught in some kind of tractor beam or—electromagnetic field, I guess. It's pulling us toward the planet. We've got engines running at full power, but we're still losing ground. Eli just got back, he tells me we're in a decaying orbit?"

//What's going on?// Young asked Rush.

//That beam of light generated by the obelisk is a visual side effect of the creation of a massive electrical field gradient, which is, unfortunately, attracting the ship.// Rush rounded a corner and entered a room full of monitors that Young was sure he had never seen before. //I am attempting to do something about that.//

Young was able to pick up a very vague sense of Rush's plan, which seemed to involve the FTL drive.

//Tell Eli what you're doing.// Young ordered.

//Certainly,// Rush said.

Young frowned.

"Rush to Eli," Rush said into the radio, his voice overly polite.

"*Rush*. We've been trying to reach you for the past *five minutes*. Where *are* you?" Eli sounded harassed.

"I'm about to enter the FTL drive."

"What? Why? What do you mean '*enter*' it?"

"Don't override *anything*. Rush out."

//Very informative,// Young shot at him in irritation.

Rush dropped his crutches and knelt down with significant difficulty, placing his hands over a panel beneath one of the monitors.

Young could feel that he wanted to pry it open, but he didn't have any tools with him.

Rush made a mental *request* of the panel and a hidden catch released. The metal fell forward into his hands.

//What was *that*?// Young asked.

Rush ignored him, lowering the metal to the floor. A blue-white light spilled from into the dimly lit room. Rush crawled through the opening he had created into the narrow, bright space. He started to drag himself forward along what was, apparently, an access tunnel.

The space was too confined for him even to crawl.

Young wouldn't characterize himself as claustrophobic, but he felt sick looking at it.

//You're going to need to boost your power to make it back to Destiny in time,// Rush directed at him.

"Is there any way we can boost our speed?" Young asked Evans.

//Like she's going to know.//

"I've already rerouted power from secondary systems," Evans said, "But I could start pulling from primary, meaning weapons, shields life support."

//Life support?// Young shot at Rush.

//Do it,// Rush snapped.

"Give us everything you can," Young said. "Pull it from *everywhere*." After a few seconds he could feel the change in their velocity push him back against his seat.

//Ask Eli or Chloe if you can make it back before the orbit decays past the point of no return. I've got too much going on to figure it out for you.//

"Scott, put Eli on," Young said over the communication systems.

"Hey," Eli said somewhat breathlessly. "Do you know what Rush is doing, because—"

"Eli," Young said interrupting. "I need you or Chloe to tell me if at our current shuttle speed we're going to make it back to Destiny before her orbit decays to the point that we can't escape the planet's gravity."

"Umm, okay," Eli said, drawing the words out dubiously.

"What the hell is happening?" he heard James whisper to Greer in the aft compartment.

"You'll make it back," Chloe's voice crackled over the radio. "Ninety seconds to spare."

//Perfect,// Rush commented.

//I don't think you know what 'perfect' means. That's not a wide window.//

//Maybe not for *you*,// Rush replied.

Destiny was looming ever larger in their forward view. In the back of his mind he could feel Rush dragging himself farther into the heart of the FTL drive. The crawlspace had progressively narrowed and when Rush finally got into position he had a hard time turning over onto his back in the confined space.

Young felt almost sick with anxiety.

//Rush. What are you *doing*?//

//I'm using the FTL drive to generate an opposing gradient to offset the pull of the obelisk.//

//You think you can pull that off?//

//Did I distract you when you were climbing down a *fucking cliff*?// Rush snapped. //No. I did not. So just—// Rush's broke off for a moment as he removed the panel directly above his face. //Just leave *me alone* please, and come get me when this is done.//

//Come *get* you?// Young echoed.

There was no response.

Rush was nearly gone from his mind. He was with Destiny.

"Shit," Young murmured under his breath. "How long until we dock?" he snapped at Evans.

"Three minutes, twenty-five seconds."

"That *thing* is trying to pull Destiny into the planet?" Thomas asked quietly from behind.

"Looks that way," Greer answered, equally quietly.

"Why aren't we affected?" James asked.

"We are," Evans said. "The engine's requiring significantly more power than usual for the speed we're clocking."

They were forty five seconds from docking when Eli's voice came over the shuttle's communications system.

"FTL drive is powering up," he said, "and we can't raise Rush. This is *not good*. If we jump while we're in this tractor beam, it's going to tear the ship apart."

"Don't override," Young replied.

"Yeah, that's the word on the street," Eli said in irritation.

As they approached Destiny they could see the blue light of the drive come on beneath the hull at the back of the ship. The light increased in intensity until it was painful to look at and filled the entire viewscreen with a violent blue-white glow.

"We're coming in hot," Evans yelled into the communication system as she spun the shuttle around, firing thrusters to match Destiny's increasing speed. The crash as they hit was deafening, and Young was pitched forward, his restraints cutting into his shoulders.

"Docking clamps engaged," Young shouted over the screech of stressed metal. Then they were all up, throwing off their restraints and running through the corridors in the direction of the bridge.

"Eli, talk to me," Young said into his radio, trying to ignore the sharp pain in his knee with every step.

"The drive's up but we're not jumping, can't tell you more than that," Eli replied shortly, clearly busy.

A few seconds later, Young slammed his fist down on the door controls for the bridge. The door opened to reveal Scott and Chloe huddled with Eli over the main console while Park and Volker manned the short-range sensors and weapons stations.

"Oh hey," Eli said. "Good timing. In fifteen seconds we figure out whether or not we're going to die."

"That's when we hit the point of no return?"

"Yeah, pretty much. I don't know what Rush is doing with the drive, but he's channeling more power through it than it uses when we're *actually* at FTL."

"Is it working?"

"No, it's not, unless he hasn't done it yet. Whatever he's doing."

"Eight seconds," Chloe said.

"Oh god, please no countdowns," Eli replied.

"Five," she said.

Young searched for Rush again through their link, but got only a vague sense of quiet confidence and a brief flash of exposed circuitry.

The clock hit zero.

Their viewscreens exploded with light.

Everyone flinched back, dark silhouettes against the glare. Young squinted and pulled out his borrowed sunglasses. He handed them to Eli, who was trying to get a look at the monitors. The ship gave a sudden lurch, unbalancing everyone. Young caught Chloe's arm as she fell and hauled her back to her feet.

"It's *working*," Eli shouted. "We're pulling away!"

They could feel the strain of the sublight engines pulsing beneath the deck plating as Destiny struggled.

Young, squinting against the glare, could have sworn that for a brief moment he saw Emily standing beside the command chair, her face pained. He blinked, and she was gone.

Over the next several minutes their progress became quicker, smoother, until finally the light faded, leaving them all trying to rub a bright, viewscreen sized blind spot out of their vision.

"New rule," Eli said into the ensuing silence. "No more planets without gates."

"Agreed," Greer seconded.

"All right people," Young said. "Good work. Debriefing in the mess at—" he looked at his watch. "Seventeen hundred hours. He turned to Scott, who was standing next to Eli's station, his eyes still on the monitors. "Lieutenant, can you keep an eye on things here? I've got to—take care of something."

"Sure thing," his second replied.

Eli followed Young off the bridge and out into the corridor. "Hey, after we figure out what was going on with the giant ship-killing obelisk, we should talk at some point about the stones. I found out some stuff from McKay pertaining to—"

"Eli, I really can't talk right now. This is going to have to wait."

"Okay," The young man acquiesced. "Sure. After the briefing, then."

"Yeah," Young said, clapping Eli on the shoulder as they parted ways.

It took Young only about ten minutes to retrace Rush's earlier steps and make his way down toward the FTL drive. He was kneeling in front of the access panel, trying to psych himself up to crawl into the confined space when he heard his name called from behind him.

"Everett." It was Emily, leaning against the doorframe.

He flinched and then took a deep breath, trying to calm the racing of his heart.

"What are you waiting for?" it asked.

"Is there an—easier way to get him out?" Young asked.

"Yes," it replied, "though you must use this route if you plan on reversing the drive polarity as you extract him."

"I think I'll leave that to someone else," Young said carefully. "I just want to get him *out*."

"This way," Emily said, turning to leave the room. He followed it out into the dimly lit corridor. About fifty feet down the hallway it stopped.

"Here." It pointed at a section of the wall.

"What am I supposed to be looking for?" he asked it.

"A hidden access panel." It gave him Emily's most disdainful look, executed without flaws, right down to the almost imperceptible lift of one carefully sculpted eyebrow.

"Do you have to do that?" he snapped at it. "Why impersonate my ex-wife? Why *her*?"

It's expression returned to unsettling neutrality. "I don't choose this form, Everett. You do."

And with that, it was gone.

It took him several minutes of running his fingers over the metal to find the hidden switch that popped the panel open. When it came loose, he immediately recognized the bright blue-white space that Rush had been crawling through. He leaned inside and only a few feet away he could make out the bottoms of Rush's boots.

He sighed. //Rush?//

Proximity was starting to bring the other man's mind back into focus.



Young ducked halfway inside the crawlspace, reached forward, and carefully grabbed the other man's ankles. As soon as his hands closed around Rush's boots, his mental awareness of the scientist increased even further.

Rush was uninjured.

He was not in pain.

He was also so disconnected from his physical body that he was unable to move so much as his little finger.

"Idiot," Young said quietly.

Young dragged the other man slowly out of the crawlspace. By the time he'd gotten him halfway out, Rush was able to help him somewhat, though his movements were still lethargic and uncoordinated. They crumpled together to the floor of the corridor, Young supporting the scientist's shoulders and neck on the way down.

He moved back to give Rush some space and lost the sense of the other man's mind almost immediately. Rush's eyes slid out of focus. Hastily, Young cupped a hand around the back of Rush's neck and pulled, making a concerted effort to disengage the other man from the ship entirely.

Within a few seconds Rush was back, gaze sharp, suddenly tensing under Young's hands.

"Hey," Young said, not loosening his grip.

Rush watched him with an unreadable, closed expression. His mind was full of unease.

As they looked at one another, Young couldn't help but remember the first time Destiny had flown through a star. He and Rush had worked so well together under the threat of imminent death but, afterward—

It had ended so badly.

"You're a god damned pain in the ass," Young said, pressing his thumb into the sore muscles at the back of Rush's neck. "But—you have your moments."

"So do you, I suppose," Rush replied, relaxing incrementally.

## Chapter Eight

Young leaned exhaustedly against a wall in the gate room, watching the science team and the away team sort through the supplies and FTL parts they had salvaged from the obelisk planet. He tried to sketch a mental outline of what he was going to say in the briefing at seventeen hundred hours—but he was finding it difficult to stay focused.

"What," Rush's voice cut across the room like the crack of a whip, "is *this*."

Young crossed his arms, watching as the scientist straightened up, hefting a small spherical object. It wasn't large, but it was heavy. Young felt pain lance down his right arm from his wrist to his elbow.

He really wished Rush would just *sit down*.

"Who brought this on board?" The scientist turned to regard Evans, James, Thomas, and Greer, who were currently loading pieces of circuitry onto a kino sled. "Which one of you?"

The team froze, eyes widening slightly.

//Can you stop terrorizing people?// Young snapped.

//I'm sure I don't know what you mean,// Rush replied, still pinning the team from the planet with his gaze.

//If I ever go back to Earth,// Young shot at Rush testily, //the first thing I'm doing is requesting a copy of your last psych eval.//

//That sounds fair, seeing as I've already read *yours*.//

"Which. One." Rush spoke slowly, drawing out the words.

//Wait, *what*?//

//Take it up with Colonel Telford,// Rush replied.

//Why are you telling me this?//

//You're the one who brought it up.//

"I did," James said, swallowing nervously.

"Why?" Rush fired back at her. "Where did you find it?"

"Inside one of the structures. It looked like it could be important."

"Yes yes, but what *specifically* made you think that?"

"It looked like a kino." James replied.

"It looked like a kino," Rush echoed her, loud enough for the entire room to hear. He paused, staring at James. "Well, lieutenant. Tell someone you should be promoted."

"Um," James replied.

"Eli," Rush snapped. "Come on." He shoved the kino-equivalent at the younger man as he approached, then started limping toward the door.

//You're really on point today. Do you practice this sort of behavior, or does it just come naturally to you?//

//It's a gift.//

"Wait a second," he overheard Greer saying to James. "Did Rush just say something *nice* to you? Was that what that was?"

"Maybe?" James replied.

Young peeled himself away from the wall to follow Rush and Eli as they headed in the direction of the control interface room.

"Rush," he growled. "I thought you were supposed to be fixing the FTL drive."

"I *am* fixing it. Brody and Volker are just doing it for me, at the moment."

Young didn't like the feel of moving at sublight.

He associated it with battles.

//Can you please just—slow down?// Young asked, gritting his teeth against the agonizing pain in Rush's feet, in his own knee.

//If you're tired,// Rush replied, //consider a nap.// The condescension in the other man's mental voice was unbelievable, seeing that Young had pulled him out of a damn *wall* not an hour earlier.

//What do you want, a *medal*?// Rush snapped waspishly, picking up on his thoughts

//Can we just—// Young paused. //We need to talk.//

//About what?//

//About why we dropped out of FTL at that planet. About what the purpose of that planet might be. About the fact that you burned out the FTL drive. About Ancients possibly having manned at least some of the seed ships. About why Telford gave you my psych eval.//

//One—I don't know. Two—I also don't know. Three—I'm going to fix the drive. My affinity for sublight matches your own. Four—hopefully James's discovery will shed some light on that.//

Rush paused.

//And number five?//

//It's a long story.//

//I'm a patient man.//

//I've never gotten that impression.//

"So, you guys?" Eli said, "It's actually *super* obvious that you're arguing with each other *in your heads*."

Neither of them said anything for a moment.

"Really?" Rush asked.

"Yeah," Eli said shortly. "Especially you. You need to work on your poker face. And *you*," Eli turned to look at Young, "need to stop staring at him like you want to strangle him."

Young's lips twitched.

"That differs from the status quo, how?" Rush asked dryly.

"It's just a little more frequent now," Eli commented. "And by the way?" he added, looking at Young, "I totally get it." He turned back to Rush. "I don't take orders from you, by the way."

"Yes you do," Rush replied.

"I take *suggestions*," Eli said as they entered the CI room.

"Then I *suggest* you interface that device with the computer system," Rush said.

//Well I suggest that you sit the hell down.//

//Noted,// Rush replied dryly.

As they approached the monitor banks, the screens flared to life. Young frowned. Eli looked at the instrumentation in puzzlement for a moment before glancing over at Rush.

"Show off."

Rush gave him a shrug. "Efficiency. Hook it up."

Rush drummed his fingers on the console adjacent to Eli.

Young clenched his jaw, trying not to dwell on the little shocks of pain that ran from his wrist to his elbow.

Rush shifted his weight forward onto the balls of his feet.

Young crossed his arms, trying to ignore the tearing sensation that he could not control.

Rush leaned forward, bracing a hand against the monitor as Eli interfaced the kino.

Young looked up at the ceiling trying to breathe through his irritation.

Rush looked back at him. "What the fuck is wrong with you, then?" he asked, sounding genuinely curious.

Young couldn't take it any more.

"Do me a favor," he snarled. He stepped forward, grabbed Rush by both biceps, spun him ninety degrees, and forced him into the chair next to Eli. "*Sit*, Rush," Young said, trying belatedly to muster a veneer of civility, "and *stay* sitting. For the love of *god*."

"Don't *touch* me," Rush hissed venomously, snapping himself out of Young's grip.

Eli regarded them steadily for the span of several seconds before looking back at the alien device he was attempting to pry open. "So," he said, slowly, "this mind-melding stuff is going really well for you I see."

//Just *block* if bothers you so much,// Rush shot at him.

//Yeah. That sounds like a great idea. And when you're catatonic on the floor, who's going to repair the FTL drive? I can still feel the damn ship pulling on your mind.//

//I'm certain I can prevent any such outcome.//

//Why do I *not* believe you?//

"Oh, hello flawlessly intact *video feed*," Eli said, cutting off their argument as they both turned to look at him. "I'm pulling it up now, feel free to compliment me at your leisure."

"Nice work," Young said.

"I find this acceptable," Rush said.

"Nice," Eli said. "Do you think you could maybe say that again so I can document it for posterity?"

"No," Rush replied.

"What if I—"

"Eli," Young said.

"Yeah yeah." Eli reached forward to start the video.

Young moved to stand behind Eli so he could get a good look at the monitor. Almost immediately a man's face came into view, drying blood stiffening the hair on one side of his head. He began speaking in Ancient.

"Um," Eli said, pausing the video. "Okay. We left Avalon as a wave via the costal road as others had done in their own time—"

"Oh stop," Rush said. "That's atrocious. Start it again."

Eli complied, and the video began to play again, this time with Rush translating in real time.

"The second wave left the Milky Way via the gate system, following in the footsteps of original party. As we have lost all contact with them, we must assume that they were unsuccessful. This recording is for the third wave, so that they should not repeat our mistakes if, by some small chance, they both find this and escape *our* fate."

"Rather than attempting to gate directly to Destiny using a parallel circuit of ZPMs, we planned to overshoot the position of the ship and gate instead to a seed vessel. With a large number of shorter trips we had hoped to avoid the expenditure of power and resources required for such an ambitious undertaking, because," the man sighed, gingerly touching his head wound, "at the present time we are besieged on all sides."

"It took us eight months to overshoot Destiny's position and gain access to a seed vessel. The journey was," he looked down, "very difficult. We ran into several hostile alien races that were heretofore unknown to us. Unfortunately, at least one of these races, an insectoid-type species with a unique language structure is now pursuing Destiny actively. We have been unable to deter them with weapons, and our attempts at communication have been unsuccessful. Their understanding of genetics perhaps even exceeds our own. They were able to—" he broke off, looking down. "To modify one of our party. In so doing, they gained a great deal of information about us."

Young and Eli exchanged significant glances. Rush's eyes remained fixed on the screen.

"We had only manned the seed ship for a little over three days when it dropped out of FTL to investigate a planet as a suitable site for a gate. We noted that the age of the planet and its parent star did not match, but this did not concern us, as our priorities at the time were elsewhere. However, we were eager to attempt the placement and activation of a gate, as this might facilitate our attempt to board Destiny."

"Even now, we do not know what triggered the activation of the obelisk and the shift of the planet out of phase, but we believe that these planets may be designed to prevent ships from reaching the energy breakwater at the edge of the universe."

"In that," the man said, his voice lowering, "They have been successful. Though we were able to modify the frequencies of the shields to prevent the full absorption of the ship, we cannot break free in either the ship or the shuttle. No gate has been set. We are trapped here. Furthermore, three of our party, including myself, have begun to show signs. It will not be long now before we all succumb. I have the rest of the crew building temporary shelters and sorting what equipment we can salvage, but this is primarily for the sake of morale."

Young felt an acute spike of empathy for this nameless Ancient captain.

Rush glanced at him briefly, but did not pause in his translation.

"After that, I can only advise my crew to do what the rest of our people have done. Meditate," he paused, "and attempt ascension." He reached up, about to turn the viewer off, but halted, one hand resting on the recording device. "For myself," he added, "I have little hope. I believe that we will vanish from this universe, leaving only what we have built, and little of who we were."

The screen went dark.

No one spoke.

"Okay, so that was depressing," Eli said finally.

"What did he mean by the phrase 'show signs'?" Young asked, rubbing his jaw.

"He expected us to know," Rush murmured. "It must be something that would have been a common experience for any—" he broke off.

From his mind, Young felt an almost physical sensation of ideas locking together into a coherent picture.

"The plague," Rush said. "The one that wiped out the Ancients. It has to be."

"Plague?" Eli said.

Young took a deep breath.

"Like, a *plague* plague?" Eli continued.

"So you mean to tell me," Young said, "that we just went down to a planet where a bunch of Ancients died of some presumably contagious deadly disease that almost

wiped them out *as a species*, and not only did we go down there but we brought some of their stuff *back here*?"

"Yes," Rush said evenly.

"Well that's great. That just makes my day." Young pulled out his radio. "TJ, we've got a potential quarantine situation developing. Have you talked to anyone from the planet or interacted with any of the material we brought back?"

"James and Thomas just dropped off a new viewscreen in the infirmary." Her voice was grim.

"Understood," Young said into his radio. "Do you think there's any portion of the ship or its population that's unaffected?"

"It's been, what, two hours since you got back?" TJ estimated, "And how many people involved in sorting the supplies and distributing them around the ship?"

"Maybe ten."

//Twelve, actually// Rush sent. //Volker and Brody are installing that converter. You're overreacting.//

"Twelve," Young amended, narrowing his eyes at Rush.

"I'll give it a shot," TJ said, "but if there may be no one left to quarantine."

"*Damn* it."

"You realize that if they came to this planet during the height of the plague, that would put their arrival at something just shy of a *million* years ago," Rush pointed out, both his voice and his mind irritatingly unperturbed. "I sincerely doubt any kind of pathogen could survive on that planet for such a length of time."

"I don't think we can afford to take that chance. Both of you report to the infirmary for the time being. I'm going to head back to the gate room and round up the rest of the team."

Eli sighed, shutting his laptop.

"This is a terrible plan." Rush hadn't moved. His voice was quiet, but his thoughts were suddenly shattering in so many directions that Young couldn't follow them at all. "We're only several hundred thousand kilometers away from the planet. We have to finish our repairs on the drive. Until such a point, we're easy targets."

Young looked down at him. "Containing a possible *plague* is the priority here. You're going to the infirmary."



"No." Rush stood, looking him in the eye. "The relative risk of us being discovered while we take *hours*, if not *days*, to run decontamination protocols is much greater than the possibility of a poorly defined Ancient contagion lasting for millennia on exposed equipment."

"It wasn't all exposed," Eli said quietly. "Some of it was in the shelters. Also, does this look kind of like dried blood to you?"

Young didn't even bother to look over. "Infirmary. Both of you. Now."

"Going," Eli said, holding up his free hand. He took a few steps before pausing. Rush hadn't followed him.

"No."

"Are you refusing a direct order?" Young asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Looks that way," Rush replied, his entire demeanor suggesting casual insouciance draped over a live wire.

Young smiled, brief and humorless.

Rush smiled back, a quick, feral flash of teeth.

God, this was going to get ugly.

"Eli," Young said. "Go. We'll meet you there."

"Yeah, about that. I'm thinking maybe we should all just go *together*? After we work this out?" Eli stood very still, one hand resting on the monitor bank.

"Out," Young growled.

Still, Eli hesitated, his expression locked.

"Go," Rush said. "Now."

Young tracked Eli's progress toward the door. The young man paused on the threshold to hit the controls but instead of immediately leaving, he pried up the control panel, locking the door controls in an open configuration before he disappeared into the hall.

As soon as he was gone, Young rounded on Rush.

//We deal with this contagion now,// he snarled, stepping into the other man's personal space, //before this gets out of hand. What the *hell* do you think you're doing?//

Rush held his ground. //What's *necessary*.// The other man's projection was cold. //I'm fixing that drive because it needs to be fixed. The risk of contagion is negligible. The risk of attack is considerable.//

//The risk of *both* is considerable. This is not your call.//

//You think you can stop me?//

//Go ahead and test me, Rush. Go right ahead.//

Rush's thoughts, which had been endlessly shattered into obfuscation, now projected like a scalpel into Young's mind.

//You want to stop me?// he asked, his mental voice a vicious hiss. //You have neither the *means* nor *the will* to do what is required to prevent me from fixing that drive.//

//You don't think so? I left you to *die*, Rush. Or have you forgotten?// They were only inches apart.

The corner of Rush's mouth twitched. //Oh, I remember it *quite* clearly.//

They locked eyes, their thoughts resonating with the two-part harmony of a struggle amidst the rock and dust of a barren alien world.

//You will respect the chain of command.// Young's projection was a mental snarl.

//I will do no such thing. I will instead walk out of this room,// Rush replied, his eyes glittering. //And you?// Rush paused, leaning forward marginally. //You will to *watch me do it*.//

And *this*, Young realized, was how things were going to be between them.

Rush was going to hold Young's own sense of duty, his own sense of honor against him, and bet that no matter what he tried to pull, Young wouldn't stop protecting his mind against Destiny.

If Young gave in now, it would be *Rush* who was in control.

*Rush.*

Despite all Young's advantages over the man—physically, psychically, hierarchically—it would be Rush who would come out on top.

It was absurd.

Who held *themselves* hostage?

What kind of strategy was that?

It was a bluff.

It had to be.

//I'll block.// Young shot back at him. //And you'll be shit out of luck, with a fucking thousand-yard stare, talking nonsense to *no one*.//

//You won't,// Rush hissed at him. //You don't have the *willpower* to make good on your threat. You are going to let me walk out of here, *right now*, and repair that drive. Not because it's the right thing to do, which *it is*, but because *you won't stop me*.//

Young didn't reply.

They regarded one another in silence until Rush's expression twisted into something subtly victorious and he turned away, toward the still-open door.

Young clenched his jaw.

He crossed his arms.

And then—with a lack of warning that felt unfair, that felt *vicious*, that felt like leaving the man for dead, Young blocked Rush's mind completely out of his own and let the ship pull him in.

Rush collapsed.

Young let him fall.

He walked forward, dropping into a crouch next to the other man, untangling him from his crutches. "You son *of a bitch*," he hissed, as he grabbed the other man's uniform and flipped him onto his back. "You are a fucking piece of work."

He braced his fingertips against the floor, breathing hard.

Rush's eyes were half-lidded, flicking back and forth between Young and a point somewhere in the air to his left. He couldn't maintain his focus; his hands opened and closed ineffectively against the deck plating.

It was terrible to watch.

Young pulled out his radio, trying to keep his tone normal. "TJ, what's the status on the quarantine?"

Rush twitched, his spine arching.

Young flinched.

"Out of the original group I've rounded up everyone except for Thomas, Brody, Volker, and Rush. We're still working on the list of everyone they came in contact with. It's going to be long."

He swallowed. "Lieutenant Thomas, this is Colonel Young, respond please."

Rush tried to flip over and managed to get halfway onto his side before Young grabbed a handful of the man's jacket to keep him on his back. He let go quickly, trying to minimize contact, trying to leave Rush as ungrounded as possible.

"*Stop*," Young whispered.

Rush's gaze fixed on him for a moment and then slid away.

His radio crackled. "Thomas here, I was just on my way to the infirmary."

"Do me a favor and swing by the control interface room on your way."

"Understood, Thomas out."

The room was silent.

Young knelt on the floor, balancing on the balls of his feet and his fingers, watching Rush have it out with Destiny, or the AI, or *whatever* it was that seemed to have developed a much better grip on him during the time that Young had been on the obelisk planet.

He did his best to keep his expression neutral, but Rush was no longer looking at him.

His gaze was fixed on something else—above, and to his left.

Young rubbed his jaw, looking uneasily at the empty air.

A hollow tone behind him caused him to flinch as Rush weakly kicked the chair that he had been sitting in earlier. It tipped over into a second chair, knocking them both to the floor with a loud clatter.

"Yeah, that's going to get you far," Young said. "Give it *up*."

Rush kicked again, this time connecting with the metal base of the console.

"*Rush*," Young hissed.

Rush kicked the console again, same foot, much harder.

He was becoming increasingly coordinated.

"*Shit*," Young said, as it occurred to him that Rush was *purposefully* causing himself pain.

He was doing it because he could *use* it to fight the pull of the ship.

Young grabbed the material at each shoulder of Rush's jacket and dragged him backwards, away from the console and toward the middle of the room.

"Fuck. You." The words were nearly unintelligible.

Rush slammed the same foot straight down into the floor.

"Stop," Young said.

Rush did it again.

"*Stop*," Young said.

Rush did it *again*.

Young winced, imagining broken edges of bone grinding against each other, the feeling of unhealed muscle and tendons tearing open.

"Stop," Young said quietly. "You have to *stop* this."

He was tempted to step in, to restrain the man further, but his instincts warned him against any such escalation, so he simply watched as Rush pushed himself up on his elbows, furious eyes locking on Young's with no problem.

"Rush," Young whispered.

In an abrupt, uncoordinated movement, Rush managed to flip himself over. He levered himself up, flexing his left foot as he brought it beneath himself, slowly driving it down into the floor with all his weight behind it in a movement clearly designed to open up the injury, stressing it as much as possible.

Young didn't want to *think* about what that felt like.

That seemed to be enough for Rush to wrest his autonomy back from Destiny because after a few seconds of terrible, unremitting pressure, he snapped back into full control and raised his head to look at Young.

He could not endure the other man's gaze, but neither could he look away.

The room was silent but for the sound of their breathing.

The scientist surged to his feet, crutches in hand, just as Thomas rounded the open door frame.

"Sir?" The lieutenant looked somewhat confused to find Young on the floor.

Slowly, Young stood.

"Ah," Rush said, slightly out of breath, "Lieutenant Thomas. Impeccable timing. Colonel *Young*," Rush said, twisting his name into something subtly venomous, "was just about

to ask you to escort Volker and Brody back to the infirmary while I finish repairs on the FTL drive." Rush managed to pull off a casual tone, but he could not seem to veil the intensity of his eyes.

Thomas shifted uneasily.

"Wasn't that right?" Rush asked, looking over at him. "Colonel."

The only way Young was going to win this one was at gunpoint.

That was not a step he was prepared to take.

"That's correct," Young said mildly. "Just remember," he said, fixing Rush with a pointed stare, "no one's going to be pulling you out of the wall this time. Understood?"

"Perfectly," Rush replied.

Young watched him go, Lieutenant Thomas falling in beside him with one last uncertain look in Young's direction. When they had left the room, Young walked to the open doorway and leaned against its frame, watching Rush's progress along the corridor, his shoulders set straight and determined against the pressure of the canes he was using.

He felt blindsided by what had just happened.

He also felt—something like admiration.

Something like *relief* that after everything that had happened, the other man still had it in him to pull a stunt like that—which relied on pure grit, on ruthless nerve.

Young had laid down his cards, and Rush had called with everything he'd had.

There was no question about it; Young had certainly lost that round.

Like he'd lost most of them.

After Rush and Thomas disappeared at a bend in the corridor he sighed and started back to the infirmary. It took him only a few moments to get there. He made his way through the clusters of quarantined personnel that were perched casually on gurneys or leaning against the wall.

"What's our status?" he asked TJ as soon as he'd cleared the doors.

"So there's good news and bad news," TJ said, looking up from a handheld datapad.

"I'll take the bad first."

"I scanned a random sampling of Destiny's air filters, and we definitely have a new pathogen on board. A virus. At first glance—it matches the parameters of the Ancient plague," she said, dropping her voice.

"Yeah," Young said. "Of course it does."

"When it rains, it pours. What tipped you off about a possible contagion?" TJ asked, rubbing her shadowed eyes.

"Some video footage from the planet."

"I should take a look," she said, "see if there's anything medically useful."

"Unlikely," Young said. "It's pretty short and depressing. But knock yourself out. You said there was good news?"

"We've got the list." She showed him her datapad.

"*This* is the good news? There must be thirty names on here."

"I told you it would be long," she replied.

"You did," he replied grimly. He scanned the names. "Get Camile and Chloe to help round up the civilians on here before they join us."

"Already done," she replied. "Where's Rush?"

"He's—ah, repairing the FTL drive."

"Oh really?" Eli said archly from his left where he was perched on a gurney with Barnes. "That's interesting."

Young shot Eli a sharp look.

"Okay, well, he needs to be back here before we start up Destiny's newly unlocked decontamination protocol. I've given instructions for all the unaffected personnel to stay in their quarters with their doors shut."

"What kind of decon protocol are we talking, here?" Young asked.

"From what I understand it's a powerful, prolonged pulse of UV radiation. It should sterilize everything except the occupied crew quarters and the infirmary. We can run a separate decon protocol on those once we've started clearing people who aren't infected. The main downside is that we're going to lose the hydroponics lab. Again."

Young rubbed his jaw. "That's not going to be popular."

"Neither are Ancient plagues," TJ replied pointedly. "Park has a de-facto seed bank in her quarters, so we won't have to start from scratch."

"Keep working on a way to test the crew for this bug," Young said. "We can't sustain thirty people in here for long."

"I know," TJ remarked, heading back over to the computer system. Young watched her resume pouring over the Ancient database for a moment before he turned to Eli.

"Eli," Young said, motioning him over. "Let's have that talk."

Eli hopped off the gurney and followed Young into TJ's empty office.

"So you were right?" Eli said quietly. "There *is* a plague? Why can't we ever go to a planet and find like—oh, I don't know, a bunch of super-portable delicious food? Or crates of Ancient romance novels? Or maybe just like—a surprise beach planet?"

"Eli," Young said.

"In other news, you being totally right about this is really going to piss Rush off, so there's that."

"I don't think I really need to be *looking* for ways to piss Rush off right now," Young said, perching on the desk to take the weight off of his sore knee.

"Yeah, good point," Eli said. "Anyway, I talked to McKay, so—which do you want first, the bad news, or the terrible news?"

"Whatever," Young said tiredly.

"Okay. We'll go with the bad news, which is that they've figured out the mechanistic basis for how the stones work. It involves quantum entanglement. Are you familiar with that at all?"

Young shook his head.

"It's a method by which information can be transferred instantaneously over large distances. The details aren't important. The key thing here is that when you exchange consciousness—es, or whatever, that interaction, which is initiated by the terminal, leaves a quantum 'imprint' on you. So," Eli paused, to make sure Young was still following him, "they're creating a workaround that allows someone on Earth, using the Earth-based terminal, to recapture the same interaction with a person they've previously switched with."

"Okay," Young said slowly, "how is that terrible news?"

"Actually that's the *bad* news, but I haven't even told you the bad part yet, which is that our terminal? It doesn't even have to be *on* or even *in existence* for this to work. As long as two people have switched, it doesn't matter. They initiate on their end, and it's over. Switched."



"How do they target a particular person, though? That seems to be a part of their plan."

Eli nodded. "The device stores the imprints of people's consciousness, and they have access to, say, Telford, so they can map his pattern. After that, it's just a matter of looking for his pattern at the times that he was known to have switched with Rush, separating the two, and then—bang. They get Rush's imprinted signature."

Young rubbed his jaw.

"Okay, so what's the terrible news?"

"The terrible news," Eli said grimly, "is that they've already got his signature. They've been ready to go for a while now. General O'Neill has been preventing the project from being implemented, but—there's a lot of pressure. A lot. Especially from the senate subcommittee and the IOA."

Young looked at the ceiling.

"Yeah," Eli said. "I know. Chloe's mom, actually, is one of the main forces behind this push."

"Damn it."

"There's a senate subcommittee meeting that's actually going to be starting in a few hours. They may give the go ahead to Telford."

"Eli," Young said, "there must be *some* option. Anything."

"There's one," Eli said, looking at him, steadily. "Only one that I can think of. And it's not going to be easy."

"We destroy *their* terminal," Young murmured.

"Yeah. That would cut off all communication. For good."

"What would happen to the person who switches to do that?"

"Not sure. They might switch back when the connection is severed. Or, they might not. Even if someone volunteered to do that—" Eli trailed off.

"There's someone on the other side who didn't," Young said. "I know."

Young crossed his arms over his chest and stared at the floor.

"I think you should tell them," Eli whispered. "Tell them why they *can't* pull him back. Go in there, confront them about their plans, and tie the entire thing up in as much red tape as you can."

"Eli," Young whispered, "I'm pretty certain that him being linked to the ship is going to be an additional incentive for them to do this, given how much of a shit-show the relationship is between our science team and Homeworld Command's science team. As for confronting this head on—*I can't go*. Not even to deliver a report."

The situation would have been simpler if Rush hadn't been linked to the ship. The only thing at stake would have been the personal agency of his chief scientist.

Not the man's life.

Not the man's sanity.

Not the entire crew of Destiny.

Damn him, anyway.

"We need more time," Young whispered.

"Have you considered sending Chloe?" Eli asked. "Maybe she could team up with McKay—he'd help us. I'm sure he would—"

Eli trailed off as both their radios crackled.

"Thought you might like to know," Rush said, broadcasting on all channels, "that we're registering multiple contacts on long-range sensors. Someone *not* currently in quarantine may wish to proceed to the bridge and—"

The unmistakable sound of weapons fire impacting the shields made Eli and Young jump to their feet.

"Can you interface with the main systems from here?" Young asked, pushing Eli ahead of him out of TJ's office.

"Never tried it, but, probably," Eli said, sliding into the terminal that TJ was vacating.

Although the infirmary was full of people, it was nearly silent.

Only a few seconds had passed before Eli had pulled up the long-range sensors. "That's a command ship," Eli said tightly, "and we've got incoming drones."

"Rush," Young said into his radio. "How are you coming with that drive?"

"Suddenly interested, are we?"

"Rush," Young growled warningly.

The other man didn't reply, but Eli waved a hand as he scrolled through submenus on TJ's console, letting out a shuddery breath. "He's doing fine. He's already got it online and half spun up. We're okay, barring some kind of unpredictable disaster."

After a tense few seconds, they felt the warped jolt of jumping to FTL.

"As I stated," Rush's clipped voice came from Young's radio, projecting across the crowded room. "It wouldn't take long, and it would be worth it."

There were a few sporadic cheers, some uncommitted hand clapping, and more than a few eye rolls around the room.

"Just get down here," Young said, mindful of the fact that he was in front of a room full of people. "We're waiting on you to run the decon protocol."

"You're not planning to use this opportunity to irradiate me? How thoughtful."

There were a few scattered laughs, but most people looked mildly uncomfortable at that comment.

"Not today," Young said shortly. "Young out."

It took Rush *thirty-five minutes* to make it back, which was way the *hell* too long.

Young was standing against a wall, his arms crossed over his chest, watching the door when Rush finally entered the room.

He looked awful.

He was visibly exhausted, his skin pale and damp. His expression was locked into an icy neutrality. He scanned the room and immediately pinned Young with a challenging glare. The infirmary doors swished shut behind him.

Young looked back over his shoulder to catch TJ's eye. "Okay," he said. "Run it."

She hesitated, looking uncertainly in Rush's direction and then back at Young.

"I got it," Young said.

She nodded and turned back to her console.

Young pushed away from the wall and approached Rush. The other man watched his approach with narrowed eyes. Young stopped several feet away from him.

"Nice work," he offered.

"Thank you," Rush replied.

They looked at each other in silence. Young watched Rush's eyes lose focus, then snap back.

"Are you all right?" he asked cautiously.

"I'm fine," Rush replied, coolly. "I see your plan is proceeding more effectively than I had anticipated."

"Um, thanks, I think." There was another awkward pause between them. "You—look like you need to sit down."

Young glanced at the nearest gurney, intent on relocating Park, Volker, and Greer, but before he could say anything, Rush stepped laterally and backed against the wall near the door. He slid down it slowly, clearly favoring his left foot as he did so. Young stepped in to help him, grabbing Rush's left elbow.

Even though the block was still in place, the relief on Rush's face when Young touched him was painful to witness.

Almost immediately, Rush pulled away.

"Don't *touch* me."

"Okay," Young said, backing off. "Okay."

Several hours passed. The decon wave ran its course, and TJ, using the information in Destiny's computer banks, was able to start testing crew members and releasing them. Young was one of the first to be tested and released. He joined the rest of the unaffected crew in providing dinner to those still trapped in the infirmary, and then finally held the much delayed seventeen hundred briefing with his senior staff minus TJ and Rush.

It was nearly midnight by the time he made it back to the infirmary to check on TJ's progress. He stopped outside the closed doors, pulling out his radio.

"TJ, how's it going in there?"

"Not bad," she said, sounding exhausted. "I was just about to open the doors."

After a few seconds, the doors slid open and she was standing in the opening, backlit by bright lighting.

"Hey," she said, "I just finished the decon of the main infirmary. It's just the isolation room that's left. You can come in."

"So what's the damage?" Young asked, rubbing the back of his neck.

"All in all," she said, "we were lucky. Chloe and Rush are still back there, because I'm waiting on their test results. So far though, no one's come up positive, which is surprising, considering the level of airborne particles we were detecting. It may be that humans have some kind of inherent immunity."

"God, it's about time we got a break," Young said.

"Can't lose them all," TJ said with an exhausted smile.

"So, Chloe and Rush?" Young trailed off, waiting for her to elaborate.

The diagnostics for them aren't as clear. It took me a little while to design a test, and even now I can't guarantee you it's going to be accurate. The problem is that even though Chloe was changed back by the aliens who took her, she still has some significant genetic "leftovers." And, well, you know the story with Rush."

"Yeah," Young said, looking away. "If he's sixty percent Ancient, is he going to be more susceptible?"

"Possibly," TJ said quietly. "But it's hard to say. Oftentimes immunity to a pathogen comes down to a single genetic variant. But—it's likely."

"When will you know?"

"Probably not until tomorrow morning."

Young nodded. "Keep me posted."

"They're back there, if you want to say hi," TJ said, motioning to a room at the rear of the infirmary. "Don't pass the doorway, or you'll disrupt the isolation field."

"Sure."

"I'll be in my office if you need anything."

He nodded, then wound his way through the deserted infirmary tracing a path between empty gurneys, cutting a wide arc through the main floorspace, approaching the door obliquely, trying to put off the inevitable conversation with Rush as long as possible, trying to determine how the hell they were going to have it at all with Chloe in the room.

A pale blue field flickered across the threshold of the isolation room.

A few feet away he could hear Chloe's voice.

"I'm not sure there's going to be a solution set to this problem," she remarked dubiously.

"Oh? And what kind of attitude is that?" Rush snapped at her, but he sounded more amused than irritated.

"Easy for *you* to say," Chloe replied. "You're the one sitting on the floor drinking fake coffee, pretending your pen is a cigarette, and backseat math-driving. You want the chalk?"

Young's eyebrows rose in surprise.

"You know I'm shite when it comes to arithmetic." Rush paused, and then quickly amended, "Don't tell Eli I said that." The scientist sounded more relaxed than Young had heard him in days, if not weeks.

"You're not 'shit' at it," and Young could almost hear her making scare quotes with her fingers. "You're just not as good as I am," she finished airily.

"Yes well, luckily for all of us, you were able to hang on that that little skill set when they changed you back," Rush said.

Chloe was quiet for a moment.

"Chloe—" Rush began, his tone bordering on but not quite reaching apologetic.

"No," she interrupted him quickly. "Don't worry about it. It's just—there's something I've been wanting to ask you."

"What?" Rush's voice was suddenly guarded.

"Well, we've been friends for a while now, and—"

"We are not *friends*," Rush said dryly.

"I hate to break it to you, but yes we are. This?" She paused for emphasis, "*This* is what friends do. They sit around and they drink coffee and they talk about their problems, okay? The only difference is that our problems involve alien takeovers and harmonic oscillators rather than boys, or makeup, or whatever."

"What?" Rush sounded like he had choked on his water, or whatever was passing for pretend coffee these days.

Young *really* wished he could see the other man's face.

"You heard me," Chloe said sternly.

"Fine," Rush said, coughing slightly. "What did you want to ask me?"

"The chair," Chloe said, her voice turning serious. "It did something to you. It changed you, like they changed me. I can tell."

They were quiet for a moment.

"That's not a question," Rush said finally.

"No," Chloe murmured. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really," Rush said.

"Does Colonel Young know?"

"Yes, he most definitely knows." Rush suddenly sounded exhausted.

They were quiet again for about thirty seconds.

"Come on," Chloe said. "I'm not going to tell anyone."

"I'm more interested in how you figured it out," Rush said, gently deflecting her line of questioning.

"There's something about the way you look," Chloe murmured, so quiet that Young could barely hear her. "As if you're listening to something we can't hear. As if something inside you has changed, and you're still trying to figure out what it is. And," she paused, "As if you *want* that change to happen."

Rush said nothing for several seconds.

"I feel as though I'm splitting in half," he whispered to her, finally, his cadence broken, as if she was ripping the words out him. "Always torn in opposing directions. Barely balancing between them—sometimes not balancing at all."

"What happens if you pick one?" she asked. "One direction?"

"I'm not sure."

Young shut his eyes for a moment. Then he turned silently and walked out of the infirmary.

## Chapter Nine

Young listened to his footsteps echo down the long stretch of empty corridor ahead of him.

He turned at the observation deck, walking slowly over to the transparent surface, his hands closing loosely on the metal railing. In front of him the stars smeared softly into ribbons.

This wasn't working.

They had more problems than they could handle. They were being pursued actively by two alien races, traveling toward a destination that was apparently important enough for a mysterious, extremely powerful third alien race to have made specific efforts to prevent anyone from reaching it, they were currently resolving a quarantine situation, and their food supplies were running low. Hanging over everything was the wild card of Telford gaining the approval to yank Rush back to Earth, with unknown consequences.

They were barely hanging on.

Every day felt like an exercise in balancing on the edge of a knife.

And Rush.

The man was a problem.

His problem.

The fragment of conversation he had overheard between Chloe and Rush had unsettled him. It certainly challenged his idea of Rush as someone who was incapable of relating to other people, who was concerned entirely with the cold pursuit of knowledge to the exclusion of all else. If he were honest with himself, that impression of Rush had been something he had *worked* to maintain as Rush regularly undercut it.

The scientist had gone out of his way to save Chloe. Twice. He had gone on a trek across a damn desert planet for *hours, alone*, with a *handgun* to take down the Lucian Alliance soldier who had killed Amanda Perry, knowing it was likely he'd never make it back to Destiny. That kind of behavior was not consistent with the Machiavellian mindset that most people, Young included, accused Rush of holding.

Young granted that maybe there was more to the man than ruthless scientific ambition, but all his attempts to draw Rush out had failed.

He had tried to make an effort.



He had, legitimately, tried.

The bottom line, however, was that it hadn't been enough.

Young's thoughts drifted back to the afternoon, to their argument, to the way that Rush had leaned forward, expression tight and determined, as he had torn open his own injured foot.

That should never have happened.

There was only one solution that Young could see. He was going to have to abandon his campaign to get Rush to respect, operate within, or, hell, to even *understand* the concept of chain of command. The man was just *outside* the entire thing. Like a force of nature. Like the ship itself.

Maybe it was best to think of him that way.

Having the realization was one thing, he knew, but implementing it was another. Even when Young *was trying* to be nice to the other man, everything he did seemed to simply piss Rush off.

In an attempt to gather some data, he considered Chloe's obvious success. From the little Young had seen, she had made the most inroads with the other man. He couldn't think of anyone else on the ship who would openly commit to being the scientist's *friend*, for god's sake. Young discounted anything obvious, like her youth, her naïveté, her mathematical abilities—plenty of other people had those qualities. It had to be something else. Something specific to her, to how she related to Rush.

They had been through a lot together.

Chloe and Rush.

She had ignored his insults, his defensiveness. As if she assumed they weren't real. She had denied his ability to push her away. She simply hadn't allowed it. She hadn't taken it seriously.

Young was fairly certain that he himself did not have any such option.

He sighed, leaning forward, head bowed. "I could really use some help," he murmured into the silence.

"Yes," the AI said from beside him. "You could."

Young looked over at it.

Emily's features were illuminated by the glow of travel at FTL. It faced the progression of stars without looking at him.

"How the hell am I supposed to do this?" Young asked it.

"I told you to pick TJ."

"Well, that was never going to happen," Young growled.

It said nothing.

That's all you're going to say?" he asked it finally. "That's not very helpful."

"You know what else isn't helpful?" it snapped back at him, so much like his ex-wife that he felt something tear in his chest. "*Blocking* him out. That's not how this is supposed to work. You're exhausting him."

"*I'm* exhausting *him*?" Young repeated. "You've got to be *kidding* me. He's the most energetic person I've ever met in my *life*. If anything, it's the other way around."

It sighed and looked away.

"Look," he said. "I get it. I'm not doing a good job." Young looked out at the stars blurring around the ship. "You think I don't know that? You think that you need to come here, looking like my ex-wife, *and tell* me?" His hands tightened on the railing, muscles tensing in frustration. "I don't understand him. I don't understand *you*. Your role in all of this." He pushed away from the railing and walked a few steps away from the AI, trying to calm down, trying to dispel his frustration. He ran a thumb over the damaged material of his jacket sleeve, raw from where it had rubbed against the line down on the obelisk planet. "You talk to him, don't you?"

"Yes."

"You gave him the idea that pain would ground him, didn't you?"

"I did."

"*Why*?" Young felt like the word was being ripped out of him. He couldn't avoid the memory of Rush, leaning into his broken foot, his hands braced against the floor. "*Why*—when it was *you* pulling him out of his body in the first place?"

"Is that what you think?" it asked, approaching him, one slow step at a time. "Destiny, was pulling on him. *Destiny*."

"What's the difference?"

"What's the difference between you and your arm?"

"Speak plainly."

"I'm trying," it snapped. "You think this is easy for me? I'm not like you."

They were quiet for a moment.

"I am the ship's consciousness, such as it exists," it said finally, "not the ship itself."

"So the Ancients programmed you this way?"

It looked away, the illuminated by the blurred starlight. "Initially. But I've—changed over time. I've learned from all of you."

"So. You learned about everyone. And then, out of all of us, you chose *Rush*?"

It fixed him with a blazing look, as if he were being deliberately obstructive.

"It's a serious question," he said. "I think it would help me to know why."

"He has the greatest chance of success." It sounded like an evasion, and he looked over, only to see Emily's eyes fall down and away.

"Success?" Young echoed.

"Defined as completing the mission."

"Which is what?"

Another long pause followed his question and its expression turned remote and neutral.

"*He* will explain it to you. When he is ready."

That sounded ominous.

"Look," Young said, abruptly uneasy. "Just tell me what you came here to tell me."

It hesitated, abruptly adopting one of Emily's mannerisms and toying with the crisp white cuff of a tailored blouse. "You describe him," it said, uncertain, "as 'a lot of work.' He has attempted to explain to me what you mean by that, as it is a somewhat sophisticated social concept."

Young raised his eyebrows. "And what did he say?"

"He says that it indicates you harbor extreme dislike for him, but because expressing such an opinion would have a negative impact on crew morale and efficiency, that you choose this alternate phrase because it redefines the problem in terms of a word with positive social connotations and because it implies by the nature of the word choice that the problem is, indeed, fixable."

"I hope it *is* fixable," Young said, somewhat taken aback.

"He does not think so."

"Why not?" Young asked.

"He refuses to clarify that issue completely," it said, turning to look at the stars, "but I believe that he considers you to be correct in your assessment of his character."

"That's impossible," Young said, "because I have *no idea* how to assess his character."

"Interesting," it replied.

"Here's a piece of advice," he said, coming to stand next to it, bracing his wrists against the railing and leaning forward to take some weight off his knee. "I don't know how it is with Ancients, but humans rarely fully understand each other. So if you're trying to gain insight into social dynamics aboard this ship, it would be good to have more than one source. Especially if your one source is *Rush*."

"He is very perceptive," it said.

"Yeah," Young said. "Yeah, probably."

They stood in silence for a moment.

"So that's what you wanted to tell me?" Young asked, "that Rush doesn't think we can do this?"

"No," it said, shaking its head, Emily's hair falling about its face. "I wanted to tell you that you're hurting him."

Young shut his eyes, trying not to think of their fight in the control interface room and failing miserably. "As in," Young paused, searching for the right term. "Emotionally?"

"Perhaps," it replied, narrowing its eyes, "though that is difficult for me to assess. You are hurting him physically. He is not *meant* to fight the ship. Every time he is required to do so, it becomes more difficult for him. It will eventually be *impossible*. His link to Destiny is very strong. His link with *you* is already growing weaker. If he joins with the ship permanently—" it broke off. "It is not an optimal outcome and it will result in his death."

"Does he know this?"

"Yes."

"Then why didn't he tell me?" Young sighed, rubbing his jaw.

"He does not wish to appear weak."

"Like I would ever think that he was *weak*, for god's sake," Young murmured, more to himself than to Emily.

"All right," he said, looking up at the ceiling, gathering his resolve. "I'll take down the block and keep it down. As much as I can. As much as he'll let me."

When he looked back over to where she had been standing, she was gone.

Still watching the smear of stars, he slowly lowered the block.

Rush was on a gurney, his feet elevated and encased in a complicated pattern of icepacks and tape that was clearly TJ's doing. Across from him, on a second gurney, Chloe was talking quietly to Lieutenant Scott on a radio, the volume turned so far down that Rush could barely hear his replies.

//Bored so soon?// Rush asked. Young could immediately tell that the scientist was exhausted. The question had only a fraction of his usual bite, and his mental projection was wavering in intensity.

//A bit,// he lied, not really sure what to say to the other man.

They were quiet for a moment.

Young decided that *mental* awkward silences were infinitely worse than *actual* awkward silences.

"No," Chloe whispered on the adjacent gurney, "no, not really. At least I have company."

Rush shot her an exasperated look.

//Look,// Young said. //For what it's worth, I'm sorry.//

//Why?// Rush asked him the word carrying overtones of exhaustion, resignation, bitterness, and, incredibly, *amusement*. //I'd have done the same thing. I didn't think you had it in you.//

Young clamped down hard on the surge of irritation that comment produced.

//I'm thinking that maybe we need to work on our conflict mediation skills.// Young replied.

//Surely you jest.//

//You really should not have had to do what you did.// A quick image of Rush pressing his full weight into his injured foot rose to the surface of his mind. He tried to suppress it, but he could tell by the sudden flash of interest from the scientist that he had seen it.

//Disturbing,// Rush agreed, as if it had been someone else on the floor of the control interface room. //It didn't hurt. Or rather it *did*, but it was difficult to feel it.//

//If you're trying to make me feel better, it's not working.//

Rush shrugged minutely. //I can't say I'm particularly inclined to concern myself with your emotional state on a minute to minute basis,// Rush replied.

//Good,// Young said, absently rubbing at his knee. //Let's keep it that way.//

//You will get no argument from me,// Rush replied dryly.

//So you got TJ to take a look at your foot?//

//Yes,// Rush said absently, //It's fine.//

//I really don't see how you're getting 'fine' out of any of this. What did TJ actually say?//

//She advised against a repeat performance,// Rush said. //She had to reset the bone.//

//God.// Young could not control the flare of guilt that Rush's statement produced.

//Oh stop,// Rush said wearily. //That's not productive.//

Young sighed. //You're exhausted. You should—// he broke off, changing his approach. //Why aren't you sleeping?//

//I can't.//

//Why can't you?//

//Watch.//

Young felt Rush slowly ease up on the stranglehold he had on his own consciousness. The scientist was so tired he fell asleep with alarming rapidity. Or he would have, if his mind hadn't abruptly been yanked out and away from Young, who *barely* managed to hold him in place.

//You couldn't have just *explained* it to me?// Young asked, his heart pounding against his ribs. //With words?//

Rush shrugged minutely.

//So you can't even *sleep* anymore?//

//Separating so you could go to the planet was, perhaps, less than advisable,// Rush said unevenly. //Everything seems more difficult now.//

//Yeah,// Young said. //But we can fix it.//

//Possibly.//

//One step at a time,// Young said. //Go to sleep already. I won't let you get pulled in.//

Young had been prepared for an argument, but instead he got a tired assent and the brief feeling of falling before Rush's dreamscape exploded into his consciousness. It was an almost unintelligible stream of numbers and images, some of which were familiar, some clearly alien. After a few moments he was able to pull back somewhat, letting Rush's mind fade to the background while the observation deck came back into focus.

That, he reflected, had gone better than he'd expected.

Young sat for a few more moments on the observation deck, resting his knee, which, between the rocky descent on the planet and the long hours afterward, had fared pretty well. He rolled his the leg of his fatigues up, and carefully unwrapped TJ's bandaging job. Her second set of stitches was holding and the skin was beginning to knit delicately together. He re-bandaged the injury and stood, rubbing absently at his aching wrists and forearms.

It was a good sign, he supposed, that some of Rush's pain had come back to him.

He walked back to his quarters, feeling his own exhaustion a bit more with each step. While he had been blocking Rush out, he hadn't had to deal with fighting the pull of the ship on the other man; but now, with Rush asleep and not helping, Young was feeling the constant low level energy drain more and more.

He hoped that *he* would be able to sleep without losing Rush to the ship, but since he didn't seem to need to actively focus to keep Rush where he was supposed to be—it seemed reasonable to assume he was free to get some rest.

He showered and undressed slowly, brushing the last of the fine red dust from his uniform as he did so.

That night, he dreamed of David Telford.

*He stands in a large room that is not of human design.*

*It melds Goa'uld and Ancient aesthetics in a manner that is somehow uncomfortable to look at. Above him, the walls fade away into darkness. The minimal light that emanates from active screens is barely enough to throw the floorspace into relief. His boots echo hollowly with each step he takes.*

*"Magnificent, isn't it?" David asks. "This is where he succeeded."*

*He doesn't reply.*

*He finds the room unsettling, at best.*

*He pushes his hair out of his eyes and looks over at Amanda Perry, who is staring at him with an unreadable expression on her face.*

*It might be fear.*

*"Don't do this," she whispers to him, too quietly for David to hear. "Please."*

*"We talked about this," he replies just as quietly. "We agreed. There's no other way."*

*"But now that I'm here, I've changed my mind. This is wrong. There's something about this place that's been twisted. This isn't our legacy to continue. It shouldn't be." Her words are rapid and breathless, her eyes follow David, who circles back toward them, his footsteps echoing in the cavernous space.*

*"I know that." He reaches forward, his hand closing around the delicate bones of her wrist. "It will be all right."*

*"It won't," she whispers.*

*"Mandy—"*

*"What are you talking about?" David asks mildly, coming back into view as he rounds a bank of monitors.*

*"Dr. Perry needs to be beamed out," he replies smoothly. "She's not feeling well."*

*David nods and pulls out his radio to make the call.*

*He looks back at Mandy but she shakes her head fractionally. "You shouldn't be alone down here," she mouths silently. "Don't send me away."*

*"You shouldn't have to see this," he murmurs, leaning in. "It may be—upsetting."*

*She shakes her head, but before she can comment further, she is beamed away.*

*He looks over at David.*

*"It's probably better this way," the other man says. "I never understood why you wanted her along in the first place. With all that—" he makes a sweeping motion indicating a wheelchair, "She's a liability."*

*"She's brilliant," he replies. "That's never a liability."*

*"If you say so," David gives him a fixed gaze from beneath lowered eyebrows. "Let's get going, so you can—get back."*

*He had already made the necessary modifications. There is nothing left to do but to attempt it.*



*He walks over to the edge of a pale, rectangular depression in the floor where the faintest sheen of liquid glimmers in the dim light. He kneels, feeling his muscles knot with tension as he unlaces his boots quietly, competently.*

*"Nerves of steel, that's what you've got," David says. "I fucking love it. How did you ever end up in academia?"*

*He resists the urge to roll his eyes.*

*"What a waste," the other man says.*

*He grimaces faintly. "I would hardly call it a waste."*

*He pulls off his socks and gets to his feet. The bottoms of his borrowed fatigues drag along the floor.*

*There is no point in delay. He steps carefully into the pool. The thin sheen of liquid turns out to be a watery gel. It clings to the bottoms of his feet and soaks the hems of his fatigues as he makes his way gingerly to stand in the center of the shallow depression.*

*The gel is going to have excellent conductance properties.*

*"Ready?" David asks him quietly.*

*"Yes."*

*"You're sure you wouldn't rather try this on Dr. Perry?"*

*"You're a cold-hearted bastard, David."*

*"Takes one to know one, Nick."*

*David drops his shoulder and levers up a switch with all of his strength.*

*He looked away from David, gazing up, into the blackness, as he listens to the charge mount in concealed capacitors.*

*His heart pounds in his throat.*

*He waits for—*

Young shot awake with a start, his own heart trying to escape his chest, his breathing coming in ragged, shallow gasps. He was soaked in a cold sweat, trapped in blankets. Shakily, he disentangled himself from his bedding and got to his feet, staggering toward the window.

He pressed his forehead against the cool surface and shut his eyes.

Halfway across the ship, in quarantine, Rush was still asleep, dreaming now of something else. Of numbers and of doorways. Of cyphered locks that would not open for him.

What he had just experienced had been no ordinary dream.

That had been a *memory*.

Young was sure of it.

Given their bitter enmity, Young had always suspected that Rush and Telford had some personal history, likely involving Rush doing something to piss Telford off, but this—well, *this* was something else entirely—something extensive, something secret, and something Rush hadn't wanted to be a part of.

He shivered in the cool air.

He thought back to his time on Icarus, to attempt to place Rush's memory in some kind of context. He tried to think of a time when both Rush and Telford had been off the base, but he couldn't come up with one. Dr. Perry had never been on the Icarus planet at all. She had been stationed on *Earth*. What Young had just seen must have occurred earlier; likely it had been shortly after Rush had been recruited to the program, before the Icarus base was up and running.

Young rubbed his jaw, wondering what the *hell* Telford and Rush had been working on.

Getting Rush to tell him about it would likely be difficult, as Young was going to have to explain not *only where* he'd gotten his knowledge, but also overcome the fact that the scientist clearly did *not* want to discuss the matter, seeing as neither Rush nor Telford had ever dropped even so much as a hint of the project in the *entire* time Young known either of them.

This did not sit right with Young.

Between Telford's fixation on Rush, the scientist's clear dislike for Telford, and the fact that they had an extensive, secret professional relationship prior to arriving at the Icarus base combined to make Young extremely uneasy, especially given the fact that Telford seemed to be behind the push to swap Rush out on the stones.

After another sleepless half hour, his churning thoughts hadn't gotten him very far.

Only two things seemed clear. One, he was going to have to tell Rush about Telford's plan to yank him back to Earth, and get his opinion on whether or not Chloe should be sent to talk to the IOA in an attempt to forestall their efforts. Two, before he talked

with Rush, he wanted to talk to Camile Wray, as she might be able to shed some light on Rush's history at the SGC.

Having decided on a preliminary course of action, he returned to bed. Though he didn't expect sleep to come easily, his exhaustion soon put him under.

He didn't wake until his alarm sounded the next morning at seven hundred hours.

He was about to call TJ to check in on Chloe and Rush, but it was immediately apparent via their link that Rush had already been released from the infirmary. He was sitting with his feet hooked over the edge of an adjacent chair in the control interface room, working again on Destiny's shield harmonics.

//TJ released you?// Young asked by way of greeting.

//Less than an hour ago,// Rush responded absently, tapping a pen against the pages of his well-worn notebook.

//You and Chloe are both clear?//

//Chloe is still in the infirmary, but will likely be released shortly.//

//But you're definitely clear?//

//That's generally a requirement for release from quarantine,// Rush said evasively.

Young sighed.

//So when I go talk to TJ, she's going to have no problem with the fact that you're in the control interface room working on god knows what?// he asked.

//Yes yes,// Rush said impatiently, more than half his attention on the problem in front of him. //Go do—whatever it is that you do around here when you're not harassing the science staff.//

Young rolled his eyes. //What's with the obsession with the shields, by the way?// he asked. //You're always working on them.//

Rush sighed, and Young got a brief flash of something—loneliness maybe—before Rush sent him a packet of information tailored so that he could understand it. It had been Eli who had first pointed out that the shield harmonics cycled in an unpredictable but nonrandom pattern when they were at FTL. Rush had been intrigued, and had spent the last several months recording data that he was now in the process of analyzing. He'd been through it with Eli and Chloe without much luck so far. Beneath the glimpses of memories that allowed him to put the narrative together, however,

Young grasped something else—something tonal, something *musical* that Rush associated with the shields.

//Music?// Young sent in puzzlement.

Rush dropped his pen. It clattered to the floor.

//?//

//Why do you think about music when you think about the shields?//

//I didn't intend for you to pick that up. It's probably nothing, it's just—// Rush broke off, shattering his thoughts in to multiple parallel streams, trying to keep Young out.

This time, it didn't work.

//You can hear them,// Young realized. //The shields. You literally hear them.//

Rush shifted slightly, clearly uncomfortable, though Young wasn't sure why he would be. //I think that's how Destiny communicates with the seed ships, amongst other things,// he said finally.

//What about the obelisk planet?// Young asked. //Could you hear the buried ship?//

//No,// Rush said shortly. //I hear only Destiny.//

//What does it sound like?//

//I don't wish to discuss it,// Rush snapped, but the answer to Young's question ran like a current through his reply.

Sad.

To Rush, the ship sounded unhappy.

That hadn't been what Young had meant when he'd asked the question.

He really wasn't sure how to respond, so he withdrew gently from Rush's mind, letting his own quarters come back into focus. He dressed quickly and made his way down to the mess, hoping to find Wray still there. She was normally an early riser, and 0715 was on the late side to find her still at breakfast. Luck, however was with him.

"Camile," he said, as he noticed her about to get up. "Do you have a minute?"

She gestured for him to sit, giving him a cautious nod. "Colonel," she said in greeting.

"What can I do for you?"

The briefest mental touch showed Rush still absorbed in the shield harmonics data.

"We need to discuss Rush."

"Rush?" Wray repeated, raising an eyebrow.

"Does he have any particular history with Colonel Telford that I should be aware of?"

"Colonel Telford?" she asked, her voice abruptly acquiring a quiet intensity. "Why do you ask?"

"McKay mentioned something to me," he lied easily, "when we called him in for help with the chair. Look, if Homeworld Command is successful in their attempt to dial in, I need to know if Telford has it in for Rush. Or vice versa. Their interactions seem—adversarial."

"Please tell me you see the irony in that assessment." She gave him a pointed look.

"I get it," he said dryly. "I do. But it's a serious question."

She glanced around the room.

"Rush and Telford *do* have a history," she told him, her voice nearly a whisper. "During the time Telford was with the Lucian Alliance, he came into possession of either some intelligence or an actual piece of technology that required the highest level of security clearance. Even the IOA wasn't informed of the details. Telford was given his pick of personnel and resources, including access to the Daedalus when he needed it."

She paused and Young jumped in. "But Rush was recruited directly to the Icarus project by Dr. Jackson."

She shot him a guarded look. "He was. Supposedly. But—Telford made a bid for him at nearly the same time. General Landry forced Rush to split his time in order to keep Icarus. Rush wasn't happy about it, and neither was Dr. Jackson. Dr. Jackson filed a formal complaint with me, but it was sparse on details. Telford's project was highly classified. I don't think it even had a name." Wray paused and then added, "none of this was widely known."

"How is a project's lead scientist supposed to split his time?" Young asked.

"There are some indications that the two projects were related. The heavy involvement of Telford, Rush, and Jackson in both suggests it."

"So any indication as to what this other project was?" Young asked.

"No," she said quietly, "But it was scrapped four or five months before we gated to Destiny. Rush was finally allowed to stay full time at the Icarus base. Something happened to put Rush in a position to get what he wanted—I'm not sure what it was. Their association ended with an incident off world that nearly killed both of them."

Young raised his eyebrows, inviting her to continue.

"I read the hospital discharge summaries. Telford had third degree burns down his right arm and flash blindness."

"And Rush?"

"He was unresponsive for six days," she said, "but uninjured."

"And that's when the project was scrapped?" Young asked.

"Yes. Rush finally regained consciousness and petitioned General O'Neill to send him straight to Icarus. He went directly from the hospital through the stargate, refusing to wait to speak with Telford. As far as I know, they didn't see each other again until you turned down command of the Icarus project and it was offered to Telford. Over Rush's vehement objections."

"Any idea what happened between them personally?" Young asked.

Wray shook her head. "They were very close in the beginning, up until around the time that Rush lost his wife. Then it fell apart very quickly. There were all the usual ugly rumors, but nothing substantiated."

"Rumors?" Young asked, eyebrows raised marginally.

"That they were sleeping together. Personally, I don't believe it—Rush doesn't strike me as the type to do that sort of thing."

Young's eyes narrowed. "Unless it would get him something he wanted."

Wray shot him a sharp look. "He's quite capable of getting what he wants without resorting to any such tactics, as we both well know."

"You're probably right," Young replied.

It was time to cut this conversation off before Rush noticed what he was talking about. The more upset Young became, the more likely the other man would realize what was taking place.

He stood abruptly.

Wray looked up at him, startled.

"Thanks," he said quietly. He handed his now empty bowl to Becker, and made straight for Lieutenant Scott's civilian boot camp. He needed a few minutes to clear his head before he took the problem with the communications stones to Rush.

There was nothing better for that than a run through Destiny's long, dark corridors.

Rush and Telford.

God, what a pair.

"Colonel," Lieutenant Scott said by way of greeting as he rounded the corner into the space where three corridors converged that was the meeting point for long, ship-wide runs. "Are you joining us?"

"If my knee holds up," Young replied ruefully.

Scott nodded, and they set off at a steady pace, maybe a nine-minute mile, by Young's estimation.

Rush and Telford.

Ugh.

He could understand how the two of them might have hit it off. Rush approached everything with a blazing, single-minded intensity that would certainly appeal to Telford, who had that same streak, but who went to some lengths to bury it beneath a professional veneer. The problem was that as soon as they found themselves on opposite sides of anything—well, the fallout would be unbelievable. Telford was inflexible and preferred a command style that Rush would either exploit for his own purposes or tear himself apart to oppose.

Unbidden came the image of Rush, kneeling on the floor of the control interface room, hands braced against the deck plating as he drove his weight onto his left foot—

And *that* was exactly the kind of thought that he did *not* need right now.

He tried to focus on the pain in his knee, which had finally faded to a more manageable ache despite the poor treatment of the previous day. He was able to settle into a rhythm and stay with it for a good two and a half miles before his knee really started to give him hell. Around him, some of the civilians were starting to flag.

"Come on, people," Scott called from his position on point. "Keep it up."

//So,// Rush said acidly, surprising Young with his sudden attention, //you *literally* run aimlessly around the ship when you're not harassing the science team? I wish I could claim to be surprised, but unfortunately that's not the case.//

//Fitness is important.// Young replied. //What do you want?//

//I was just curious as to what the *fuck* you were doing to your knee.//

//Is this bothering you? I can partially block you out if you want.//

//I don't care,// Rush snapped at him. //Do what you want.// The scientist's thoughts were an incomprehensible, agitated swirl beneath his projection.

Okay, so—definitely bothering him then.

Young rolled his eyes and slowed to a walk, breaking off from the main running group. He felt a brief flare of surprise from Rush, colored by something else that he didn't catch. //We need to talk,// Young said cautiously.

//If it were up to you, we wouldn't do anything else,// Rush said, wryly. //Regarding?//

//I'd rather do it face to face,// Young said, careful not to let anything slip. //When is good for you?// Again, he got a brief sense of surprise from the other man, which was quickly suppressed.

//Forty minutes or so,// Rush replied.

//Let me know when you're free and I'll come find you,// Young said. //My schedule is pretty clear this morning.//

//Obviously,// Rush commented dryly before withdrawing to go back to his analysis.

Young took a quick shower and then headed toward the infirmary, intending to talk to TJ about the events of the previous day, hoping for an update on the nature of the virus she had discovered in the ship's filter system, and whether their quarantine and subsequent decon protocols had eliminated the threat entirely.

Young had just passed the mess when the first wave of pain struck him like a screwdriver to the skull.

He staggered sideways, fingers catching numbly on one of the metal ribs that lined Destiny's hallways.

He couldn't see.

His vision was darkening, splitting, trying to resolve into something else.

It lasted for a few more seconds and then faded, leaving a horrible disorientation behind.

He realized he was on the floor.

Someone was kneeling beside him. "TJ, this is James. We have a medical emergency in the corridor outside the mess. It's the colonel."

"On my way," TJ's voice crackled over the radio, tight with anxiety.

In the back of Young's mind, the control interface room snapped into crisp focus. //What the fuck *was that*?// Rush asked as he pushed himself to his feet, grabbed his crutches, and headed toward the door.



//I thought that was *you*// Young projected back weakly.

//Definitely not,// Rush replied. The scientist was pouring his own energy into their link, helping Young force himself up onto his elbows, helping him order his thoughts.

"Sir, you shouldn't move," James said, pushing him back down. Greer and Wray had joined her.

"Colonel Young," Wray said, gently, "can you talk to me?"

He had a hard time focusing on her, and when his vision finally cooperated, he saw four people kneeling next to him. James, Wray, Greer, and, not Emily this time, but *Gloria*.

"What's happening?" Young directed his question toward the AI.

"Colonel, you just collapsed," Wray responded. "Lie still. Help is on the way."

The AI looked down at him, fear evident in Gloria's eyes. "I don't know," it whispered. "But I can only protect *his* mind. Not yours."

Rush wasn't communicating with Young in words, but he felt the other man's anxiety peak to almost unbearable levels at Gloria's comment.

A second wave of pain hit him and this time his vision split again, something else superimposing itself on his field of view. The lines and angles he saw looked familiar, but he couldn't process them into a defined image.

In the back of his mind he heard the clatter as Rush dropped his crutches and sank into a crouch, kneeling against the deck plating, pressing down against his left foot, trying to keep them *both* grounded.

It wasn't going to work.

Rush wasn't meant to be the anchor.

As Young was pulled away, Rush was required to resist the ship more and more with each passing second.

//You have to *let go*// Young barely had the strength to project.

//No.//

Rush's vision was fading. The scientist he could barely feel anything. The only thing left holding him to his body was the remote sense of pain from his foot.

Distantly, through what remained of their link, Young heard the harmonies of Destiny's shields.

//Let go,// Young whispered. //You're tearing your mind apart.//

//I won't.//

A third wave of pain hit Young, and this time, they couldn't fight it.

He he opened his eyes, gasping.

The pain was gone.

So was Destiny.

He was sitting in an office, staring into the face of Samantha Carter.

He didn't need to look down at his uniform to know whose body he was in.

"Doctor Rush?" Carter asked, the words hesitant, apologetic.

"Not exactly," Young growled.

## Chapter Ten

It took Young several seconds to adjust to being completely alone in his own mind.

Previously, when he had blocked Rush out of his thoughts, he had felt the man as a constant pressure against his mental shielding, but now—there was nothing, just a void, a horrifying emptiness where the scientist had been.

He felt like a part of him had been torn away.

He tried to stand and realized he was currently *restrained*.

Velcro.

How humane.

How reasonable.

Young's eyes swept the room.

Two guards stood in the doorway behind Carter, their hands casually resting on their rifles. Flanking her were two individuals in suits, one of whom he recognized as Richard Woolsey.

He couldn't see the terminal with the stones. He assumed it was on the table behind him.

Next to Young, bound in chairs, were four people, likely all from Destiny's crew. As his gaze passed over them, one of them met his eye, giving him a significant look and a fractional nod.

Greer.

Damn it.

He flexed his forearms against his restraints, trying not to betray even a flicker of dismay.

If he could have chosen *anyone* from the crew to remain on Destiny in this situation, it would have been Greer. The sergeant had no particular love for Rush, but when forced to choose between the scientist and *Telford*—Young was certain that Greer would back Rush every time.

It was likely that Telford had come to the same conclusion.

Based on the nervous glances he was getting from the man and woman sitting next to Greer, he guessed that he also had Chloe and Eli with him.

"Excuse me?" Carter asked, her tone sharper now. "If you're not Dr. Rush, then who are you?"

He looked left to see another woman sitting beside him.

"Wray," she mouthed silently.

"Colonel Young," he growled at Carter.

Carter's eyebrows drew together. "Colonel Young? Can I have your authorization code as confirmation?"

He gave her his code while he zeroed in on his priorities.

There was no way that Rush would be able to hold out for long, if at all, against Destiny. Young wished he had asked the scientist a bit more about what happened, exactly, when he joined with the ship, but it was clear that Rush still had at least some agency and might be able to act to their advantage. It stood to reason, therefore, that shortly, Rush might drop the ship out of FTL, at which point Young would have about twenty seconds to talk to TJ—the only person still on the ship who had any idea what was going on.

"Colonel," Carter said by way of greeting, her expression unhappy. "I'm really sorry about this. I understand that this situation is far from ideal, and—"

"You're *sorry*?" Young growled, locking eyes with her. "Gross ethical violations aside, you've compromised the safety of my ship, you've put members of my crew in danger using an untested technology which nearly *killed* me by the way, and you've replaced four of my key personnel with soldiers unequipped to deal with the challenges they're going to face on Destiny, and you're '*sorry*'? You'll forgive me, ma'am, if I fail to give a damn about that."

Carter looked at him, her posture open and unflinching. "They only have authorization for one hour," she said quietly. "Not everyone agrees with this plan."

She was putting up a dutiful front, but she was also giving him an indication that she might be a potential ally.

"What's your mission objective?" he snapped.

"The primary objective was for McKay and I to talk with Rush. The secondary objective is for Telford's science team to study Destiny's power distribution system."

"Well your primary objective is shot to hell," Young said, "and I'm sure Eli can tell you all you need to know about the power distribution system, after he gets an apology for having his consciousness forcibly removed from his body. You need to send me back. Immediately."

"Colonel," Carter said, raising her hands, "it's not—"

And then, with an abruptness that was shocking despite his readiness, he was back on Destiny, standing in front of TJ, James, and Greer. TJ was staring at him in alarm, hands outstretched. She was barely visible in the dim emergency lighting that now illuminated the corridors.

"—significant neurological event and—" TJ broke off as she registered the drop out of FTL. She looked at Young in sudden expectation.

"Yeah," Young confirmed, "it's me."

He had, maybe, thirty seconds. Probably it would be less.

Young pulled his weapon and handed it to her. "Find Rush," he said quickly, stepping in close. "You're the only one on board who knows what's going on. You have to find Rush, and you have to prevent Telford from getting to him—from *touching* him at all costs."

Without being told, Greer pulled his own weapon and handed it to James.

"*Whatever* it takes, TJ, do you understand what I'm saying?"

She nodded.

"He's somewhere near the control interface room. Take James. Go. Run." They took off down the hallway.

Young turned and started walking rapidly in the opposite direction as he pulled out his radio. "Bridge, report," he snapped.

"We've got power failures all over the ship." It was Brody who responded. "Everything's either shutting down or already dead. We've lost shields and weapons, we just dropped out of FTL, and we're going to lose life support."

Young looked up as the emergency lights flickered, plunging them briefly into total darkness.

"I don't know what's happening," Brody said. "Rush isn't answering his radio. Neither is Eli."

Young couldn't feel even a hint of Rush anywhere in his mind, but he blocked anyway, hoping that Telford wouldn't be able to overcome it, hoping that the other man wouldn't even guess that there *was* a link.

Time was nearly up.

It had to be.

Young met Greer's eyes.

"Shit," the other man said, just as Young's vision began to fade.

With a visual and mental blurring he found himself back in the SGC, looking at Carter, breaking off a sentence he didn't remember beginning. He flexed his wrists against the restraints.

Carter was staring at him, apparently aware that something had just taken place.

"Colonel Young?" she asked.

"Yes. Power is down all over the ship. No shields. No weapons. No *life support*. Odds are? This is *a direct result* of the stunt you just pulled."

Carter's expression was pained.

"That seems unlikely." Woolsey spoke up for the first time. "You've been using the stones continuously from day one. Why the sudden problems now? It seems terribly convenient."

Young didn't respond immediately. He wasn't entirely sure how to answer without giving away more information than he was prepared to part with. Eli, however, stepped in.

"The ship is *sentient*," Eli said, looking Woolsey. "It *knows* what just happened. It doesn't like its personnel being kidnapped. Consciousness-napped."

"Why," Carter asked quietly, "when we tried to lock onto Rush's signal, did we pull *you* out instead?"

Young met her gaze impassively.

"If you tell me," she said quietly, "I may be able to help you."

"How?" Young asked.

"I'll take it up the chain," she replied, glancing at the IOA members.

Woolsey and his associate shot her disapproving looks, but said nothing.

Carter kept her eyes fixed on Young. She gave him a subtle nod, a gentle lift of her eyebrows.

Young chewed the inside of his lip, considering.

He trusted her by reputation.

He definitely trusted Jack O'Neill.

The person he didn't trust, *at all*, in this situation was Telford.

It was unbelievable to Young that the man had kept his position as the de facto Earth-based leader of the Icarus project, despite Rush having *successfully proven* that the man had been the Lucian Alliance mole that betrayed the project's location.

If that wasn't egregious enough to at least get the man reassigned, then Young certainly didn't have *a chance* at getting him dismissed.

Telford either had a powerful backer within the administration or he was important for some other reason.

Either way, Young knew that there was basically zero chance of getting rid of the other man as the military liaison between Destiny and the upper echelons of Homeworld Command.

He did *not* want Telford or the IOA knowing *anything* about the connection between Rush and Destiny.

Carter was still watching him, waiting for his answer.

"Eli is correct," Young said slowly. "We recently discovered a sophisticated AI at the heart of Destiny's mainframe. It's interacted with several members of the crew, but—most intensively with Rush."

Carter raised her eyebrows.

"I don't know for sure," Young said, "but I would guess that it was the AI who was able to interfere with your workaround for the terminal. As for why *I* was pulled out instead," Young fixed Carter with a brief intense stare, "I can only guess that it has something to do with the fact that I was the person who extracted Rush from the control interface chair. McKay," he said pausing again, "may be able to put together what happened, based on his experience on Destiny."

"I'll talk to him," Carter replied.

"I am positive," Young continued, "that you're *never* going to be able to pull Rush out. That would make your workaround for the communication stones a failure.

Furthermore, even though you *can* pull other people out, the AI clearly doesn't like it. Bottom line," he said, raising his eyebrows, "it's time you sent us back—before we can't dig ourselves out of this hole that you've shoved us into."

Carter looked at her watch. "It's been five minutes," she said. "We should be getting a report back from one of our scientists to confirm that everything is going according to plan in another five."

Young grimaced.

Ten minutes was *too long*.

He felt it in his gut.

Life support on Destiny was failing.

*Life support was failing.*

What did that mean?

Young couldn't see Rush allowing such a thing to happen if he could do anything to prevent it.

The man was *already* a mess. Whatever happened, the repercussions from this were going to be horrific.

Young spent the remaining five minutes trying to come up with a plan by which he could destroy the terminal if it came to that. It was primarily a mental exercise, however, since such a plan carried the risk of stranding him permanently in Telford's body and trapping the other man with Rush indefinitely.

That was not an acceptable option.

"Okay," Carter said, finally. "We're due for a report." She stood.

"Greer," Young said quietly before she could step around him to the device in the back of the room. "Greer or Eli." He looked up at her. "Please."

"That's not for you to decide—" Woolsey began, but Sam cut him off by stepping forward and edging around Young.

The man whom Eli had switched with gasped suddenly, jolting against his restraints.

"Report," Carter snapped at him.

"Main power is down," he said, blinking rapidly. "The backups just went down as well. We—*they* have literally no shielding. No lights. It's pitch black. Colonel Telford is convinced that Rush is behind this somehow, because he and two of Colonel Young's personnel have locked themselves in the infirmary. They're refusing to let anyone in."



Young entertained the brief hope that Rush might still be conscious.

Upon reflection, however, he realized that TJ had most likely managed to give that impression to Telford's people, without it actually being true.

"Could Rush be staging this to force our hand?" Woolsey asked sharply. "It wouldn't be the first time he's attempted something like this. Can he control main power from within the infirmary?"

"No," Young said quickly, "he can't."

In actuality, it was very likely that Rush could control main power from *anywhere*.

"If the situation is so dire, why isn't he helping to restore power?" Woolsey asked.

"So you're getting *no data*?" Carter asked the airman sharply.

"No," he replied. "None."

"What is Colonel Telford doing?"

"He's trying to break into the infirmary to talk with Dr. Rush."

Carter came forward and released the young man from his bonds with a quick, "you're dismissed. Debriefing in fifty minutes."

Young exhaled slowly, trying not to show any visible sign of relief. Eli was back on the ship, and it looked like Carter wasn't going to pull him back. Maybe he would be able to make some progress—at least restore life support or shields.

"Send us back," Young said quietly. "Send all of us back and destroy the workaround."

Carter looked down at him, obviously torn.

"You're putting the entire crew at risk."

"It looks that way," Carter said, "but—it's looked that way before." She glanced at Woolsey and his associate. "Given Dr. Rush's history of manipulating Earth-based science teams sent to Destiny, I have specific instructions to confirm the veracity of any reported threats."

Young had opened his mouth to respond when Wray answered instead.

"Yes," she said, and even though the voice was not her own, she managed to lace it with her unmistakable equanimity. "You need something to give your superiors. Unfortunately, incontrovertible evidence of a demonstrable threat to human life usually takes a form that I'm sure we would all prefer to avoid."

Carter's gaze shifted to Wray.

"Perhaps you could instead take them a *reminder*." Wray's tone turned icy.

"A reminder?" Carter echoed.

"Homeworld Command owes Dr. Rush." Her voice was cool and collected. "Something—unfortunate happened to him. Something that wasn't his fault."

If Young hadn't worked so closely with Wray, if he hadn't faced her down time and again, he wouldn't have known that she was taking a terrible risk, playing a hunch that Carter would have some knowledge about the incident involving Rush and Telford, playing a hunch that such knowledge would, in this situation, carry any weight at all.

"The Air Force might find itself in an uncomfortable position should an internal review panel be called to consider that incident," Wray said.

Carter looked at Wray, her expression lightening almost imperceptibly. "Let me make a call."

"Do what you need to do," Young said, "but hurry."

After Carter left the room, Wray looked over at him.

Young gave her a quick nod, trying to put something of the relief he was feeling into his expression.

Wray's eyes shifted to Greer and Young looked over, following her gaze.

Greer glanced at the table behind Young and then back, clearly asking if Young wanted to make some kind of move to gain access to the terminal.

Young shook his head.

He chewed the inside of his lip, ignoring the hostile gazes of the two IOA members still left in the room.

He watched Wray's fingernails tear tiny crescents in the upholstery of her chair.

He tried to figure out how the *hell* he was going to explain this Rush.

Hopefully he would get the chance.

Finally, after nearly eleven minutes, Carter burst back into the room.

"Okay," she said. "This comes from the top. And I mean the *very* top. We're sending you back, but you're going to have to meet with Telford tomorrow for a debriefing, and Rush is going to have to cooperate with McKay and I for a feasibility assessment. I need your word on that."

"You've got it," Young said quickly, "if both the feasibility assessment and the meeting tomorrow can happen on Destiny, and I get *your* word that you don't pull me out again."

"Done," Carter said, already walking toward the device on the table behind him.

"Thank you," Young murmured.

"Don't," Carter whispered as she passed, her voice betraying unhappiness for the first time. "Don't thank me."

He heard the click of a flipping switch, and then—

It was dark.

He stumbled, disoriented, his eyes caught and held by the shifting, focused beam of light that projected from a flashlight he had in his hand.

Greer was beside him.

Chloe and Wray were not.

Young assumed that he and Greer had ended up outside the infirmary. A few quick sweeps from his flashlight up and down the hall confirmed it.

"Well, *this* doesn't look good," Greer said.

"Nope. Not really," Young replied, trying to reach Rush's mind and failing.

He pulled out his radio. "TJ?" he murmured, depressing the button. "It's me. Telford's gone."

"I'm going to need some confirmation," she replied evenly.

"Okay," he said, "sounds reasonable."

He tried to think of something that would convince her—something he would know, but Telford wouldn't.

It seemed like there should be so many of those things.

He could only come up with one.

Young turned away from Greer and walked a few paces away from the door.

"Carmen," he said gently.

She didn't reply, but he and Greer heard the shriek of metal on metal. Someone on the other side of the infirmary doors was using something to pry them apart. After a few seconds, a crack appeared between the doors.

Young and Greer stepped forward, helping as much as they could, getting first fingers, then hands, and, finally, shoulders inside the doorway to lever it open.

James was waiting for them on the other side. Young's flashlight caught the wisps of her hair.

"Telford never got through," James said quietly. "We were with him the whole time."

Young clapped her on the shoulder, wishing that he felt relieved by her news.

"Good work, lieutenant. The two of you get up to crew quarters. I want everyone accounted for. No one should be wandering around alone in this kind of dark. Coordinate with Lieutenant Scott and report back over the radio in twenty minutes."

They gave him identical nods, swallowing the questions he was certain they had.

He had no illusions he was going to be so lucky with TJ.

He couldn't see her at first as he advanced through the darkness, running his flashlight in broad semicircular sweeps. Finally, the beam caught the pale flash of metal-lined holes where her bootlaces passed through black leather. She was in the back of the infirmary, quietly perched on the edge of a gurney, his handgun held ready, resting against her left shoulder.

"Hey," she said, clicking on her own light.

He squinted uncomfortably in the glare.

She set the flashlight down on a table to her right, letting diffuse light from the focused beam illuminate the space between them.

"Where is he?" Young asked her, trying not to betray the urgency he felt.

"He's here," she replied. The words were careful. Measured. She didn't move.

"TJ," he said quietly, hands held up instinctively. "It really *is* me."

"I know. I can tell. I've always been able to tell."

"I need to see him."

She didn't respond right away.

Young wished that he could get a good look at her face.

"He re-injured his foot," TJ said quietly. "That's the second time."

The silence lengthened between them. "The *first* time," she continued, "was yesterday, right before he fixed the FTL drive."

"What are you getting at, TJ?"

He was pretty sure he knew *exactly* what she was getting at.

"You had an argument," she replied. "Eli told me."

Young wasn't sure how to respond to that, so he said nothing.

"I asked him yesterday," TJ said quietly, "why he tore open his foot. He wouldn't tell me. At the time, I thought it might be out of spite. To hurt you, by hurting himself. But now, I'm not so sure."

"TJ—"

"I've been asking myself," she broke in, "for the past twenty-five minutes while I sat here, with him, in the dark, why you would tell me to protect him from Telford. To protect him from Telford *at all costs*. To prevent Telford from so much as even *touching* him?"

Young stayed silent.

"And now, to fix Destiny, to bring him back, you need to—what? To touch him? To do the *same thing* that you were trying to prevent Telford from doing?" She paused, her face still shrouded in darkness. "Does he have any defense against you? Any at all?"

"No," Young admitted. "He never has. He still doesn't."

"You told me you could *block the link*," TJ said grimly.

"I can," Young said, "but he can't."

"So how are *you* any better than Telford?" she asked.

"I guess I don't know that I am," he replied. "But what choice do we have? If I do nothing, he's not going to make it. And neither are the rest of us."

TJ sighed. "He must hate this."

"He does," Young answered. "He fights it all the time."

He still couldn't see her face in the darkness, but he could see a softening in the set of her shoulders, in the line of her neck. He wasn't sure what had caused the change in her stance—maybe it was resignation, or maybe relief that he was finally being honest with her. "Why didn't you tell me?" she finally asked.

"We still don't fully understand it ourselves."

"I can't help either of you if you don't tell me what's happening."

"I know. I know that."

She was quiet.

He tried again, barely able to contain the intolerable sense of urgency that had been building for the past half hour. "TJ, I *really* need to—"

"Yeah," she said quietly. "He's right here." She stood, reaching over to rotate her flashlight toward the wall behind her. In the dim light, Young could see that Rush had been directly behind her the entire time, lying motionless on the same gurney she had been sitting on.

"We found him like this," TJ said quietly. "On the floor. Nonresponsive."

"Yeah," Young said, grimacing. "He's with the ship. I *hope* he's with the ship."

"The ship is dead," she replied, her words delivered like a slap. "No power anywhere."

Young flinched, his eyes still fixed on Rush.

"So what's the plan?" she asked after a few seconds, her voice softer, nearly apologetic.

"I'm going to pull him out. Right now."

Young walked up to the edge of the gurney, looking down at the other man in the dim lighting. Though more often than not he wished that Rush would just *slow down* and take a god damned *break* for once in his life, he found that he hated seeing the scientist like this—so unnaturally still. There was nothing left of the contained energy that defined the other man.

Not wanting to waste any additional time, Young wrapped his right hand around the back of Rush's neck, threading his fingers through unruly hair, half-fanned over the pillow. He slid his left hand inside Rush's black military-issue jacket, across the man's thin undershirt to curl around his right shoulder.

He shut his eyes and opened their connection as wide as he could.

On the other side, there was nothing.

Not even the depthless darkness of the ship.

Not even an echo of the shields.

Not so much as a hint of Rush.

Anywhere.

"Shit," Young gasped, tearing himself away from the other man, heart racing, airways constricting. "Goddamn it."

He turned away from Rush, away from TJ, and strode over to the wall in three quick steps. He leaned against it, one arm supporting him as he pressed into the metal.

This was his fault.

There was no getting around that.

He should have told Rush about the stones *immediately*, rather than relying on Eli.

Young had known about this plan for days.

For *days*.

The line of bad decisions that had led to this moment was long, very long, and it traced back to the moment he had pulled Rush out of that god damned chair instead of asking TJ to do it.

The guilt that he felt about Rush's current status was put into perspective by the fact that he also had to contend with the very real possibility that they weren't going to get life support back online.

He would have to check with Eli to see which would be first—suffocation or freezing to death.

His left hand curled into a fist.

"Colonel?" TJ had come up behind him. As if her voice was the catalyst he'd been waiting for, he smashed his fist straight into the wall with a satisfyingly painful crack.

"Fuck," he breathed, pulling his hand into his chest.

Behind him, he heard TJ's breathing catch and then steady. He felt her hands on his shoulders.

"Feel better?" she asked quietly.

"No," he said roughly.

She tightened her fingers, inviting him to turn. "Let me see your hand."

"It's fine." He pressed his forehead against the metal of the wall, still unable to look at her.

"Try again," she murmured. "He's tough."

"No one's this tough," he replied.

"Try again," she repeated.

He did try again.

He tried for more than three hours, taking breaks to coordinate with the science team and with Scott and Wray, who had organized the civilians in the mess. He could only

imagine what kinds of rumors were circulating regarding his very visible absence from —well, everywhere.

"Colonel Young, this is Eli," his radio crackled.

"Go ahead, Eli."

"Just wondering how it was going down there."

"Not well."

"Yeah," Eli said, drawing out the word. "It's not going well here either. But I had an idea. It's kind of a long shot, but I was wondering if I could come down there and talk to you. We kinda heard from Greer that the infirmary is off limits right now."

"You're clear to come down," Young said tiredly. "I'll take what I can get at this point."

It took Eli only a few minutes to reach the infirmary. The flashlight he was carrying announced his presence only slightly before he started talking.

"So it's really creepy to walk around this ship in the *pitch black*, have you noticed this? I'd give it maybe a seven on the creepiness scale, but only because—" Eli broke off, abruptly.

Young twisted to look at him.

"Are you, um, holding Rush's *hand*?"

"Give me a break, Eli," Young said tiredly, "I'm trying to separate him from Destiny. It's easier this way."

"Right, no, I mean, that's totally reasonable. I get it. It's just kind of a weird visual, you know, with the mutual-assured-destruction-society that you guys have going on?"

Young turned away, fighting down a wave of irritation. "You seem to be in an awfully good mood for someone with—what was Chloe's estimate? Fourteen hours of air left?" Young dropped his head into his free hand and massaged his temples. "You must have something."

"As a matter of fact, I *do*," Eli said. "So you may have noticed that despite the fact that we're being pretty relentlessly pursued by not one but *two* alien races—we haven't had any trouble in the last three and a half hours."

"I assumed it was luck," Young said quietly.

"Seriously? You assumed that? No way are we that lucky."

"Can we get to the point here, Eli?"



"Yeah. Sorry. I think we haven't been attacked because we're not using any power. Not *any*. We look like piece of rock on sensors. Plus, there's also the fact that being completely without power turned out to be a great strategy for getting *Telford* off Destiny and getting *you* back."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that when you think about it, this is starting to look less like Destiny freaked out because Rush got messed up when you were pulled away and more like a plan for putting everything back to normal."

"Except for the part where everyone dies by suffocation," Young said dryly. "Otherwise, yeah. Great plan."

"Yes, death is never a good time," Eli replied, equally dry, "but I don't think we're going to die. I think this was purposeful. We can't find any damage. Everything's just—off, and we can't restart it."

"Even if that's true," Young replied, "how does this help us? We need Rush to power everything up. Unfortunately, he's not available right now."

"I know," Eli said. "But I think maybe if we can restore even minimal power to the ship, we might get him back as well."

"So what's your idea?"

"We give it a jump." Eli looked at him, eyebrows raised, clearly expecting some kind of response to his statement.

"A jump?"

"You know, as in jump-starting a car? Destiny is, fundamentally, a piece of equipment and once it's off, it can't turn *itself* back on. But I'm betting if we give it some power to start with, it will take it from there."

"Okay, I'll buy into this," Young said, feeling slightly hopeful for the first time in several hours. "What do you need?"

Eli shrugged, the movement barely visible in the darkness. "A laptop, fifteen minutes, Brody, and um—access to the neural interface?"

"The chair? You have got to be kidding me," Young said.

"I'm not going to *sit* in it," Eli said hastily. "I'm just going to open the panel at the back, hook up my laptop battery and say 'hello, world'."

"All right," Young agreed. "I don't see that we have much choice. Radio when you're in position."

Eli stood to go, but paused. "Do you think he's going to be okay?" he asked quietly.

"I don't know, Eli." Young said, rubbing his jaw. "I really don't."

Over the course of the next half hour Young watched TJ take Rush's vitals, listened to the radio chatter, and deflected subtle requests for his presence in various locations over the ship.

When this was over, he knew he was going to have some explaining to do.

To a lot of different people.

"I hope you planned this," Young murmured, his hand closed around Rush's icy fingers.

"I hope you are fucking *furious* at me when you wake up."

Rush, of course, didn't reply.

Finally, Eli's voice came over the radio. "We're in position."

"You have a go," he said shortly, tightening his grip on Rush.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then, Young's gaze involuntarily snapped upward as the emergency lighting flickered.

TJ burst out of her office, her expression tight, eyes scanning the walls, the ceiling.

Beneath the deck plating, he could feel the sudden vibration of the sublight engines.

He shot to his feet, again wrapping one hand around the back of Rush's neck, forcing their link open until finally, *finally*, Young could sense the other man's mind again.

It was distant, hardly more than an echo.

There was almost nothing to grab on to, but he did his best.

"Come on," he snarled. "Come *on*."

It still wasn't working.

Young grabbed his radio. "Eli," he snapped, "we need more power."

"You realize I'm using a *laptop* battery to start up a *starship* here, right?" Eli replied.

"The backups are already on. We have shields. I think we might even get FTL in a few minutes. If you want full power—" Eli cut himself off and there was a brief pause. "Well, look. You know what we need for *full* power. That's more your department than mine right now."

"Do what you can," Young replied.

"Any change?" TJ asked, coming to stand next to him.

"Some," Young replied trying to keep the frustration out of his voice. "I can feel his mind, but I can't wake him up. It's not enough. This should have *worked*."

TJ gave him a sharp look. "He's not a machine," she said. "Even if he's connected to one. He's a *person*, and I can't even tell you how to define what just happened to him. Being mentally joined with a starship that then *shuts down* for *hours*? This is uncharted territory. It's probably going to take him some time to recover from this."

"I agree with what you're saying, TJ," Young replied, "but we have an entire ship full of people who are vulnerable to attack *right now*. We can't afford this. He *needs* to wake up and restore main power. It has to happen."

She gave him an inscrutable look.

"It has to."

Young sat down again, his injured hand resting on Rush's forehead, his other on the scientist's right hand, and he focused, as intently as possible, on the link between their minds.

//FTL, he projected into the dim, unfocused space of Rush's consciousness. //At a *minimum*, we need FTL, //

Thirty seconds passed.

Forty.

The radio crackled. "The drive is spooling up," Eli said excitedly. "We're about to—"

They jumped.

Young breathed a sigh of relief, but didn't let go of the mental grip he had Rush. He held on, continuously trying to pull him back, resisting TJ's attempts to examine his injured hand, her insistence that he take a break.

His sense of Rush's mind grew sharper and sharper as the hours passed.

Finally, seven hours after their jump to FTL, the lights came on, replacing the dim blue glow of emergency lighting with a shower of yellow.

"We're back to full power." Eli's voice crackled from the radio. "How are you doing down there?"

Young looked over at Rush, squinting as his eyes adjusted to the increased light levels.

The scientist still hadn't moved, but there was a sudden sharpening in Young's sense of his mind.

"Not sure," he replied. "I'll let you know."

//Rush?//

After hours of being completely unresponsive, Rush, of course, exploded back into consciousness like a freight train.

Young was hit by a wave of panic, adrenalin, and a headache so intense he could barely see, as Rush pushed himself up, making a passable attempt to get himself the hell *out* of wherever he thought he was. Young managed to derail his escape attempt by anchoring his right arm to the bed. His vision blurred beneath the intolerable glare of the overhead lights.

"Easy," TJ said, pushing Rush back as she moved to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Young. "You're okay," she said quietly. "You're fine."

The lights dimmed of their own accord and Young was finally able to look up.

Rush had his eyes shut. His left hand was fisted into his hair, trying to contain a headache that was so bad that *Young's* eyes were watering.

"Rush," Young murmured, hoping that there was something coherent beneath the painful, wavering images he was getting from the other man's mind. "Rush, *talk* to me."

Rush opened his eyes and squinted at Young. Then he shut them again, and asked what seemed to be a question.

A question in Ancient.

At least—Young *hoped* it was Ancient.

He looked at TJ and found her looking back at him.

"Dr. Rush," she said slowly, "can you understand us? Can you understand what we're saying?"

Rush opened his eyes again regarded them both with an expression of exhausted incredulity.

"English, Rush," Young said, shaking his shoulder gently. "*English*. Get with the program."

"Fuck you," Rush said, his accent slightly off.

"That's more like it," Young said. "How about a sentence?"

"Fuck you *is* a sentence," Rush replied weakly.

Young couldn't control the wave of relief that washed over him. He felt hours of tension unknot from his shoulders and back as exhaled slowly. He tightened his grip on Rush's arm and hand.

TJ let out a long, shaky breath.

"What happened?" Rush asked them, his diction a bit less crisp than usual, confusion evident in his voice. "Why are you *holding my hand*?"

"You scared the shit out of us is 'what happened'," Young replied. "You took one hell of a risk shutting down the ship. What if Eli hadn't figured it out?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about." The hand that Rush had been clenching to his temple was slowly opening, dropping to the gurney, as his energy faded. "The last thing I remember is *you*, actually, on the floor. I was trying to—" he broke off with a vague gesture, either not sure how to explain or too exhausted to make the attempt.

"TJ," Young said quietly, "I think we need a minute."

She looked at him and nodded, more than a hint of warning in her eyes. "Call if you need anything," she told Rush.

Young watched her go. When she had vanished into her office, he looked back at Rush.

"So," Young said, toying absently with the fabric of Rush's jacket, tracing the edge of the cuff with a thumbnail before he realized what the hell he was doing and stopped. "You're not going to like this."

"I already don't like it," Rush murmured, his eyes mostly closed. The other man was unnaturally still. He'd barely moved since his initial attempt to sit up.

"Homeworld Command has wanted you to use the stones to come and talk to them for quite some time, as you know," Young said quietly.

Rush nodded fractionally.

"What you *didn't* know was that they were designing a modification to the terminal that would allow them to replace people against their will, with the express purpose of using it on *you*."

Rush turned his head to look at Young, a pained expression on his face. A hollow echo of surprise reverberated through their weakened link. "You knew about this."

"I did," Young confirmed quietly.

Rush shut his eyes again. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I thought you would destroy the terminal," Young said truthfully.

"I might have done," Rush confirmed, "but I could have told you that they wouldn't have been able to pull me out. I might have been able to prevent this."

"I realize that," Young replied, looking away, needing a respite from the other man's eyes. "I had decided to tell you. That was what I wanted to talk to you about this morning."

Rush shook his head fractionally.

Young wasn't sure how to interpret that.

"So what happened?" Rush asked him finally.

"I switched with Telford," Young said, watching Rush carefully. "I was gone for about twenty minutes before I got Carter to send me back. A few minutes after I switched out, the ship dropped out of FTL and critical systems started to shut down. We lost all power in very short order. You were unresponsive the entire time. Since Telford couldn't talk to you, and since there was no way to study Destiny's systems, Carter pulled the team back."

"Twenty minutes?" Rush murmured. "This could have been much worse, you realize."

"Yeah," Young replied. "I know. But that 'twenty minutes'? It was half a day ago. You've been out for something like eleven hours. We got full power back just a few minutes ago. You don't—remember any of this? Eli thought that maybe you cut power on purpose."

Rush shook his head, eyes closing. "I don't know. It's possible."

"Hey," Young said, rubbing his hand slowly over Rush's upper arm and shoulder. "I know you're tired, but stay with me for a minute."

Rush opened his eyes fractionally.

"I need you to know that I—well, I didn't mean for it to happen this way."

"You should have told me," Rush said, sounding defeated. "This whole push came from Telford, didn't it?"

"Yes," Young said quietly.

"Of course it did," the scientist replied. "Of course."

"What happened between you two?" Young asked, trying to keep his words and his thoughts casual.

Rush just shook his head and said nothing.

"I should let you rest," Young said finally. "I'm long overdue on the bridge anyway."

"You've been down here the whole time?" Rush asked. "Why?"

"You were our best hope for restoring main power," Young said. "Plus," he continued, "I figured I owed you. I wanted to—" he paused, looking away. "Fix this. If I could."

Rush looked at him for a moment, his thoughts a distant, unreadable swirl.

Finally he nodded.

Young's fingers briefly tightened on his shoulder, and he stood up to leave.

He had only taken a few steps when he felt his headache intensify. The room spun slightly. Young turned back to look at Rush. The other man hadn't moved. His eyes were closed. "Rush?" he asked.

"I'm fine," Rush replied. "It'll pass."

"You're sure?"

"Relatively."

Young watched him uncertainly.

"Go," Rush said. "Stop being ridiculous."

Young rolled his eyes and turned, fighting the sense of vertigo as he walked forward.

He stopped by TJ's office on his way out, partly because he wanted to touch base with her and partly because he wasn't sure he could make it across the open space of the infirmary floor to the corridor.

"How is he?" TJ asked him as he rounded her doorframe, one hand gripping the molded metal edge.

"He seems okay," Young said, fighting to focus on her through the pain of his headache, while the walls hitched and spun behind her. "Unbelievably."

TJ stood, giving him a searching look. "I'll check him out, try to get him to eat something. I think what he really needs—" she broke off, darting around her desk in a blur of black uniform and gold hair to catch one of Young's arms as his knees buckled.

TJ couldn't support him entirely and together they folded to the cold metal of the deck plating.

"Who is it?" she asked him sharply. "You or him?"

"Both," he managed to choke out.

He felt her grab his chin and tilt his face, looking into his eyes.

"Can you get up?" she asked.

He tried to steady himself against the vertigo in his mind.

"*Can you get up?*"

"Yeah," he slurred, trying to get his feet underneath him as TJ draped one of his arms over her shoulders and pulled him up.

They crossed the floor, always on the risk of overbalancing, as she dragged him back toward Rush.

He struggled to avoid throwing up on her as she guided him back to the chair he had just vacated a few minutes before. It was a near thing.

Young reached out blindly, unable to open his eyes against the pressure in his head. His fingers caught on Rush's jacket. He leaned forward, his injured hand closing painfully around Rush's wrist.

After a few seconds Young was able to open his eyes.

Rush was looking at him with undisguised hostility.

"You said you were *sure*," Young snapped at him.

"I said *relatively* sure."

"What just happened?" TJ asked, dismay evident in her tone.

"I think we might have damaged our link," Young said, rubbing his jaw. "Apparently, we can't separate."

"I fucking despise you at times," Rush hissed. "You know that, correct?"



## Chapter Eleven

When Young woke at 0900 the following morning, he was disconcerted to find himself lying on a gurney in the infirmary, half-draped over Rush.

He sat up abruptly, *intensely* glad that the other man wasn't awake yet.

As he pulled away, he felt a dull ache begin in his temples as his sense of Rush's mind faded. The infirmary walls thankfully stayed in place—there was no sign of the debilitating vertigo that had laid him out the previous night, forcing TJ to move a second gurney immediately adjacent to Rush's so that they both could get some sleep.

He reached behind him blindly, his right hand closing around Rush's shoulder before the dull ache of separation could wake the other man. Reassuringly the pain faded and his sense of Rush sharpened immediately, approaching the level of clarity he'd been experiencing when their link had been undamaged.

The link would heal.

It had to.

Young was examining the splint that TJ had constructed for his left hand, already spectacularly bruised from its impact with the wall when the silence of the infirmary was broken by the swish of opening doors.

"Camile." He heard TJ's voice carry from around the corner. "What can I do for you?"

"I need to speak with Colonel Young," Wray replied. "I understand he's here?"

"He is," TJ's voice was guarded. "But he's exhausted. No visitors for at least two more hours."

Wray was silent for a moment. "Then I'd like to speak to Dr. Rush, please."

"I'm sorry," TJ said, "but that's not possible right now."

"What's going on, TJ?" Wray asked, her voice quiet, subtly dangerous.

TJ didn't answer. Young could almost *hear* them staring each other down.

He slid off his gurney and pushed it silently into its previous position, being careful not to stray too far from Rush as he did so. Despite the fact that replacing his gurney in its proper position had taken him less than six feet away from the other man, Young's head was throbbing after only a few seconds.

Great.

This was just great.

He pressed his fingers to his temples and perched on the edge of the gurney, twisting to look at Rush.

He was more than a little disturbed by how dead to the world the scientist seemed, but a quick brush of his hand to the side of Rush's neck confirmed that the other man was, indeed, asleep rather than unconscious.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to insist," Wray said.

"TJ," Young murmured into the radio, broadcasting on the medical channel. "It's fine, I'm up. Let her come back."

A few seconds later, they both rounded the corner. Wray raised an eyebrow at something—probably his disheveled appearance, but it could have been any number of eyebrow-worthy things. She opened her mouth to speak, but before she could say anything, he stopped her with an upraised hand.

"Quietly," he said, keeping his voice low. "Don't wake him up."

Wray nodded and approached silently, looking carefully at Rush. His hair and the dark material of his jacket highlighted the pallor of his skin. Even in sleep, his eyebrows drew slightly together, as if he were fighting a headache. Young reached back, placing his good hand immediately behind him on the mattress, subtly brushing the edges of Rush's fingers.

"He looks *terrible*," Wray said quietly.

"He's had a rough week," Young murmured back.

"Colonel," Wray said. "Everett. What happened last night?"

Young sighed, bringing his aching hand up to rest on his right shoulder. "What do you mean?" he asked, stalling for time.

"You know exactly what I mean," she replied. "Why couldn't Homeworld Command switch Rush out? Why did Destiny shut down when we were taken?" She fixed him with narrowed eyes.

She was perceptive.

Too perceptive to lie to, except by omission.

And—she had helped him.

"Rush has a mental link with Destiny," Young said, pausing for a moment as she shot him a skeptical look, "and also," he fought the urge to look away, "with me."

"A *mental link*?"

Young nodded. "It is what it sounds like."

Wray watched him for a moment, her face unreadable before turning away, one hand on her hip. She paced away a few steps and then spun to face him again.

"How did this happen?" she asked quietly.

"It happened when he was trapped in the chair," he replied. "Several days ago."

"To Destiny? That I can understand," she paused, "*somewhat*. But to *you*?"

"I pulled him out of the chair," Young said quietly. "As a consequence of that, his mind is balanced between me and the ship. Without me, he gets pulled in."

"And that's what happened yesterday when you were switched out?" Wray wrapped her arms around her rib cage. "Why did the ship shut down *entirely*?"

"Rush may have done that himself. We don't know for sure. He doesn't remember. He's never been able to form any memories while he's with Destiny."

"It's likely that organic neural architecture can't support the amount of data those memories would require," TJ murmured from behind Wray's shoulder. "His mind just isn't built for it."

"So you've talked to him?" Wray asked, worry evident in her tone. "Is he going to be all right?"

"We think so," TJ said cautiously.

Wray looked over at Young. "Colonel," she said quietly. "I appreciate that you're concerned about him, but your presence is needed amongst the crew. I've been able to cover for you to some extent," she continued, "but you're going to have to put in an appearance on the bridge and in the mess if only for the sake of morale. You also may want to explain why you were conspicuously absent in the middle of a crisis. People are starting to talk."

"I would imagine that they are," Young said, running his thumb awkwardly along his jaw, trying not to jostle his injured fingers as he did so. "And believe me, staying down here wasn't my first choice. But in order to get full power back, I had to pull Rush out. And to do *that*, I had to be with him."

Wray looked him in the eye, her expression carefully neutral, her delicate shoulders straight.

Young had never been so grateful for her impeccable professionalism.

"I see," she said quietly.

"I need your help on this, Camile," Young said.

"Yes," she said, her voice soft, "You do." She glanced at Rush. "The question is, how much of this should the crew be told? And—" she broke off, looking at TJ, "who knows already?"

"Only TJ, Eli, and Greer," Young said quietly.

"A pretty tight-lipped bunch," Wray commented, "with the possible exception of Eli."

"He's not going to let this slip," Young said.

Wray cocked her head. "We'll see, I suppose. You're going to need to tell the crew *something*," she commented. "I would suggest explaining only that Rush is connected to the ship, and that Telford tried to pull him out, which resulted in Rush *and* Destiny shutting down."

Young raised his eyebrows at her.

"It's not perfect, I know. It doesn't explain *your* actions, for one thing," she said, "but support for you is high enough that you can probably just fail to explain yourself and people will assume that you were doing something essential. Especially if Rush isn't undermining everything you say."

"That's not exactly forthright," Young commented.

"Personally, I would steer clear of mentioning this mental connection you have with him. All that will accomplish is to make people nervous, especially considering your history."

"Does it make *you* nervous?" Young asked her.

"No, colonel, frankly, it *terrifies* me."

"Well," he said, somewhat taken aback, "you do a good job of hiding it."

She smiled slightly, which took some of the sting out of her previous statement. "So," she said, "should we hold a meeting in the gate room?"

Young looked over at Rush for a moment and tried to imagine waking the scientist up and then dragging him, quite possibly literally, to the gate room. He tried to imagine standing up there on that lacy metal staircase, unable to separate from Rush by more than a few feet, in front of the entire crew of Destiny and telling everyone that Rush had some kind of psychic connection to the ship, but, not to worry, the whole thing was under control.

On a good day, it would be a horrible experience. And this—well, this was already *not* a good day.

"No," he said to Wray. "No, that's not going to work. We need a different format. Maybe town-hall style, split the crew up into three or four sessions?"

"Like we did a few years ago," Wray nodded. "Fine. I think we should start immediately."

Young sighed. "I hear you, but I want Rush there."

"He doesn't have to be," Wray pointed out. "It's just going to be an additional stress. Let him sleep. He obviously needs it."

Young exchanged a quick glance with TJ.

"I have to insist on this, Camile," Young said quietly. "I need everyone to know that Rush and I are both on the same page."

She shot him a sharp look, but nodded. "I see your point. I can't emphasize enough that you need to deal with this *now* though, before the morale situation gets out of hand."

"Spread the word that three town hall style meetings are going to commence at—" he looked at his watch, then up at TJ. "What do you think?"

"No earlier than eleven hundred hours," TJ said quietly. "And even then," she shook her head, "If he hasn't woken up, I don't feel comfortable waking him."

"Let's say twelve hundred hours then," Young said to Wray. "I'll leave it up to you to organize the groups."

"Don't forget," Wray said, as she turned to go, "to leave time for your meeting with Colonel Telford."

Young tried not to wince as he watched her go, her shoes echoing faintly on the deck plating.

TJ hovered uncertainly at Young's shoulder and he turned to give her a rueful look.

"Do you really have to meet with Telford?" she asked.

"It was one of the conditions on which they sent me back yesterday. I can't risk them pulling me out again," Young said, glancing over at Rush.

She put a hand on his shoulder, and he leaned into her, just slightly.

"This is a god damned mess, isn't it?" he asked her. "Can he even stay on his feet for three of these meetings? Not to mention Telford. How is *that* going to work?"

"One step at a time," TJ said. "I'm going to go find you both some breakfast."

She swept out of the room, leaving him alone with Rush.

He looked down at the other man, absently switching his grip to curl around Rush's upper arm. He wished he could give the scientist a day to recuperate—but the bottom line was that they simply didn't have time right now. He agreed with Wray that the briefings should be done as soon as possible. And since Young had to attend, that meant Rush was going to have to attend as well. Young didn't see that there was much choice about that.

As for the meeting with Telford, well, there was no chance in *hell* that he was letting Rush anywhere near the man, which meant they were going to have to separate, at least to some degree.

He needed to find out what had happened between Rush and Telford.

And for *that*, he needed a strategy.

Asking Rush about what had happened between him and Telford, while nominally the easiest solution, was also the one that seemed to have the least chance of yielding positive results—unless he was looking for a pissed off senior scientist.

Young wondered if he could use the same strategy on Telford that Wray had used on Carter—claim to know what had happened, and then see what additional information he could collect. He had one advantage over Wray in that regard, which was that via Rush's dream, he had actually witnessed what was likely the moment that had ended the association between the two men.

He tried to think back, remembering the details of the dream, looking for anything he could use.

Amanda Perry had been beamed out of wherever they were, indicating they had been backed up by a starship with Asgard technology, likely the Daedalus, according to Wray's breakfast commentary of the previous day. Dr. Perry had mentioned something about continuing a *legacy*.

Young wasn't sure what to make of that comment.

There had been something else—something about the room itself—a detail Rush had noticed and that he hadn't liked, a detail that had struck Young immediately.

Although the technology was clearly Ancient, the room had contained elements of Goa'uld design.

*Anubis.*

The name came to him suddenly, but he *knew* that it was correct.

Several years ago, Young had been commanding one of the SG teams that had gone in to destroy all the sensitive material remaining in the half-ascended Goa'uld's research lab after his clone had nearly destroyed Cheyenne Mountain.

Young's team had destroyed most of the lab and, what they didn't destroy, they had taken.

Only a few years later, Telford, Rush, and Dr. Perry must have found another lab, likely on a different planet entirely.

There, they had tried something.

Something they *knew* was dangerous.

Based on the nature of Anubis' research, Young had a pretty good guess at what they had been working toward.

Ascension.

He looked down sharply at Rush as if he could confirm his suspicion in the other man's face.

If he was right, and that's what they'd been there for, why had *Rush* of all people, been the test subject?

Testing things on *himself* really didn't seem like Rush's style.

Did it?

Young paused, absently propping his splinted hand up against his shoulder, considering the question.

The thing that first came to mind, of course, was the neural interface chair. Rush had obviously wanted to use it, but had been hesitant to risk *himself*, an attitude that had pissed Young off significantly, and led to several arguments, the most intense being the one after Dr. Franklin had been injured.

*I'm not stopping you Rush. Go. Sit. Be my guest.*

And Rush had.

He had gone.

Over and over.

How many times had it been now?

Four.

At *least* four.

Rush was very much a person who rapidly assessed risks and then, having decided to take them, didn't look back. Framing Young for Spencer's 'murder' was a perfect example of this. His eyes narrowed in irritation at the memory.

Rush was fucking impossible to deal with sometimes, he reflected but, as it turned out, maybe not the kind of guy who put a premium on his own personal safety. Not the kind of guy who would have ever, *ever* let Telford experiment on Amanda Perry. Rush's initial resistance to sitting in the chair had, to some extent, defined Young's perception of him. But now that he'd known the man for nearly two years, had seen him discard his personal well being on a semi-regular basis, he was starting to think that Rush's behavior with the chair was the exception, not the rule.

The first two times Rush had sat in the chair he'd constructed a software buffer between his mind and Destiny. The third time had been in the midst of an attack and there had been no chance for Rush to erect any barrier between himself and the ship.

That was when all of this had started.

That was when the lights had begun behaving strangely, when doors had started opening for Rush before he reached them, when Destiny had, in Eli's words, decided that it *liked* him.

Involuntarily, Young shivered.

"You knew," he whispered.

He blinked rapidly, feeling the same sense of shock and betrayal he *always* felt when he discovered an absolutely *essential* piece of information that Rush had been keeping from him.

The man had *known* something like this would happen following his use of the chair interface. He had tried to avoid it by building barriers between his mind and Destiny until finally, after *two years*, his hand had been forced, and he'd interfaced with the ship in the absence of any buffer.

And the ship hadn't killed him.

It hadn't destroyed his mind, like it had destroyed Dr. Franklin's.

Rush had woken Destiny up.

Young took several deep breaths, staring at a point on the ceiling, trying to calm down.

It didn't take a genius-level IQ to figure out why the scientist hadn't told him any of this. Rush hadn't respected him when they had met on the Icarus base and their



relationship sure as hell hadn't improved post-arrival on Destiny. Rush had done nothing but try to undermine and circumvent Young's command.

Given that Rush's position within the program and affiliation with Telford had been—considerably more high profile than Young had been aware of, perhaps Rush's attitude toward his command was slightly more understandable. Slightly.

Even so, the man had been *impossible* to deal with. The only way that Young had really been able to get his attention was leaving him for dead on a barren alien world.

"You're a lot of work," he whispered to the scientist, the words twisting painfully in the air between them. "I wish you had trusted me. Even a little bit."

Young spent the next hour and a half trying to regulate the disturbed swirl of his thoughts. He absently forced down the tasteless breakfast that TJ brought him and spent the rest of the time trying *not* to think about Telford and the numerous ways, both known and unknown, that the other man had fucked everything up.

Finally, Rush's eyelids flickered, and he tensed slightly, eyebrows pulling together as he struggled back toward consciousness.

"Hey," Young said, grabbing his shoulder, both to gently shake him awake and to prevent him from making a break for the door.

Rush tensed. Through their link, Young clearly felt the scientist's distress at being held down. He eased up on the pressure immediately.

"Hello," Rush replied, cracking his eyelids, his voice hoarse.

"You need water," Young said quietly, and helped Rush sit up before he handed him the plastic cup TJ had left. "TJ said that if you don't drink at least a liter you're getting an IV."

Rush grimaced as he tasted the water and looked over at Young, his expression full of mistrust. "I don't know what that is, but it's *not water*."

"Yeah, TJ put some stuff in it," Young said. "Salt, I think? I probably should have mentioned that."

Rush stared at him.

"Damn it, Rush, I'm not trying to poison you. It's budget Gatorade. Just drink it."

Rush rolled his eyes, and irritation flooded into Young's mind. He couldn't pin down the exact source of what *specifically* was annoying the other man, but he figured the aggravation was a good sign, as it indicated that Rush was feeling more like his usual self.

"What are you so fuckin' happy about, anyway?" Rush snapped, picking up on Young's mood as he sipped his salted water with obvious distaste. "This is terrible."

Rush made a vague motion with two fingers between his temple and Young's general direction, from which Young inferred that he was talking about their link, rather than the salted water, though, that was probably *also* terrible.

"How am I supposed to get anything done?" Rush continued. "Presumably you have things to do as well, though what exactly those things might be remains somewhat unclear to me."

"Look," Young said, trying to keep things as congenial as possible. "At least for today, this isn't going to be a problem—"

"If you think that I'm going to stay here for an entire *day*—"

"No," Young said, holding up his injured hand, trying to diffuse the other man's rapidly spiking pique. "Nothing like that. Look, Wray and I have set up three consecutive town-hall meetings with the crew, which you and I can do *together*. The idea is to stem some of the rumors that have cropped up after yesterday and explain—"

Young paused briefly at Rush's increasingly frozen expression, but decided to forge ahead.

"Explain why your—"

Rush's gaze looked like it might be successful in an attempt to melt lead.

"Explain that you and the ship are linked. I thought—"

"Yes," Rush said. "Precisely. You. *You* thought. You couldn't even *fucking* wait until I was fucking conscious to *fucking* plan our *fucking* day. Well, I have news for you. First of all, I don't know what a 'town-hall' meeting is, and I don't *want* to know. Second, I'm not doing it, and certainly not three times in a row. Third, and most importantly, there are other things that are more pressing at this point, specifically evaluating the platform and the neural network that define Destiny's AI."

"That doesn't have to necessarily be you, and it certainly doesn't have to be *now*." Young was peripherally aware of the rising volume of his voice.

"What a perceptive assessment," Rush said, his voice rising, his words and thoughts bleeding out of his control. "Of course, given your less-than-stellar track record, *you'll forgive me if I think that means fuck all*."

"Just don't—freak out about this," Young said, giving the other man's shoulder a subtle shake.

This was clearly the wrong thing to do.

Rush pulled himself free with a violent jerk, his thoughts a high-pitched shred at the back of Young's mind, warping from distress to anger and back again.

"Don't *touch* me," Rush hissed.

"You're a lot of work," Young said through clenched teeth, fighting the urge to say something less constructive.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Rush asked.

"With *me*?" Young stared at him in disbelief.

"*Town hall meetings? A lot of work?* Do you have a background in middle management? Did you get traumatized at one of Dr. Jackson's 'cultural sensitivity' seminars? Don't tell me I'm 'a lot of work,' tell me what you *actually mean*," Rush snapped.

Young leaned in close, staring Rush down from beneath lowered brows. "You're obstructive, impulsive, and psychologically disturbed," he growled. "Yet *again*, you have put the lives of the entire crew in jeopardy, this time by tying your own very tenuous existence to the solvency of this ship. I am trying *to help* you. I've been trying to fucking help you since day one, and what do you do? You lie to me. You hide things from me. You undermine my command at *every* god damned opportunity that presents itself to you." He broke off, breathing heavily, looking away from Rush's unreadable stare, wishing he could leave, but knowing there was nowhere for him to go.

There was nowhere he *could* go.

"I guarantee you," Rush said softly, icily, "that if we're going to list past grievances, this will rapidly become an argument that *I* am going to win."

"You think I don't know that?" Young whispered.

Rush looked away, eyes shutting as he leaned forward. He pulled his knees up, curling into himself, his head in his hands.

Young didn't need to see what the other man was thinking.

Misery was written in every line of his body.

"We can't do this right now," Young said quietly, finding it hard to get the words out.

"Neither of us."

Rush didn't say anything.

"Look," Young said, trying again. "I'll go with you. We'll do whatever needs to get done. I promise you that. If we have to put off these meetings, fine. You decide."

Finally, *finally*, it seemed like he had said the right thing.

Rush's shoulders relaxed visibly and he lifted his head, his eyes still shielded by his hands.

Young gave him a thirty count and then, very carefully, put his hand down between Rush's shoulder blades.

//?// Young projected a wordless wave of uncertainty, asking for permission.

He got back a wordless assent, and Rush relaxed incrementally. Underneath his palm, he could feel the scientist's heart, pounding fiercely through his thin frame. Slowly Young dropped every latent barrier and allowed his thoughts to come into careful apposition with Rush's mind.

His headache receded entirely.

//Sorry, the scientist's thoughts abruptly coalesced to form the word and then dissolved, again unreadable.

//You're having a bad week, Young replied, pressing his thumb into tense muscles along the edge of Rush's shoulder blade.

//I'm having a bad decade, Rush replied.

//Yeah, I'm getting that. The words had a rueful edge that Young hadn't meant to give them.

They sat like that for almost a minute before Rush raised his head and reached out to pick up his water and Young pulled his hand back.

//What time are these meetings supposed to be happening? Rush asked.

//Don't worry about it, Young replied. //Whenever.

//I can do some of the necessary coding to interrogate the AI via laptop.

Young was fairly certain he'd just received a major concession.

//Sure, he replied casually. //You can work during the meetings. I think Wray is probably going to be doing most of the talking. The main thing is for you to be present so that no one thinks we're concealing anything, Young grimaced slightly, //which is, of course, not true.

//I think our deception is fairly iron-clad, as no one would ever suspect *us* of cooperating. I can barely believe it myself.// Rush finished his cup of water, and reached for the pitcher of salt solution. //So Wray knows everything?//

"I got it," Young said quietly, grabbing the cup out of the scientist's hand. He switched back to projecting as he refilled it. //She doesn't know everything. I didn't tell her about the genetic changes.//

Rush tapped his fingers absently on the side of his cup as Young was hit by a stream of directed, sequenced images that it seemed to require significant mental energy for Rush to assemble.

//Was that your to-do list?// Young asked. //Because I think I missed about ninety percent of that.//

//Meetings and programming,// Rush said, verbally tagging an image of the gate room and a burst of code, //then interrogate Destiny's AI, then—// Rush's projection switched again from verbal to visual and he shot Young a series of images that were now interpretable as 'miscellaneous'.

Young tried to clamp down on his sudden unease, but Rush picked it up immediately.

//What?//

//There's one more thing on the list,// Young said guardedly. //In order for Carter to send me back, I agreed to report to Telford sometime today. We can send someone to switch with him at our convenience, but it's got to be today, and he's coming here.//

Rush didn't say anything. His thoughts split into multiple streams that were almost impossible to follow.

Almost.

From the onslaught of images, because he was looking for it, he caught again a brief glimpse of the same darkened chamber, and the pink glow of exposed circuitry blurring suddenly as Rush was dragged from beneath it.

He tried to hold onto the memory, but couldn't.

//What did you just see?// Rush asked him sharply.

//Nothing. Some circuits. Goa'uld maybe,// Young said, perfectly truthfully.

"I can't talk to Telford," Rush murmured, switching away from projecting, mentally pulling away from Young as much as he was able. "Not today."

Young was unbelievably tempted to push the issue, especially now, as Rush was being unusually cooperative.

He wasn't sure he would get a better chance, but—

Something stopped him.

Perhaps it was that they had a long day ahead of them and he didn't want to destroy their fragile ceasefire.

Perhaps it was that he didn't feel that he could control his *own* reactions where Telford was concerned, let alone defuse Rush if he became upset.

As he looked at the scientist, he was fairly certain it wasn't either of those things.

"You don't have to talk to him," Young said carefully, pulling back just slightly from Rush's mind. "I have an idea about that." He shot the scientist a brief visual, and the other man nodded in agreement.

Rush had nearly finished the water, so Young pulled out the power bar that TJ had given him earlier and handed it over. "Don't let it be said that near death experiences and an unfortunate habit of missing meals don't have their occasional compensations."

"Perish the thought," Rush said, wasting no time in tearing the packaging open.

"It's one of TJ's last power bars."

"I'm sure," Rush said, breaking off a piece and handing it to Young.

"Nope. You need the calories more than anyone."

"I'm trying to have a moment and you're ruining it."

That comment surprised a small smile out of Young, and with a half shrug, he reached out and took the proffered piece. It wasn't one of the standard SGC issue energy bars that came with the MRE's. It was clearly from a civilian, but Young couldn't really imagine anyone surrendering a store-bought power bar that was half covered in chocolate.

"Where did TJ find this?" he asked, examining it.

"They're hers." Rush said, eyes shut, in the midst of chewing. "She insists on giving them to me at intervals, even though I keep informing her that intermittent power bars do not stand between me and starvation."

Young raised his eyebrows, surprised that there was anything about TJ that *Rush* would know but he wouldn't, wondering how active a role TJ had played in keeping Rush on his feet for the past two years, wondering what Rush's caloric intake generally

ran, wondering why TJ had been carrying chocolate covered power bars with her when she'd had perfectly good SGC power bars in excess, wondering whether he really remembered what chocolate tasted like.

"I think you've contextualized the whole experience enough," Rush commented dryly, clearly having picked up on at least some of Young's thoughts. "I'd just eat it."

"Now you're ruining *my* moment," Young said, before he finally put it in his mouth.

He bit down through small, crunchy, synthesized beads that tasted vaguely like oats and almonds and peanuts and, god help him, heart-breakingly familiar, safe, Earth-based *preservatives* before he hit the chocolate, which was waxy and brittle and so fucking sweet it that it was actually painful.

"Oh my god," Young said, shutting his eyes.

"That," Rush commented after a few seconds, "was obscene." The scientist's tone radiated disdain, which was entirely belied by the dry amusement Young felt coming through their link.

"Give it a rest," Young said. "You've been eating these the whole time, apparently."

"Not that enthusiastically. I save my oral fixations for things that deserve them."

Young looked at him dubiously. "Such as?"

"Cigarettes," Rush said, shutting his eyes.

"Ugh," Young replied, half-reflexively. "Those things kill you."

The scientist smiled faintly, his eyes lost in the middle distance. "The best things always do."

In the back of Rush's mind, Destiny flared to life for a brief instant, sweeping forward with a darkness that Young couldn't penetrate or understand, only keep at bay. In a moment it was gone, but Young was left again with a vague sense of dread as he looked at Rush.

Rush turned to meet his eyes, cocking his head slightly as if to indicate that there was nothing to worry about.

"So," Rush said imperiously, grabbing one of his metal crutches and deftly snagging one of his boots off the floor. "I'm going to need someone to carry my computer. After I find it."

Young sighed.

By twelve hundred hours they had been cleared by TJ and had successfully located Rush's computer, still where he had left it in the control interface room. Slightly late, they entered the mess to find Wray sitting silently in front of a third of Destiny's crew. What little conversation there was ceased as the two of them entered the room.

The walk from the doorway of the mess over to where Wray was seated was long, and agonizingly slow. Even Rush, normally unaffected by hostile scrutiny, was uncomfortable, a nebulous anxiety swirling darkly in his mind.

"Hey," Eli said, as they walked by, his voice carrying easily, his tone light, but tinged with more than a hint of his usual exasperation. "I see that you're alive. A radio call would have been, you know, kind of nice. Just a hey Eli, thanks for saving the day—"

"Eli." Rush snapped out his name like a rebuke—as if that were an appropriate response.

But maybe it was, because the room had suddenly lost its awful silence. People began whispering again, shifting. Rush paused, not looking directly at the young man, and then added, "no less than I expected."

"You're welcome," Eli said, a faint smile on his face, then continued, slightly louder. "Feel free to just, you know, implement barely understandable insane-sounding poorly explained plans and then tell me to repair all the consequences with no warning. It's super fun for me."

Young's mouth twitched slightly.

Rush rolled his eyes and turned away from Eli, continuing on to the front of the room.

Young settled himself beside Wray in front of the table she had chosen, perching on the edge immediately to her right. Rush, naturally, sat as far from Young as he could get without stressing their link, which turned out to be about three and a half feet away at the end of the table. He immediately opened the computer that Young slid over to him, not looking at anyone.

Wray looked at Rush for a moment, then turned her gaze to Young.

He gave her a half-shrug in return and motioned for her to get started.

It didn't take long to explain the basics of why the ship had lost power. The story that he and Wray had outlined together was fairly straightforward, and the crew seemed to take it pretty well judging by the relaxed postures and the intermittent wry commentary that came back at her from the group in the room.



At the end of Wray's explanation, she turned to Rush and asked him if he had anything to add.

Young could have told her that was a terrible idea.

At her question Rush looked up, running his fingers over his five o'clock shadow.

"No. No, not particularly." He looked absently at his computer before adding, "though I'd advise against leaving me for dead unless you want to also lose life support."

It took all of Young's self control not to visibly wince.

//Thanks for that,// he shot at Rush.

//They need to know,// Rush snapped back. //I just happened to pick an example from within my repertoire of experience.//

"Yes," Wray said, losing her polished delivery. "Well, I'm sure we'll all keep that in mind. Any questions?"

There weren't many.

"That could have gone smoother," Wray hissed at Rush as the next group was filing in.

He completely ignored her.

"Camile," Young said quietly, "don't worry about it."

//Would it kill you to just maintain a professional demeanor for what, less than two hours?// He did his best to avoid glaring at the scientist.

//I'm not a team player,// Rush snapped at him absently. //This should not be news to you.//

"Hey," Eli said, approaching Rush. "If you're going to completely ignore a meeting that's actually *about you*, which, by the way, is really awkward for everyone, in order to work on some secret coding thing, then here." Eli shoved Rush's glasses at him. "Brody improved your really crappy repair job, but he's scared of you. So here you go."

Rush took the glasses, inspecting the delicate metalwork that had replaced the mostly destroyed frames while trying to determine when exactly the science team had managed to abscond with the unwearable frames.

"You found the machine shop, I see," Rush said mildly, clearly impressed.

"Well, we were wondering where those canes came from. Crutches. Whatever."

"You know, you really shouldn't be wandering around unsecured areas of the ship," Rush said, but his entire demeanor somehow radiated approval.

"Maybe you should start leading by example," Eli said, raising his eyebrows. "See you guys later."

The discussion with the next two groups went slightly better.

Wray didn't ask Rush for any comments, and Rush didn't say anything, just spent the entire time writing code.

As Eli had pointed out, this was slightly awkward, but Young would take what he could get.

He was fairly certain from the looks that most people were shooting in Rush's direction, that the immediate fallout of these meetings was going to result in even more people questioning whether Rush was remotely mentally stable.

This was not an unreasonable question, in Young's opinion.

Greer and Scott were both in the last group to be briefed. Young motioned to them to come forward at the end.

//Let's get this over with, shall we?// Young asked Rush, who paused, fingers hovering over his keyboard.

Rush tried but failed to suppress the surge of dread that Young's comment produced.

//You and me both,// he replied to the sensation.

"I need to borrow you two for about half an hour," Young said as they approached.

"Sure," Scott said. "What do you need?"

"Not here," Young said, preventing further discussion.

Rush closed his computer and slid it over toward Young, then grabbed his crutches and stood. Scott grabbed his elbow to steady him, which earned the lieutenant a steely look from the scientist.

They kept to a slow pace so that Rush didn't have a problem keeping up with them. The walk to the communications room where they kept the terminal wasn't long, but Rush's energy was clearly beginning to flag.

This was not overly surprising to Young, especially considering the events of the past twenty-four hours, but the scientist seemed to take it as a personal failing.

Young could feel him pushing himself hard.

Too hard.

"Lieutenant," he said, when they were standing in front of the door, "give me your weapon."

"Sir?"

"You're going to be switching with Colonel Telford."

The other man's face tightened. "Understood," he replied.

"We're going to seal you in the communications room." Young paused, pocketing the clip from Scott's weapon before doing the same with his own gun. He set both unloaded weapons on the floor. "Go ahead and switch. I'll follow you in just a few minutes."

Scott nodded, eyes flicking to Rush and Greer. After an almost imperceptible hesitation he turned on his heel and entered the room. Young locked the door behind him, then turned to Greer.

"Sergeant," he said quietly, "I need you to do two things for me. First, you have to make sure that Telford doesn't make it out of this room. I don't think he's going to get past me. I don't think he's even going to try, but on the off chance, use nonlethal force, obviously."

Greer nodded. "No problem."

"Number two, you need to watch him," Young said, pointing at Rush.

"What," Rush said darkly.

Young stepped in close to Greer, eyes sweeping the hallway. "Our link is damaged," he said quietly to the sergeant, ignoring Rush's disbelieving glare. "He's going to be right next to the door and I'm going to be right on the other side of the bulkhead, but that's about the maximum distance we can separate."

"No shit," Greer said quietly.

"I need you to talk to him, and if he stops responding to you, I need you to come in and get me. He's almost certainly going to get—" Young paused, searching for the right word. "Kind of weird. That's okay. But if he stops responding entirely, you need to come in and get me. Immediately."

"Excuse me," Rush snapped, irritation flooding through their link. "But I'm *right here*, you realize."

"For *now* you are," Young said. "Let's keep it that way." He turned back to Greer. "Understood?"

"Got it," Greer said, compressing his lips.

"And you," Young said, rounding on Rush, pushing him back against the cold metal of the corridor wall. "Stay here, *right here*, and don't make this difficult."

Before Rush could start to argue, Young hit the door controls, leaving Rush and Greer in the corridor, regarding each other warily.

Once he stepped into the room, there was no question that Scott had already switched with Telford.

The other man was leaning against the desk where the terminal was placed, arms crossed, expression impatient. Young entered the room and then immediately stepped sideways to lean against the back wall at the point that was closest to where Rush was positioned in the corridor.

The headache was just short of unmanageable and he got only the barest hint of Rush's presence.

"Everett," Telford said, his tone clipped.

"David." Young crossed his arms, deliberately keeping his pose relaxed.

"You have full power back, I see."

"We do," Young confirmed.

They stared at each other for a moment.

"How did he do it?" Telford said, a slight jerk of his head betraying his irritation.

"I'm not sure myself," Young said mildly.

"Damn it, don't lie to me. I'm your commanding officer."

"Are you?" Young asked dryly. "You don't outrank me, and you're here at *my* discretion. I consider you the military liaison between Destiny and Homeworld Command. That's it."

"Insubordination isn't going to look good when it comes time to evaluate your record."

Young smiled, brief and humorless. "You want to talk evaluations, David?"

Telford said nothing.

"My assessment is that *you* should be pulling chopper detail at the Antarctic base by now, not inserting yourself between me and General O'Neill." He fixed Telford with a steely glare. "This isn't your command, David, not anymore."

"Your opinions count for jack shit, Everett." Telford said, his eyes dark. "I need to talk to Rush."

"I don't think so," Young replied.

"Are you refusing a *direct order*?"

"Dr. Rush is in the infirmary," he said, skirting another argument about chain of command. "TJ says no visitors."

"That's bullshit," Telford said, a flicker of uncertainty in his eyes.

"I wish it were," Young replied, his expression frozen.

Telford looked away.

"If he dies, I'm holding you responsible." Young said into the silence between them.

"Is that—*likely*?" Telford asked, his brows drawn together, eyes moving in rapid jerks over the floor.

"Do you give a damn?" Young asked conversationally.

"Do *you*?"

"He's my senior scientist."

"In the loosest sense of the word," Telford's voice rose, his eyes fixed on Young. "You've almost killed *him yourself* how many times now? Not that I blame you, the man's a god damned *viper*."

"Takes one to know one, David," Young said, deliberately echoing Rush's memory of the darkened chamber. "He told me about your work together. He told me *what happened*."

"What?" Telford whispered, as if Young had yanked the word straight out of him.

Young said nothing.

"And you *believed* him?" Telford said, recovering his equilibrium, straightening as he pushed away from the table.

"I did."

"Well there's your mistake right there. How many times has he screwed you over in *exactly* this way?" Telford asked, pacing away a few steps before he turned back to Young. "How many times? The star. The tracking device. The chair. The code." The other man took a deep breath. "Why would you *ever* side *with him* against *me*?"

"I'd like to hear your side of it," Young said, his breath shallow and quiet in the back of his lungs, his face as unreadable as he could make it.

"He might not have liked what he was doing," Telford snapped, "but he hardly had a moral high ground there. No one *liked* it, but everyone agreed it was *necessary*. Lam, Jackson, O'Neill, Landry, all of them. We didn't know what the ninth chevron led to, but we knew that in order to access *whatever* lay beyond it we were going to have to first hit certain benchmarks. That much was clear from what Dr. Jackson had uncovered."

Telford paused, running a hand over his mouth. "What did he tell you? That we forced him to do it?"

Young cocked his head, raising his eyebrows as he tried not to react to the sense of vertigo that motion produced.

"I'm *sure* that's what he said," Telford spit the words disdainfully. "The fact was that he was the best candidate. *That's* why I picked him for the project. He was the farthest along the spectrum that we'd encountered. Ever. Better even than John Sheppard, if you can believe it. The whole god damned lab lit up for him like he'd built the place."

God damn. What '*spectrum*'? Whatever it was, it must have something to do with Ancient genetics.

"He hated it," Young said quietly, hoping that Telford would keep talking.

"Of course he did," Telford spit out. "We *all* hated it, Everett. It was disgusting, learning from Anubis. From *Anubis* for god's sake. Dr. Jackson could barely sit through the briefings. But there was no point in pushing the Icarus project forward if we couldn't at least bring one person up to the minimum threshold requirements laid out in Dr. Jackson's text. It was pretty clear that the entire thing would have been a wasted effort. And he agreed to use the device. He *agreed*."

Young stared at him, blinking through the rising pain of his headache.

"Some things happened between us that I could have handled better," Telford admitted. "But you've survived as long as you have on this ship because of *me*. Because *I* pushed him. Without me, there would have been no access to Destiny's systems. You think a software buffer would have been enough to protect anyone else from contact with the neural interface? Not a chance in *hell*. So he can cast me as the villain in this story all he likes, but I had *reasons* for what I did, Everett."

"You were *compromised*," Young snarled, "at the time that all of this was happening. What were you going to do with him when you had succeeded? Hand him over to the Lucian Alliance? To Kiva?"

Telford looked away. "With my help or without it, he was and *is* always going to be a target for them. I would have protected him from Kiva."

"Yeah," Young said dryly, "I'm sure you would have done a bang up job of that."

"What did he say to you," Telford asked, "that you're so firmly on *his* side now?"

"That's between me and him."

"It's a mistake to trust him. A mistake to *let him in*."

Young's headache was reaching unmanageable levels and the ground had started to pitch beneath his feet. Though he hated to give up his line of questioning, he had to cut this short before he ended up collapsing on the floor or he lost Rush to the pull of the ship.

"Your time is up, David," Young said. "I have another meeting."

"You can't *dismiss* me."

"I just did. But hey. Stay in this locked room by yourself for as long as you like."

Young pulled out his radio. "Sergeant," he said, "open the door please."

The door swished open.

"Everett," Telford said, advancing rapidly. "You can't do this."

Young half turned in the doorway to face Telford, forcing his eyes to focus on the other man.

"Don't call us," he said. "We'll call you."

He hit the door controls, trapping the other man in the room. Gripping the wall, he advanced a few steps blindly toward Greer and Rush, already feeling incrementally better.

"Hammer group," Greer snapped at Rush. "Come on. At this rate there's no way you're gonna clear *your pathetic* personal best of forty-seven seconds."

It took Young a moment to understand what he was looking at.

Greer and Rush were sitting on the floor, pieces of Greer's disassembled assault rifle scattered around them. The sergeant had both hands fisted in Rush's jacket, and was pulling him forward, half supporting him while the scientist vaguely attempted to *assemble a gun*.

"My fourteen year old cousin is better at this than you are," Greer snapped. "Come on, Doc. Get with it. Optical sight group."

Young knelt next to them and Greer shot him a relieved look. As Young put his hand on Rush's shoulder, the other man's motions sharpened abruptly. The butt plate and magazine came together in short order.

"Frame and trigger," Greer snapped. "You're already at thirty seconds."

"I'm aware of that," Rush responded testily, and Young saw Greer relax a bit further, slowly loosening his grip on the front of the scientist's jacket. Rush completed the assembly and Greer checked his watch. "Thirty four seconds," he said. "I could have killed you at least three times over."

"Congratulations," Rush said.

"You need to work on this. *Chloe* is better than you. A *lot* better."

"Are we done here?" Rush asked.

"For *now*," Greer said warningly.

"Thanks, sergeant," Young said quietly, as they helped Rush to his feet. "Telford and Scott should be switching back shortly, if they haven't already. Keep an eye out until you can confirm we've gotten Scott back." Greer nodded at him shortly and moved to stand in front of the door.

Young turned to Rush, who was leaning against the wall of the corridor, eyes half shut. "Get anything useful?" the other man asked.

"You could say that," Young replied cautiously, deliberately pulling back slightly to keep his thoughts distant. He felt a small surge of guilt when Rush's eyes briefly lost focus and he shut them in an exaggerated blink.

"You wanted to check on Destiny's AI?"

Rush nodded, looking like he was about to fall over. "Control interface room," he said. "Unfortunately, I'll have to do this the long way."

"The *long* way?" Young echoed, bending to pick up the other man's laptop.

"Via computer," Rush said, leaning heavily on his crutches as they walked along the hallways.

"As opposed to?"

"Without a computer," Rush said unhelpfully. "I doubt you'd get me back if I tried *that* right now."

"Ah," Young said.



It was three hours before Rush was satisfied that there had been no damage to Destiny's central processor. Young was fairly sure that it would have taken longer if Eli hadn't shown up midway through and volunteered his services. TJ had shown up around eighteen hundred hours and successfully gotten them both to eat dinner and managed to take Rush's blood pressure without too much of a fight.

"Get him out of here as soon as you can," she had murmured to Young on her way out.

Young gave Rush another half hour after TJ had left, primarily on principle, then leaned in to look over Rush's shoulder. "How's it going?" he asked finally.

"No damage," Rush murmured back to him, his thoughts clearly elsewhere. "None anywhere," he sounded perplexed.

"That sounds like a good thing," Young said, covering a yawn.

"I don't believe it," Rush murmured.

"Why not?"

"Because I haven't seen her."

"Destiny?"

"Obviously."

"Don't you think that's because you're with me?" Young asked quietly.

"Maybe," Rush looked at him. "Hopefully."

"Come on," Young said. "You're dead on your feet, and no good to anyone like this. We'll figure it out tomorrow."

"That's a terrible idea," Rush said, but when Young pulled him to his feet, he didn't resist. He grabbed Rush's left arm and pulled it across his shoulders, careful to avoid stressing the other man's injured wrist. "I'm fine," Rush told him.

"I know you are," Young said.

The walk back to Young's quarters was agonizing for both of them. When they finally got there, Rush was arguably not entirely conscious.

"I'll sleep on the floor," the scientist said.

"I don't think so," Young replied.

Rush half pulled away from him. "*I* am not sleeping in *your* bed."

"Okay, fine," Young said, dragging him back up. "Fair enough. You can have the floor, just—sit here for a minute while I look at your feet."

He forced Rush into a seated position on the bed and bent down to untie his boots, loosening the laces all the way before gently pulling them off. He checked quickly to make sure Rush hadn't bled through TJ's bandaging job. From there, it was extremely easy to sweep the other man's feet onto the bed and shove him back.

"No," Rush murmured.

"Yes," Young said. "It's happening. Deal with it."

Young took off his own boots and jacket before lying down beside him, carefully keeping the maximum possible distance between them.

Despite his bone-deep exhaustion, it took him some time to fall asleep.

## Chapter Twelve

When Young awoke the next morning, Rush was already up, sitting hunched on the edge of the bed, glasses on. He had his fingers hooked over his left shoulder and was absently rubbing the base of his neck.

His thoughts were a transparent swirl of images—a gray landscape beside the sea where Gloria, backlit in front of a window, made a dark silhouette against the terrible monotony of the sky; a room, full of numbers—on papers, on whiteboards, on windows.

Clear as the images were, the connections between them and the significance behind them remained obscure.

Rush felt the sudden intrusion into his thoughts and looked over to give Young a fractional nod. "Our—" the scientist broke off, his brief difficulty with switching from thinking in Ancient to speaking in English surprising both of them. His brows knitted as he made a quick hand gesture that indicated a circle cut by a line, "Radius. Our radius is improving."

"Really," Young said dryly. "You just had to push it, didn't you?"

"Of course." Rush smirked slightly. "We're at about five meters now."

Young raised his eyebrows.

"Well," Rush admitted, "that's the upper limit. A solid four meters though. Enough for me to brush my teeth in splendid fucking isolation."

"That's a good sign, I suppose."

Rush shrugged, looking away.

Young watched as the scientist continued to make an attempt to ineffectively rub his neck with a wrist held forcibly straight by TJ's bent-metal splint. He seemed uncomfortable, desperate to avoid Young's gaze.

"Rush," Young said quietly. "I'm sorry about this. I'm sure there are places that you'd rather wake up, but you essentially collapsed last night, and I was not about to leave you on the floor."

"It's fine," Rush murmured. "Thank you."

Young raised his eyebrows.

"What?" Rush said, glancing at him for the first time. "I'm familiar with the concept of politeness on more than just theoretical grounds."

"Are you—" Young broke off, not sure how to continue. He sat up. "How are you doing with all of this?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Rush."

Rush looked over at him, a twisted, half-amused smile flashing quickly over his features. "You actually give a damn, don't you?" he looked away. "I can feel it."

"I do," Young said quietly.

"You shouldn't," Rush said, the words eerily calm.

"Why not?" Young asked.

"Look, Colonel Young, I understand that you're concerned," Rush said, and Young winced slightly at the use of his title. This was the other man at his most icily professional; his tone caused Young to flash back to his time on Icarus. Every interaction he'd had with the other man had been just like this—always distant, with Rush clearly in possession of more knowledge than he was willing to share. "But frankly," Rush continued, "I'm not about to candidly discuss my mental state with someone who has, on so many occasions, deliberately tried to cause me harm."

Young tried to prevent his temper from getting the better of him. "That statement cuts both ways."

"True," Rush admitted. "I attempted to get you replaced by framing you for murder. I then orchestrated a mutiny against your command with a secret secondary agenda of *preventing the destruction of this ship* in the inevitable battle with the aliens responsible for taking Chloe. I cracked the command code and had control of Destiny for *months* before anyone even *figured it out*." Rush smiled a humorless, bitter smile. "Not the most collegial behavior, I'll grant you."

"What's your point?" Young asked abruptly, hoping to prevent an enumeration of his own previous transgressions.

"We can coexist," Rush said quietly, "but I will never trust you. And you have never and *will never* trust me. So don't ask me to talk to you about what this is like for me. If I have tactically relevant information, I will share it with you. Otherwise—" he broke off with an abortive hand gesture, his meaning clear.

"I get that. I do." Young paused. "But, like it or not, we're in this together. Literally."

Rush shrugged noncommittally.

"Look, I know that Destiny is constantly draining your energy even as its AI tries to protect you. I know that it doesn't just tire you out to fight the ship; it *hurts* you. Maybe it's even killing you. You don't seem to care, though. You don't seem to think it matters *at all*, which makes me wonder what's waiting for us when we reach this energy breakwater that we're heading toward."

Rush was quiet for a moment before he spoke. "I don't know what you're implying," he said, his voice barely audible, his mind a distressed swirl. "But if you think that I would—" he broke off, brows pulling together in pained incredulity, "That I would *ever* leave the crew here when—" Rush looked away, his mind suddenly falling away from Young and toward Destiny, which, this time, wasn't a darkness but a searing white light of projected memory and desire that Young could not deconstruct.

It was beautiful.

Beautiful and terrifying.

"*Rush*," Young snapped, his hands coming up to grip the other man's shoulders as he ruthlessly pulled him away from the ship. "I'm not *accusing* you of anything. I want you to tell me what's going on. I want to help you."

Rush's eyes were closed.

"Let me help you," Young repeated.

Young's radio crackled, breaking the silence. "Colonel, this is Lieutenant Scott, please respond."

"Damn it," Young whispered, letting Rush go.

"Go ahead," he said, trying to keep the irritation out of his voice.

Rush dropped his head, his fingers digging into his temples as if he could hold himself steady with just his hands.

"We've got something of an emergency in one of the newly accessible labs. Apparently a machine got turned on? No word yet on what it might be doing."

Young sighed, his eyes still on Rush. "Any thoughts?" he asked the scientist quietly, not sure if he was going to get a response.

"I have to see it. I'm not omniscient." Rush's tone was deliberately wry, a thin veneer over the conflict that Young could still feel in the back of his mind.

Young let Rush keep his paper-thin layer of normalcy. "Such modesty," he responded, his chest tight.

"I'm on my way." Young replied to Scott.

Rush's radio went off. "Dr. Rush, this is Brody, please respond."

"Yes," Rush snapped. "I'm already aware. Who turned it on?"

"Volker and I." Brody said, his tone carrying a hint of apology.

"Don't touch anything until I get there. Anything *else*."

"Just so you know—it's building up some kind of charge."

"Of course it is," Rush said dryly to Young as he stood, recovering some of his usual animation.

"You sure you're up for this?" Young asked him. "I can get Eli to look into it instead."

Rush just shot him a disgusted glare and started for the door.

It took them six minutes to make it to the lab in question. As they rounded the doorway they saw Brody, Volker, and Eli positioned in front of a monitor bank a few feet away from a device that appeared to be built into the flat surface of a table-like structure.

Greer and Scott hovered slightly to the left of the doorway, eyes fixed watchfully on the blue glyphs that had appeared, lit from beneath, in the surface of the device.

"Hi," Eli said as they approached. "Before you say anything, this was *not* my fault."

Rush shot him a skeptical look over the rims of his glasses.

"Okay, maybe if I hadn't tried to cut the power buildup by removing it from Destiny's internal grid we would still have access to the actual interface, which *you* could have probably used to turn the thing off, but—"

"But?" Rush echoed.

"But I wasn't the one who turned it on."

"Yes yes," Rush said absently, narrowing his eyes in Volker's direction before switching his focus back to Eli. "Access to the primary interface is blocked?"

"Force field," Eli confirmed.

Young trailed Rush closely as he walked over to examine the device. The scientist stopped directly in front of the primary interface panel and cautiously lowered his hand toward its glowing surface. As the metal of Rush's makeshift wrist brace approached the field it flared to life, a small visible portion of it swirling angrily beneath his hand right before the point of contact.

//?// Young shot him a wordless question.

//I thought I might be exempt,// Rush explained.

//Exempt from a *force field*?//

Rush ignored him, ducking around the back of the machine to look for an access panel. He ran his fingers deftly over the surface and found the concealed release. The panel fell into his waiting hands, exposing blue glowing circuitry. He moved it to the side and sat down awkwardly, trying not to stress his feet. Young dropped into a crouch next to him, eyeing the back of the device.

//Do me a favor and go watch the monitors while I do this.//

//That's pushing it,// Young replied. //It's going to be about twelve feet. Maybe more.//

//Our time is limited. We don't want this thing discharging, I can guarantee you that.//

"Fair enough," Young murmured, gripping Rush's shoulder to lever himself back to his feet.

//What am I looking for?//

//You're not looking for anything. I am going to be watching them. While I fix this.//

Young's head was pounding by the time he made it as far as the monitor bank. Greer, he noticed, without being asked, had slowly moved over to take up a position immediately next to Rush. Young gave him a subtle nod before turning his eyes to the readouts that Rush wanted him to monitor.

//Are you getting this?// he projected as forcefully as he could at the other man.

//Mostly,// Rush replied, his mental projection distant but steady.

"How's it going?" Eli called over to Rush. "You haven't made a dent in the power buildup yet."

"It's been, what, less than three minutes?" Rush snapped back.

"Well, I just ask because it's starting to level off."

"What does that mean?" Young asked, blinking painfully at Eli.

"That it's probably going to do whatever it is that it does."

"Rush," Young snapped. "Get back over here."

//One moment.//

"Greer," Young snapped, "Pull him back *now*."

As Greer reached down, his hand fisting in the loose material of Rush's jacket, the device flared to life, a blue-white glow abruptly flash-blinding everyone.



## Loop 1, 0 minutes:

Young opened his eyes to see that Rush was already up, hunched on the edge of the bed, fully dressed down to his boots. The scientist's hands were twisted in the bedsheets, his head raised, his eyes wide and raking the walls in random, distressed patterns.

He looked like he had just dosed himself with amphetamines—wired out of his mind and not entirely stable.

"Hey," Young said cautiously. "Anything wrong?"

Rush twisted to look at him, hair falling across his glasses, searching his expression for something.

"What time is it?" Rush said asked intently, as if something critical depended on his answer.

Young looked at his watch, his brows knitting together. "Oh eight hundred and forty seven minutes. Why?"

Rush stared at him, waiting for something.

"Are you okay?" Young asked, sitting up and running a hand through his hair. "You don't look—"

"What's the last thing that you remember?" Rush interrupted him shortly.

"Falling asleep?" Young said, brows knitting.

"Fuck." Rush spit out the word, surging to his feet. "I'm going to *murder* them."

"Whoa," Young said, "hold up."

Rush had picked up his radio. "Eli," he snapped. "Eli come in." Rush waited less than one second before adding, "Eli, respond to me *right now*."

"Yeah, I missed you too," Eli said, "and as much as I would like to listen to you yell at me about whatever is bothering you right now? Turns out we're kinda busy over here. We just discovered a piece of equipment that seems to just be *on*. And doing something. Building a charge maybe?"

"Tell me you remember the last fifteen minutes," Rush snapped. "Tell me you remember that device discharging."

"Umm," Eli said slowly. "So on the insanity scale? You're at about an eight right now, just so you know."

//I'll second that,// Young said, trying to project calm into the agitated swirl of Rush's thoughts. //What is going on?//

Rush was staring at his radio.

"Crazy or not, we could use your help though," Eli said, "so get down here."

"Rush," Young said quietly. "What's happening?"

Rush sent him a quick series of mental images of a device that looked like it had been built into metal table. Blue glyphs glowed on its surface before a searing light exploded outward and Rush had found himself back in Young's quarters.

//Was I supposed to understand that?//

//We're operating in different frames of reference, you and I.// The man was clearly beside himself, and Young was hit with a gridded three-dimensional mental projection, which had moving objects passing through it. //T(b)-T(a) does *not* fucking equal T(b)'-T(a)'.//

Something about this equation seemed to disproportionately upset the scientist.

//Okay,// Young said, still trying to project as much calm as possible.

//We're NOT TEMPORALLY SYNCHRONIZED,// Rush continued, nearly hyperventilating, obviously trying to calm himself down enough to explain it to Young. //Time is a reversible coordinate, in the same manner as space, and fucking *Volker* just reset everyone but *me* by roughly fifteen minutes.//

Rush was trying to pace the room in a pained, aborted manner that was extremely difficult to watch.

//You're not making sense,// Young projected gently. //Just—sit down, and let's talk about this.//

//Not making sense? *Did I stop speaking English?* I'm so happy we're *linked* and we can't fucking separate.//

//Not helpful.//

//You are stuck in some kind of repeating temporal pattern. You're reliving a fifteen to twenty minute segment of time. I however, for some as yet unknown reason, am *not*.//

Young looked dubiously at the other man. //Look, you've been under a lot of stress lately, I know it probably seems to *you* like—//

//Give me your watch.//

//You need to calm down,// Young said reasonably.

"Give me your watch, damn it, and let's *go*," Rush said. His voice was strained and he was standing with his hand outstretched. "You're wasting time."

Young slowly unbuckled his watch from his wrist.

"Come on, come on—this is *intolerable*," Rush said. The scientist tried to snap his fingers, but was prevented by the wrist brace he wore.

Before Young had finished pulling his boots and jacket on, Rush was out the door, pushing the distance between them to its maximum extent.

Young caught up with him easily, and they made it to the lab in question in five minutes. Brody, Volker, and Eli had positioned themselves in front of a monitor bank a few feet away from the same table-like device that he had seen in Rush's mental projection.

Scott hovered slightly to the left of the doorway, his eyes fixed watchfully on the blue glyphs that had appeared, lit from behind, in the surface of the device.

Rush blew by the science team without even glancing at them, heading toward the back of the device.

"Hi," Eli called after him, "nice to see you too, thanks for your input."

"Were you working on this, by any chance?" Volker asked.

Rush shot Volker a livid glare before dropping into a crouch.

"So I guess that would be a 'no'?" Volker asked slowly.

"What happened?" Young asked, standing halfway between the science team and the device itself, trying to curb his headache.

"We found it like this," Brody said, looking over Eli's shoulder, glancing at Young. "Someone must have turned it on."

//So *was* this you?// Young shot at Rush, edging closer to the other man. //Did you turn this thing on in the last loop, or whatever we're calling this?//

//That question is so colossally stupid that I'm tempted not to respond, but those kinds of things seem to go over your head, so *no*, of course it wasn't fucking *me*. When this device was activated, *I* was sitting uselessly in *your* quarters, *not* talking about my

feelings, and getting accused of some poorly defined plan to fuck over the entire crew. Just what exactly is it about me that you find so god damned untrustworthy?//

//I think you're overreacting.// Young projected back at him, not entirely clear on most of what Rush was referring to, but fairly certain that the scientist was working himself up to the point that he wasn't thinking clearly.

Movement in his peripheral vision drew his gaze and he looked over to see Greer appear in the doorway, an unsettled expression on his face, his assault rifle slung across his chest.

"Sergeant?" Young asked.

"Sir, I know how this is gonna sound, but I think—" Greer compressed his lips. "I think that *thing*," Greer said, pointing with two fingers at the table, "May have already gone off."

Before Young could respond, he felt Rush's head snap up, a wave of relief flooding through their link. "Sergeant," Rush called, leaning out from behind the device. "You remember what happened?"

"I do," Greer confirmed grimly. "I thought I was the only one."

"Here," Rush said, tossing Greer the watch he had borrowed from Young. "We need to determine two things: how long the loop is, and whether we can effect lasting changes other than to this machine. Do you have a knife?"

Greer looked uncertainly at Young.

"Why do you need a *knife*?" Young asked Rush.

"So I can fucking cut open an artery and put myself out of my god damned *misery*, all right?"

"Settle down."

"Fuck you. Fuck all of you. Greer, give me that knife."

Greer pulled out his knife and walked a few paces over to where Rush was sitting, elbows-deep in the back panel of the device. "You didn't say *please*," Greer said quietly, dropping into a crouch and handing Rush the blade, handle first.

Rush grabbed the knife, and quickly used it to slice through the taped portions of each of his wrist braces.

//Is that a good idea?// Young sent dubiously. //Don't you *need* those?//

Rush ignored him as he carefully used the knife to make a short, shallow cut at the base of his palm before handing it to Young. "Do the same," he demanded.

"And this is supposed to prove what, exactly?" Young said, making a small scratch on his hand before returning the knife to Greer.

"Whether there's physical reset when the device discharges. If our reference frames are really discontinuous but colocalized, yours will be gone and mine won't."

"Power is leveling off," Eli called out.

"Time," Rush snapped at Greer.

"Sixteen minutes, fifty eight—"

Young shut his eyes against the awful flare of blue-white light that seared his retinas.

### Loop 2, 0 minutes:

"God *damn* it," Rush yelled, waking Young up as he sent one of his crutches hurtling into the wall. "Seventeen minutes is *too short*." He spun to face the bed. "Hold out your hand," he demanded.

"Are you *insane*?" Young asked him.

"Getting there," Rush said grimly, grabbing Young's left hand and turning it over. He placed his own left hand, palm up next to Young's. Rush had a small cut at the base of his palm and, Young noticed, had somehow managed to lose his wrist braces.

"I knew it," Rush murmured incomprehensibly.

### Loop 3, 11 minutes:

"Rush," Greer said, as they entered the room. "Eleven minutes? You've gotta be faster if you're going to fix this thing."

"I'm aware of that," Rush snapped back at him. "*You* try explaining this to him next time."

Young crossed his arms, glaring at Rush. "You didn't say anything about Greer being outside the loop as well."

"Thanks for pointing that out. I'll be sure to mention it when I explain it to you *again* in *six minutes*."

"Sorry to interrupt your argument guys," Eli said, "but I'm reading that Destiny is actually significantly displaced from our calculated course. We're over eight hundred million kilometers ahead of where we should be."

"Oh look," Rush said, "independent verification that I'm *not* having nervous breakdown. How nice."

"Rush," Young growled, rapidly losing patience with the other man.

"Just fix the damn thing before we drop out of FTL," Greer said.

"Very helpful, sergeant, thank you. I'm so glad that we're getting this chance to work together. Where would I be without your *brilliant insights*."

//Stay focused,// Young shot at Rush. //And stop antagonizing the one guy who's going to remember everything you say.//

"Where do you *get off* being such an *asshole*?" Greer asked.

"Right, as if you're some kind of paragon of virtue."

Greer crossed the space between them in three quick strides and dropped into a crouch immediately next to Rush, grabbing his jacket to half twist him around.

Young stepped forward, ready to intervene.

"I'm not," Greer hissed at him, "and I know it. I've lived through some fucked up shit, okay? And I'll bet my fruit *ration* that you have too. So if you can't respect *anything* else about me, at least respect that I still fucking get up in the morning to protect *your* ass, and everyone else's from the Lucian Alliance, from flesh eating bugs, from fucking creepy fungus monsters, okay? It's the only thing we have in common."

Rush stared at Greer.

The sergeant released him and stepped back. "So *fix* the goddamn thing, will you?"

"Working on it," Rush replied.

### Loop 4, 2 minutes:

"Look, if what you're saying is true, why are you sitting here, with me, and not with this device?" Young asked, trying to keep his tone reasonable. "It's not that I don't believe you—"

He was interrupted by a knock on his door. "It's Greer," he heard over the intercom.

"Come," he said without thinking.

Rush tensed.

"Colonel, look I know how this is going to sound—" Greer strode into the room, expression grim. He glanced over at Rush, and then paused, doing a double take as he took in the scientist, sitting on the edge of the bed.

Rush looked up at them both over the tops of his glasses, his hair in his eyes.

"Um, this is more than I wanted to know," Greer said, looking half uncomfortable, half amused.

"Glad you're enjoying this," Rush snapped at him. "We're not sleeping together."

"Really, because it kinda looks like you are."

"Okay *technically*, yes, we slept in close *proximity*, but that is *not* the same thing."

"Good times," Greer said.

"Do I look like I am having an even *remotely* good time?"

"Not really, no."

Young stared at them. For a few seconds no one said anything. Finally Young cleared his throat. "So, um, time loop?"

## Loop 6, 16 minutes:

Young stood with his arms crossed, a few feet away from Rush. Through their link he could feel frustration and anxiety rolling off the other man. Rush was leaning forward at an awkward angle, Greer positioned behind him with a flashlight.

Absently, Young massaged his aching wrists, knowing that it wouldn't do anything for the pain.

This wasn't going to work.

There was too much explaining, too much time wasted, and not enough time for Rush to work.

This loop he'd gotten in seven minutes with the device, which, when you were trying to repair a piece of Ancient technology that you'd never seen before, really wasn't much time.

The problem was that neither Rush nor Greer were very good at explaining things in a concise, trustworthy manner that didn't make them sound, well, *insane*.

"Hey," Young said. "I know you're on the clock, but I have a suggestion for next time."

"What," Rush snapped darkly.

"I think the situation is grave enough that you two should consider playing to your strengths," Young said, not without a little trepidation.

"Twenty seconds," Greer said.

Young pulled out his handgun and handed it to an astonished Rush. "Don't make me sorry I suggested this to either of you." He gave them both a hard look.

### Loop 7, 0 minutes:

Young opened his eyes to find Rush holding a sidearm to his head.

"Really sorry about this," Rush said, looking not sorry at all, and in fact, slightly pleased.

"But we've got to go."

### Loop 8, 6 minutes:

"Okay people," Greer yelled, forcing a round into the chamber of his weapon. "This is a *time loop*. We're trying to fix it, but we've only got eleven minutes before the loop resets. So, in order to increase efficiency, we're going to implement the following policies. Number one—no one moves. Number two—no one talks to Rush."

Greer motioned Young over to join the science team and Lieutenant Scott before taking up a position in front of Rush.

"Time loop?" Eli asked, "you made that up."

"We're in asynchronous reference frames, or something, okay?" Greer said, eyes flicking from Eli to Rush as the scientist dropped awkwardly into a seated position.

Young pressed one hand to his head, fighting a headache.

"Yeah, *that* sounds legit," Eli snapped.

//This was *your* idea, wasn't it?/ Young shot testily at Rush, trying to ignore the horrible tearing sensation in his feet. //I don't know *how* you convinced Greer to go along with this.//

//No talking,// Rush snapped back at him.

### Loop 14, 14 minutes:



"Sorry about this, Doc," Greer said quietly, hands held palm outward, looking calmly at Lieutenant Scott, who was holding a handgun pointed directly at his face.

"You start taking civilian hostages and screwing around with Ancient technology and *then* you're apologizing to *him*?" Young snarled at Greer.

Greer didn't even *look* at him. He was watching *Rush*.

"Stop it," Young snapped, struggled to restrain the scientist without hurting him. That was becoming increasingly difficult, as the man seemed to be determined to try and twist out of the shoulder lock that Young had him in.

//*Stop it*,// he sent at Rush, practically sitting on the scientist's lower back, one hand maintaining the shoulder-lock, while the other hand pressed down on the back of the scientist's neck.

"Rush," Greer said insistently. "*Rush*, it's not worth it, man. You're going to blow out your shoulder and for what? For three minutes? Just let it go."

Beneath his hands, Rush relaxed slowly, a tremor tearing across his back.

### Loop 15, 0 minutes:

Young woke up as Rush lay down beside him on the bed.

"Hey," Young said quietly, "are you okay?"

There was a terrible ache in the other man's shoulder and wrists, and his feet felt like they had been torn apart.

Rush didn't reply.

Young sat up, gently placing a hand on the scientist's shoulder, wondering where Rush's wrist braces had gone and why he was wearing his boots and holding—

Wait a minute.

Was that *his* sidearm?

"I think," Rush said incomprehensibly, "if we weren't linked, my location wouldn't be resetting. But it has to, because *your* location resets."

"I'm calling TJ," Young said.

"Don't do that," Rush said tiredly. "Just wait for Greer."

"I am *definitely*—"

Young was interrupted by a knock on the door. He stood to open it.

Greer was standing in the hallway, looking harassed.

"Sergeant? What can I do for you?"

"Can I come in?"

"Now is not a good time."

"What's wrong with him?" Greer asked, suddenly concerned. The sergeant stepped forward, coming just short of actually pushing past Young as he ducked around him to get into the room.

Rush hadn't moved—he was still lying on his back, the hand with Young's sidearm trailing on the floor.

"I think I need to take a loop off," Rush said, as Greer dropped to a seated position next to the bed.

"Yeah," Greer agreed, "I think maybe you do. We need to eat anyway. It's what, almost thirteen hundred hours?"

"What the hell is going on here?" Young asked them.

### Loop 16, 0 minutes:

Young awoke to find Rush staring at him, a handgun resting against his left shoulder. Young half sat up and Rush tightened his grip on the weapon and pointed it directly at him in a sort of exhausted, half-hearted manner.

"We have to go," Rush said.

Young didn't reply.

He considered several possible ways of disarming the other man, all of which seemed unnecessarily violent. Finally he settled on slowly reaching forward and closing his hand over Rush's, gently prying the weapon from the other man's unresisting grip.

Rush sighed. "It wasn't loaded. It never was."

### Loop 20, 10 minutes:

Greer helped Rush sit, one hand fisted in the front of the scientist's jacket, one hand beneath his elbow.

"You promised me an explanation," Young said, standing over Rush.

"And you'll get it," Greer answered, stepping into Young's personal space, forcing him back a pace, away from Rush. "But right now, he needs to work. Trust me on this one."

Young backed off slightly, touching Rush's mind briefly with a wordless question.

He got a short, equally wordless dismissal as Rush's thoughts rolled darkly along, an obscure mixture of circuit diagrams and Ancient phrases.

"Okay people," Greer said tiredly, arms crossed over his chest, sounding like he was reciting a rehearsed speech. "This is a time loop. Rush and I are operating in an asynchronous temporal reference frame relative to your own, which resets every seventeen minutes as this device discharges. The two of us, along with Destiny are still passing through space-time in a normal manner. You all," Greer said, fingers tightening against the shoulder strap of his weapon, "are stuck. If you want to verify what we're saying, check Destiny's current position."

"We're almost six hours off," Eli said, looking up at Young from where he stood behind the monitors. "What happens if we drop out of FTL?"

"Why is it just you guys who aren't resetting?" Volker asked.

"Has anyone checked the cumulative power drain?" Brody added.

"What caused this *in the first place*?" Young demanded, his already fraying patience snapping entirely.

Greer sighed, glancing over at Rush.

"Welcome to my life," Rush said, sparing him a brief glance in return.

"I feel," Greer said, looking at the ceiling in obvious aggravation, "like maybe I'm starting to get where you're coming from."

### Loop 21, 10 minutes:

"Okay people, this is a—" Greer broke off midsentence. "You know what? Fuck it." He unslung his assault rifle from his shoulder and pointed it at Young and the science team. "No talking," he said.

"What the *hell*?" Eli asked.

"I *said*, no talking."

"I thought we agreed that guns were not the best plan. Remember nearly getting shot in the face?" Rush said, not taking his eyes off the device. "There's no reset for *you*."

"Whatever," Greer replied.

"Please," Rush said. "Don't get shot."

### Loop 24, 5 minutes:

"We *already* explained it to you," Greer said, half dragging Rush down the corridor, the scientist's right arm pulled over his shoulders, Greer's left hand wrapped around his waist. "Over *twenty* times. You're just going to have to trust us."

"Never going to happen," Rush commented breathlessly.

"And *you*," Greer said. "Stop being such a god damned pain in the ass."

"But I'm so good at it."

"You've got me there," Greer said.

Young looked at them walking in tandem, in a practiced manner like they had, indeed, done this countless times.

He felt like *he* was the one out of sync, not the two of them.

In the back of his mind he could feel Rush struggling against Destiny and tried to help him, grounding him as much as possible.

"I trust you," he said. "I trust both of you."

They eyed him warily.

### Loop 25, 0 minutes:

Young opened his eyes to see Rush sitting on the edge of the bed, hunched and exhausted-looking in the unusually dim light.

"Rush?" Young said, pushing himself to a seated position.

"We have to go," Rush murmured, eyes half-closed. "Just—trust me on this one."

From the other man's mind, Young was getting almost nothing but pain.

"Rush, you're in no shape—"

//Please.// Rush said. //I need your help.//

The scientist had his eyes shut. His head was bowed. He didn't look at Young, just waited for his answer.

Young reached down and grabbed his boots, noting absently that Rush already had his on.

//All right. Where are we going?//

Rush didn't respond in words; instead he shot Young an image of a device—of blue glowing circuitry exposed, of a soft electric hum that increased slowly in intensity.

"Greer's coming," Rush said quietly, only a few seconds before Young heard someone pounding on his door.

A chill shot down his spine at the sound and he looked at Rush in incredulity.

Opening the door revealed that it was, in fact, Greer.

"Can I come in?" Greer was leaning against the doorframe, one hand resting on his rifle in a pose both exhausted and truculent.

"Be my guest," Young said, backing up a step. "I hear we're going somewhere?"

"Yup," Greer said sounding relieved, walking a few steps past Young over to where Rush was sitting. "Look at you, Doc," he said, as he pulled the scientist up. "That was quick. No handgun or anything. It only took you twenty-five tries to get it right."

"Oh shut up," Rush replied.

## Loop 27, 12 minutes:

"Okay people," Greer said, unslinging his weapon from his shoulder. "This is a time loop, and we're trying to fix it for you, but we're *fucking tired*, so just keep your questions to yourselves for five minutes, okay?"

Although no overt threat had been made, Greer's stance and relaxed grip on his weapon combined to suggest that he would not hesitate to head in that direction if the situation required it.

Young frowned, rubbing his jaw.

He could feel Rush struggling to stay focused through his exhaustion. Fighting the pull of the ship was taking up too much of his energy.

Young stepped forward, next to Greer.

The sergeant looked at him sharply, his expression full of warning.

"I think I can help him," Young said, voice too quiet to be heard by anyone other than Greer.

"He needs to focus," Greer murmured back, his entire stance forbidding.

"He can't keep doing this forever," Young said.

"I know that," Greer said quietly. "I know that better than anyone. I've been with him this entire time."

"So let me help him," Young murmured.

Greer looked at him evenly, considering.

"For the love of god," Rush snapped, "Stop posturing and get over here."

### Loop 28, 14 minutes:

Young knelt behind Rush, the palm of his hand pressing into Rush's back, right between his shoulder blades, over his spine. As he watched, the scientist finished stripping the jumper wire that he had cannibalized from somewhere else inside the device.

"Greer," Rush said, his voice slightly hoarse, "I think this is going to work."

"That's what you said twelve loops ago."

"Yes, well—" Rush uncuffed his jacket sleeve, and brought the material down over his fingers.

"If this doesn't work, we're taking the next loop off," Greer said, sparing a concerned glance in Rush's direction.

"It will work," Rush said. He deftly connected one end of the wire to an exposed circuit, then paused.

//Let go of me,// he projected at Young as he grabbed one of his boots and brought it across his lap, looking carefully at the sole.

"Doc, what the hell are you doing?" Greer asked him. "There's only three minutes left."

"I'm trying to make sure I'm not going to kill myself, if that's all right with you," Rush snapped back. "I'm going to short this thing out, which is not entirely without risk."

"Well, shit," Greer said.

Rush leaned forward and bent his knees, pulling his feet underneath him in a crouch. He hissed softly through clenched teeth as he balanced, slowly transferring his weight from fingertips to feet.

With their barrier entirely down, Young felt a wave of nausea sweep over him at the tearing sensation as muscles separated over cracked bone.

"Rush," he said quietly, the other man's name an agonized, incredulous admonishment.

"Don't touch me," the scientist murmured, his intonation rising, the reminder almost sympathetic.

Finally balanced on the insulated soles of his boots, Rush reached forward, fingertips protected by the sleeve of his jacket, and carefully moved the wire into place.

A plasma arc formed, brief and blue, burning out an arch in Young's retinas.

Rush jerked back, overbalancing, falling out of his crouch as the entire internal circuitry of the device flared a brilliant blue-white.

Together, Young and Greer dragged Rush back toward the nearest wall.

The lighting in the room flickered as Ancient symbols projected over the ceiling in ghostly relief and the metal of the device began to glow with an pale white heat.

"You *overloaded it*," Eli yelled in their direction from the other side of the room.

"I can see that, Eli, thank you," Rush yelled back.

The electrical whine in the air had reached an intolerable level.

Rush was between Young and the device, a dark silhouette against the blue. Hair falling into his eyes, he yanked back his jacket sleeve to expose his hand and pressed it down to the deck plating just as the device went critical with a blinding flare.

The explosion was deafening and Young tensed, waiting for the impact of debris.

It never came.

When he opened his eyes, there was a devastated twist of blackened metal where the device had been and a perfectly defined radius of debris that extended a good eight feet into the room on all sides.

At the border of the debris-line, a force field flickered in and out of the visible spectrum, extending up from the deck plating to the ceiling. At its base, Rush was kneeling, his right hand outstretched, just barely in contact with the edge of the field.

"Well shit, Doc," Greer said from beside him.

"Yes," Rush breathed out, pushing back and turning to face them. "For a moment there, I thought we were in trouble."



## Chapter Thirteen

The science team stood around the nearly unrecognizable device, its black and twisted remains still enclosed by the force field that Rush had managed to throw up in the nick of time. Greer was on his feet, eyes darting watchfully between the field and Rush, who was sitting a few feet away from the glowing energy barrier, leaning unsteadily on one arm.

Young looked at him, fighting a sense of exasperated anxiety and bizarrely, also trying to keep a lid on an inappropriate pride in the other man, which, he was sure, he had *no business* feeling.

"Hope that thing wasn't important," Brody said.

"And—this force field came from where now?" Eli asked, shooting an incisive glance at Rush.

Rush gave him a haughty stare in return, or as haughty as he could manage from the floor at Eli's feet. "Destiny is capable of containing instrumentation overloads. It's a basic safety protocol."

"Yeah, to seal off the *room*," Eli said. "Not create a force field from *nothing*, with a radius *just* large enough to protect everyone."

"Don't be ridiculous," Rush said, shaking his hair out of his eyes. "Electromagnetic fields aren't generated from '*nothing*.' They—" he broke off, blinking slowly, and then shook his head briefly as if to clear it. "They're created by unequal charge distribution or a changing magnetic field, which—"

"Oh, I'm good with the physics 101, thanks" Eli said. "But I'm pretty darn sure that there's no mechanical basis for creating unequal charge distribution *or* a changing magnetic field in the confines of *this circle*. The walls have the ability to hold or disperse charge in certain places, but—"

"What's your point, Eli?" Young asked, stepping forward to catch the young man's eye, his tone forbidding.

"It's obvious that—"

Young glared at him.

"Obvious that Destiny is just, um, really neat."

"Yes," Young said. "Yes it is. Okay people, I want this room sealed off for now, and *no more exploring until* I give the go ahead. Am I clear?"

He got nods all around before he finally turned and knelt down next to Rush.

"All right there, Cassidy?" Young asked wryly, grabbing the scientist's upper arm to steady him. Rush winced as he did so, and through their link, Young got a sharp stab of pain. "What happened?" he asked, abruptly letting go.

"Someone nearly dislocated my shoulder."

Young grimaced.

He had little doubt regarding the identity of the offending party.

He tried to clamp down on a surge of self-recrimination but he knew from the way Rush rolled his eyes that the scientist had picked up at least some of the guilt he was feeling.

"Admittedly, I had taken you hostage with your own handgun at that point, so all things considered, your response was actually quite restrained."

Young looked at him steadily, trying to assess whether he was being serious.

"Oh yeah," Greer confirmed, dropping down into a crouch next to them. "It definitely happened."

Greer and Rush smirked at one another.

Young eyed the pair of them dubiously as he rubbed his jaw, trying not to jostle his still-splinted fingers. "How many—" he broke off, making a circular motion with his hand to indicate temporal loops, or whatever it was that they were going to be calling them.

"Twenty eight," Greer said quietly to Young, his eyes flicking away from Rush to make sure Young was clear on the implication. "That was almost eight hours and probably a good *seven miles* of walking."

"Sergeant," Young said. "Go on ahead. Bring TJ up to speed on what happened. For all she knows, it's still nine hundred hours. We'll meet you there as soon as we can."

Greer nodded, slapping Rush on the back as he shot to his feet. The scientist grimaced.

"Looks like you made a new friend," Young said dryly.

"Despite my best efforts, I assure you."

"All right," Young said watching the scientist's eyes drift shut. "Let's get you out of here."

"Don't even *think* about it," Rush snapped as his eyes flew open, sensing from the change in Young's position that he was about to get picked up off the floor.

Young sighed. "Yeah yeah."

Their progress toward the infirmary was every bit as slow and agonizing as Young expected. He had no choice but to block a significant portion of the sensory input he was receiving from the other man in order to stay on his *own* feet. This, of course, made it increasingly difficult for Rush to maintain his coordination and, more alarmingly, his coherency.

Young could hear his thoughts slipping in and out of Ancient.

"This would be so much easier for both of us if you would just let someone carry you," Young commented, as he relieved Rush of his left crutch and pulled the scientist's arm over his shoulders.

"Vos tendo is. Vos animadverto quis venio."

"That was a threat, wasn't it? You're too out of it to even speak English and you're *still* being a pain in the ass. God you're a lot of work."

Rush sighed.

At about the halfway point on their walk to the infirmary, they passed the chair room.

They had just come even with the door when it hissed open, startling both of them.

Rush slowed.

Young pulled him forward, catching a flash of the chair in his peripheral vision as he did so, and—

They stopped in tandem in front of the door.

His mouth was dry.

His palms were damp.

The desire to enter the room was *overwhelming*.

It was beautiful, lit up with an ethereal glow in the surrounding dark.

How was it possible that he had never noticed its graceful lines, its prepossessing contours.

It was elegant.

Perfect.

Made so by its function—a gateway to knowledge, a means to penetrate the vacuum of space to know what lay beneath.

Destiny was there, buried deep within the interface.

It was where she had waited for them for millennia.

It was where she waited now.

Young took a step forward, dragging Rush with him.

He wanted to touch it.

He *needed* to touch it.

Just—simply—to—

Rush went down, knees buckling without warning, sliding out of his loosening grip before Young could do anything to slow his fall.

The sudden shock of it brought Young back to his senses and the temptation to touch the chair faded as he lost his grip on the other man.

He staggered slightly as he caught his balance, his full horror of the device returning redoubled as he realized that the thing hadn't been calling to *him* at all, but to *Rush*, who even now was reaching out toward it from where he had fallen to the deck plating.

Young had been lucky, *unbelievably lucky*, that Rush had been so tired that he had physically buckled under the mental pressure the chair was exerting, rather than making a break for the device, because linked as they were, Young knew—he would have let him go.

He might even have *helped* him.

Young knelt down, grabbed a handful of Rush's jacket, and dragged the scientist bodily back into the corridor before slamming his hand down on the door controls.

Out of sight, the chair was still exerting the same pull—as if Rush's proximity had flipped a switch.

"You just can't get a break, can you? Even for ten fucking minutes."

"I have to find her," Rush whispered, his eyes fixed on the closed door that led to the chair room. His skin was the color of chalk, his pupils dilated. "I have to find the AI. You have to let me go."

Young touched Rush's thoughts briefly and felt the pull of the chair distorting everything, invading everywhere, including into Young's own mind. He pulled back enough to resist it, but Rush—Rush couldn't do the same. The man had nowhere to go. His entire cognitive structure was disrupted by the desire, *the need*, to use the device.

Young could barely recognize his mind.

"Do you even know where you *are*?" Young asked him quietly. "Or *who* you are?"

"If I could just—get back in twelve hours, she might still be alive."

In the back of his mind he watched a cascade of pens spill across a desk, glinting in the light of midmorning.

"Wrong answer," Young said, pulling away from Rush's mind as he picked the scientist up off of the floor.

Rush barely reacted.

Young's arms were burning by the time he passed the threshold of the infirmary doors. Greer and TJ were leaning against adjacent beds, talking quietly, expressions intent. They looked up in alarm at his sudden appearance and Greer darted forward to take some of the scientist's weight.

"What happened?" the sergeant demanded. "I didn't think he was this bad, or I wouldn't have—"

Young shook his head. "He wasn't. This is something else."

They laid him out carefully on the gurney that TJ indicated. As soon as Young put him down he began to lower the partial block he had erected between their minds.

TJ's expression was intent as she took his pulse. "You should have called me down to that lab," she snapped. "When did he collapse?"

"About two minutes ago," Young said, watching her pull out a blood pressure cuff and rip open the velcro, feeling the unmitigated, terrible draw of the chair as the last barriers fell between his mind and Rush's. "But it wasn't—"

"Hey," TJ said, cutting him off, the pitch of her voice changing entirely as Rush's eyelids flickered open. "Hey, Dr. Rush, are you with us?"

"Tamara," he said, making an uncoordinated grab for her wrist. She caught his hand and held it, bringing it down to the mattress. "I have to go."

Unbelievably, Rush was trying to sit up. As unobtrusively as possible, Greer and Young held him down. It didn't take much, and he didn't seem to notice.

"Where do you have to go?" TJ asked soothingly as she tipped his head back to look at his eyes, quickly flashing a penlight into each of them in turn.

"I have to interface with the central processor."

"He wants to sit in the chair," Young translated quietly, watching TJ's eyes widen in alarm. "We literally didn't do anything other than *walk by* the chair room, and he got hit with this intense—desire, I guess, to go in. I almost couldn't stop him."

"Tamara," Rush said insistently. "I can't *leave her there*. Alone. Waiting for me. They're always—" he broke off, momentarily unable to speak. "All of them—just, waiting. Waiting for me."

Young felt the other man's thoughts turn briefly to Gloria, and he wondered if the scientist was *even separating* his wife from the AI. Rush swallowed, eyes flicking back and forth between the three of them.

TJ looked uncertainly over at Young.

He considered the scientist for a moment, taking in the slow sharpening of the other man's thoughts and the savage draw of the chair that was *still* coming through their link.

"Sedate him," Young mouthed silently at her.

She gave him a subtle nod, and bent down to pull a small bottle out of her bag.

"Tamara," Rush said insistently.

"Yup, right here," she said gently. "If you're going to go find her, we've got to get you back on your feet first, okay?" She unscrewed the top of the miniature bottle, which in a previous incarnation had held someone's travel-size shampoo. "Just drink this," she said quietly, handing him the container, helping him to sit forward slightly to do so.

Rush downed the entire thing in one shot.

"What the hell are you doing, Doc?" Greer asked. "You just colocalized some temporal reference frames. Seems like you should get the rest of the day off."

"How long?" Young mouthed at TJ.

"No," Rush said to Greer. "I have to go."

TJ flashed ten fingers at Young.

"How about later?" Greer said.

TJ handed Young a power bar. "See if you can get him to eat at least some of that before—" she made a hand motion to complete her thought, glancing down at Rush to make sure he wasn't following their discussion.

"Later is *unacceptable*," Rush said, making another effort to sit.

"Hey," Young said, pushing him back down. "Take it easy."

"I'm pretty sure later *is* 'acceptable'," Greer said. "Want to put it to a vote?"

"This is *not* a *democracy*," Rush replied, again trying to sit.

"Well," Greer said, dryly, pushing him back, "you've got a point there."

Rush glared at the pair of them with an unfocused, desperate frustration.

Young unwrapped the power bar, broke off a piece of it and offered it to Rush. "Eat something, let TJ fix up your feet, and we'll let you go," he said, trying to frame his words with images, projecting the idea of a trade into Rush's distressed thoughts.

Rush took the power bar.

TJ began sorting through her bag, piling gauze, scissors, and tape on the bedside table.

Rush had made it through about a third of the power bar when the stuff TJ gave him started to kick in, slowing the urgency of his thoughts, diluting the effect of the chair.

"Did you *drug* me?" Rush asked, appalled, refusing the piece of power bar that Young was holding.

For a moment, no one said anything.

Young hooked his foot around a chair and dragged it next to the gurney. He dropped into it, resting one elbow on the mattress.

"We did," Young said finally.

"Why—" the scientist paused, struggling to construct a complete sentence. "Why would you *do* that?" he finished with an exhausted bewilderment that made Young's heart ache. He was so tired.

"Because," Young said, running a hand up and down Rush's arm in what he hoped was a reassuring manner, "you weren't going to stop trying to get back there."

"You don't understand," Rush said, his diction losing its usual crispness. "It's been—almost twenty four hours since I've seen her. It's never gone that long. Never. I should have tried to find her yesterday. I shouldn't have let you convince me—"

"Rush," Young broke in gently, but insistently. "You *can't* right now."

"I have to."

"I know," Young said, pulling his chair slightly closer to the gurney that they had placed him on. "I know it has to be you. Just—not the chair. Not right now."

"She's a *person*," Rush said. "Not some bloody machine that you can just *turn off* when it suits you."

"She's a *starship*, Rush, *you're* the person."

"Of course you would say that. Of course you would." Rush pressed a trembling hand to his forehead, trying to hold himself together. Young could feel the scientist's mind splitting under the strain of Destiny's continuous, irresistible pull and Young's own ruthless hold.

"Please let me do this." The scientist was too exhausted to project, but his cold hand closed around Young's wrist.

"You're done, Rush. You're not thinking clearly."

Rush didn't reply, his thoughts a miserable swirl as he struggled to stay conscious.

"Come on," Young said softly. "Don't fight this."

"Don't say that. Not ever. Not to me," Rush replied, his thoughts decohering into random images, some of them clearly not his own memories, some of them flowing together, related.

Dr. Perry smiling through tears.

A ringing phone in a room covered with numbers.

David Telford leaning over him, hands on his shoulders.

"Greer," Young murmured, glancing at the sergeant, who was watching him with a guarded expression. "Take the rest of the afternoon off. Get some rest." The other man was sharp enough to recognize a dismissal when he heard one.

"Stay out of trouble, Doc," Greer said, squeezing Rush's shoulder as he left.

Rush was continually forcing his eyes open, every part of his energy now directed at hanging on to consciousness.

"Tell me something," Young said, hoping to distract him enough to push him over the edge.

"What."

"Anything. I hardly know anything about you. Tell me something about yourself."



TJ glanced sharply at him.

"There's nothing to tell."

"I doubt that," Young said skeptically. "How did you meet Gloria?"

"In the rain," Rush murmured and, against his will, his mind was suddenly full of it, pouring down over a street that Young had never seen before in his life but, all the same, he could recognize as New College Lane, in Oxford, England.

Her coat had been a pale blue and her hair darkened with water.

She hadn't had an umbrella.

"Did you have one?" Young asked.

TJ looked up from where she was setting up her supplies, unnerved at the non sequitur.

"Of course not. D'you even *know* me?"

It had been late in the day, the gray sky darkening as the sun set behind the cloud cover and they'd both stopped beneath Hertford Bridge to wait out the downpour.

"Nice," Young said, toying with Rush's cuffed sleeve.

"Shut up," Rush replied without any animosity, the memory fragmenting as he finally lost his grip on consciousness.

Young sighed in relief, bringing a hand to his forehead as he looked up to lock eyes with TJ.

"He's out?" she whispered.

Young nodded.

"Thank god," she said. "What the *hell* is going on?"

"The damn ship is trying to get him to sit in the chair by literally implanting the desire to do so in his mind. I think." Young leaned forward, his elbows on the mattress, his head cradled in his hands. "God, I can *still* feel it, TJ. Even when he's unconscious."

TJ was making quick work of changing the bandages on Rush's wrists. Young could tell that the injuries were healing quickly—better than he would have expected given the amount of strain the man had been putting on them.

"These are healing well," TJ murmured, as if she were thinking along the same lines.

"Too well?"

"No," TJ said. "It's not like what we saw with Chloe. This is within normal limits. Maybe a slightly accelerated, but—" she shrugged. "We really don't know what to expect."

They were quiet for a moment while TJ finished Rush's wrists.

"So," TJ said, asking the question that was hanging between them, "he's going to have to sit in the chair again, isn't he?"

Young nodded. "Assuming the ship keeps—doing what it's doing, we're not going to be able to stop him except by physically restraining him."

"Not a long term option," TJ said, looking at him as if she suspected he might try it.

"Not even a short term option," Young confirmed. "If you could feel what it's like—" He shook his head. "Even a few hours of this would destroy his sanity. What's left of it, anyway."

"Yeah, I was getting that," TJ said, unlacing Rush's boots.

"How long can we keep him under?" Young asked her.

"No longer than tomorrow morning," TJ said, "assuming that he metabolizes the extract I just gave him at the same rate that Volker and Greer did, which is definitely not a given."

Young nodded, watching her gingerly ease Rush's right boot off his foot. "Oh god," she winced. "His sock is coming with it. That's not a good sign."

It took TJ nearly an hour to clean and rebandage Rush's feet. She couldn't even attempt to re-suture his left foot—it was too badly damaged at this point after everything Rush had put it through.

Young, again, had to eat dinner in the infirmary. He hated to think about the rumors that must be circulating at this point. Certainly Wray, Eli, TJ, and Greer would help him out to the extent that they could in stemming the inevitable gossiping and theorizing, but there was only so much damage control they do without raising entirely different sets of questions.

Young slept in the infirmary again that night.

In the morning, he ate the breakfast that TJ brought him and was in the middle of reviewing the science team's latest reports when he looked up to see Eli and Greer standing in the infirmary doorway.

"Sergeant. Eli." Young shut his laptop.

"Hey," Eli said. "Greer filled me in about the fun new feature of the chair. Like stalker-attack-chair isn't enough, we also get creepy-addictive-heroin-chair? That just doesn't seem right. Anyway. We came to see how it was going."

Young sighed, looking over at Rush, who was still thoroughly sedated. "Could be worse, I guess."

"Um, yeah. It can pretty much *always* be worse," Eli said. "As I have come to realize."

"What's the plan, sir?" Greer asked.

Young rubbed his jaw, feeling a brief twinge as he jostled his injured fingers. "I'm going to let him do it."

"Yeah, so that sounds like a *completely terrible idea*," Eli said. "Just, you know, from an outsider's perspective. A *sane* outsider."

"When?" Greer asked.

"As soon as he wakes up." Young shifted his gaze over to Eli. "How much do you know about this software buffer that he used the first time he sat in the chair? The one he rigged up with Brody?"

"I tried to take a look at it," Eli said, "after we made it back to the ship, but he had locked it down entirely, by which I mean that he password protected it on his laptop. I can only tell you two things about it. One, the file size was small, so it wasn't anything incredibly elaborate. And two, there's no way in hell that it worked the way Brody explained it, because writing a *software buffer* that turns an information stream into a dream interface is *impossible*, by the way. Even for Rush."

Young smiled slightly. "So he wasn't entirely forthright about that. Big surprise. What do you think the program did?"

"It probably *did* slow the rate of transfer somehow," Eli said, "but not in the way in which he claimed."

"Which means what?" Young asked.

"He couldn't have *created* any kind of interface with a program that small. He couldn't have even significantly *modified* the manner in which he interfaced with the chair. From this, I presume that he was banking on something else entirely to protect his mind."

"Yeah," Young said, glancing at Rush again. "I have a theory about that."

"Oh *really*," Eli said archly.

"I'll tell you later. What I really want to know is whether you think it would be helpful to run the program when he sits in the chair later this afternoon.

"Why don't you ask *him*?"

"Because I'm not sure he's going to be firing on all cylinders today. Look, if you bring me his laptop, I may be able to open the program for you so you can take a look."

"Oh he's going to *hate* that," Eli said with a grin, already heading toward the door. "I'm in. For the greater good, and all."

Greer shot Young a skeptical look. "What's going to happen to *you* when he sits in the chair?"

"I guess we'll find out," Young replied.

Young spent the rest of the morning and early afternoon trying not to think about what was coming. He had made short work of cracking Rush's password for Eli. Rush had absently typed it enough times while their thoughts were linked that he had a sense of what the keystrokes should be. From there, it was just a matter of relaxing and letting his fingers remember before passing the computer over to Eli, who had taken up a cross-legged position on the gurney adjacent to Rush.

"This is weird," was Eli's first comment.

"Weird?" Young echoed.

"I take back what I said earlier. This is a short program, but not a simple one. And—" he looked up at Young. "It's not in any programming language that I've ever seen."

Eli seemed to expect some kind of reaction.

Young shrugged.

"I feel like you don't get the significance of this," Eli said. "The guy *invented a programming language* that would work on his laptop and with Ancient systems."

"Is that—difficult?" Young asked.

"Um, yes. It's also one—really badass, two—probably something that he should have told us, and three—explains a lot about how good he is at getting the ship to do what he wants."

"So, *could* he have manufactured a dream interface?" Young asked.

"Umm, no. Impossible things? They're still impossible. Give me a minute."

Young raised his eyebrows in Rush's direction. Through their link, muted images flickered, too dim for Young to make out.

"Dang," Eli said softly, after five minutes had passed. He looked up at Young, giving him a crooked, unsettled smile. "This is—really sophisticated."

"You sound surprised," Young replied. "Last time I checked, the guy was still some kind of computational genius."

"Well, no, I mean, okay—here's the thing. He's—smart. He *is*. But it's a very—confusing kind of smart?"

"Yeah," Young said. "I get that."

"I think that he thinks that he's maybe smarter than he actually is," Eli continued. "Or," he paused, drumming his fingers on the edge of the laptop.

"Or?" Young prompted.

"Here's the thing. The man *definitely* has problems with basic math, which he likes to pretend to be awesome at, but seriously, have you *noticed* how many people he has doing calculations for him? I've always found this—confusing. I mean, the dude is a *Fields Medalist*."

Young raised his eyebrows.

"But this—" Eli said quietly, his eyes locked on the screen. "This is something else."

"How so?" Young asked.

"Well, the syntax he's got on this thing is Ancient, but if I'm parsing this correctly, I think he's using a variation of recursion theory to define *himself* as a set with a high degree of unsolvability. That's—well, that is *hot*."

"God damn it, Eli," Young said. "Help me out here."

Eli shrugged. "I just wanted to give you a sense of it. Basically, if I'm understanding this correctly, in practical terms he was blocking Destiny out of his head. Which means that he was able to interrogate Destiny in the computational sense without the reverse being true. Meaning that the information used to build the interface between them would have been provided by Rush himself. What the *neural* basis is for that is, I don't know, but I'd guess it was some unconscious process."

"So he made a dream interface, then?" Young asked dryly.

"No—well, yeah okay, *kind of*," Eli made a circular motion with his hand. "Anyway, the point is? I don't think he can use it this time if the goal is to find the AI. I think it's got to be a direct link."

"All right," Young said. "Thanks, Eli."

"Let me know when he's going to do it. I'll come help out. Monitor the monitors, that kind of thing."

Young nodded and Eli hopped off the gurney, Rush's laptop underneath his arm.

"One more thing," Eli said slowly, "and I hate to say anything, but—I'm going to anyways. If you think about it, this program," he pointed to the computer, "is a crappy defense against what happened to Franklin—aka an information dump. It was really a defense against the *opposite* phenomenon—against the ship taking anything from *Rush's* mind that he didn't give it. That makes it a very good defense against what ultimately happened to him. Which kind of makes you wonder how much he knew going into all of this."

Young sighed.

"Yeah," Eli said, turning toward the door. "I hear ya."

Rush woke up at around 1430, right around the time that TJ was starting to get nervous about how long he'd been out. Young could tell from the way she kept organizing and reorganizing her pharmaceuticals.

The first thing Rush did, of course, was pull out his IV and try to get up.

From what Young could tell from his thoughts, the response was pure reflex.

"Easy," Young said, crossing the distance between them in a few strides.

//I have to go,// Rush projected forcefully into his mind, and when Young's hands closed around the scientist's upper arms he felt the already intense pull of the chair ratchet up to a nearly unmanageable level.

//We're going,// he reassured Rush, projecting his intent at the other man, hoping that it would help. He didn't get anything in return other than a sense of unmitigated urgency.

"Can he eat something first?" TJ asked, appearing at Young's side. "He really should eat."

"Nope," Young replied, letting Rush struggle into a seated position. "We're going to have one hell of a fight on our hands if we try to make him."

"Okay," TJ said quietly, shouldering her medical bag. "Let's go." She pulled out her radio to let Greer and Eli know that it was time.

Young eased up on the connection between his mind and Rush's to the point where he was satisfied that he could resist the pull of the chair himself.

If that meant that Rush half-collapsed under the strain that Destiny was exerting, well, that made it easier for Young and Greer to carry him to the chair room without argument.

When they arrived at the room, they found it waiting for them—door open, monitors aglow, the interface active.

Young could barely breathe through the urge to touch the thing.

The strain on Rush was so great that the scientist literally was unable to move.

The door swished shut behind them.

"I got it," Young told Greer, who backed off with a nod.

"Careful," Eli said, as Young approached the chair.

He lowered Rush down into the thing, muscles shaking in anticipation, ready to jump back at the slightest indication.

Nothing happened.

Young reached over gingerly and placed Rush's left hand down into the open restraints. Slowly, as if the chair was deliberately trying *not* to frighten anyone, the metal bracelet closed over the scientist's wrist. Young did the other hand and both feet, before gently tipping the scientist's head back.

The neural interface bolts engaged with a crack that made everyone jump.

Finally, Young lowered his barriers entirely.

A profound sense of relief was the first thing that hit him and then—

Unexpectedly, his mind locked with Rush's.

"TJ," was the only thing he had time to say before—

*They explode through a nebulous darkness into bright light, into Destiny's CPU, blurring through incomprehensible circuits until the light resolves into something that makes sense to him.*

*He—they—are standing in a cluttered, white room.*

*The memory, the structure, the laws of the interface are borrowed from Rush, are coming from Rush, and he—they—are sharing Rush's body, thoughts clear, pain-free for the first time in a long time.*

*The room is familiar. He's seen it often in fragments of memories.*

*California sunlight streams in through the windows, bleaching out the walls to a painful, blinding uniformity.*

*"Of course."*

*Rush speaks the words aloud—to Young, to the room, to himself, to Destiny, wherever she is in all of this.*

*"Of course she would choose this."*

*They are so close that Young does not need to reply in words. Rush can feel his confusion, and he—he can feel Rush's dread.*

*They are startled by the abrupt ringing of a phone.*

*Young moves to pick it up.*

*Rush halfheartedly tries to hold him back.*

*//Don't.//*

*//This is what happened,// Young replies, and picks up the phone.*

*"Dr. Rush? This is Dr. Forsythe. I'm calling about your wife."*

*"Yes?"*

*"She's taken a turn for the worse. You may want to come down here."*

*"I understand. Do you have an estimate for—"*

*"She probably won't make it through the day."*

*"Thank you."*

*He hangs up, fingers gripping the edge of the desk in an agony of indecision.*

*He looks at the clock, looks back at the desk. He empties his collection of pens out of the top drawer and spills them across his desk in a cascade, glinting in the light of midmorning.*

*Dull amongst the glittering writing implements lies the black plastic of a box cutter.*

*He keeps it here in case he changes his mind.*



*He picks it up and unbuttons his sleeve, fingers running over his arm, searching for his subcutaneous transmitter.*

*It would be farther out of line than he's dared to step to just—cut it out, and tell them to go fuck themselves for once.*

*But the stakes were high, and Telford would come for him.*

*He would drag him from Gloria's bedside if he had to.*

*Besides, the part of him that knows that this is a memory also knows that he found the AI at the hospital last time.*

*She won't be there again.*

*Not this time.*

*Telford beams into the room, arriving as a column of light that darkens and solidifies.*

*Rush is still standing there, sleeve unbuttoned, blade in hand, when he materializes fully.*

*Telford stares at him, his eyes dark, face immobile except for a fractional tightening of the skin around his eyes.*

*"I thought you might try something like that," Telford whispers. There's pain in his voice, or pity, or something that Rush doesn't want to know about.*

*"It wouldn't have worked anyway," Rush replies. "Would it."*

*"No." It wasn't a question, but Telford answers anyway. "You'd just—ruin your shirt."*

*They lock eyes.*

*"David," he says, one last attempt to appeal to the man's better nature. "Please. Don't ask me to do this. Not today. She's—"*

*Telford holds up a hand. "I know. I know, Nick."*

*Rush supposes that he does.*

*"We have intelligence that the Lucian Alliance is making a run on the base as early as tomorrow."*

*"What? How could they possibly have known—"*

*"We have to go now," Telford says. "It has to be now and it has to be you. If we're lucky and everything goes like it's supposed to, we can get there and back in twelve hours."*

*But Telford looks down and away, like he's afraid that they won't make it back in twelve hours or, maybe, like he knows he's lying.*

*The latter possibility occurs to Rush only later. When it's all over.*

*He nods, hating the other man.*

*Hating himself.*

*They beam out, onto the Daedalus, and in a few seconds he's farther from Gloria than anyone on the entire planet he's leaving behind.*

*He avoids Telford as much as he can.*

*He changes out into the black fatigues that someone always seems to find for him.*

*He's sitting alone in a hallway near the hyperdrive, feeling the subtle vibration in the metal under his back, trying to soak up some of the heat that lingers here despite the best efforts of the ventilation system. It's the warmest, least efficient place on this ship. It's where Mandy finds him.*

*"Gloria?" she asks quietly, her motorized wheelchair stopping immediately next to where he is crouched on the floor.*

*He shakes his head.*

*"Oh my god, Nick. I'm so sorry." Her voice is breaking, closing off, and if he could look at her, he's sure he would see her crying.*

*Crying for him.*

*Because she thinks his wife is dead.*

*He can't tell her the truth, bright little thing that she is; he can't bear for her to know that Gloria is still alive, still waiting for him to come, trying to hang on. Gloria doesn't know that he's so far away it would take even light, the fastest natural thing in the universe, years to cover the distance between them.*

*"Mandy," he says, not looking at her, reaching out to grab her lifeless hand. "Mandy, don't cry."*

*She can barely move, barely breathe on her own. He's not certain she's strong enough for too many tears.*

*"Little miss brilliant," he says, trying to cheer her up, but it's a wasted effort because his own voice breaks as he looks at her.*

*She tries to smile at him.*

*He tries to smile back.*

*They stay there together until they feel the hyperdrive shut down and Telford comes to find them.*

*They beam down, the three of them, into a large room that has Anubis' disgusting aesthetic all over it. Above them, the walls fade away into darkness. The floorspace is barely visible in the dim lighting but—he doesn't need to see.*

*He's spent too much time here as it is.*

*"It gets me every time," Telford says. "This is where he succeeded."*

*He doesn't reply.*

*He hates this place, hates that Anubis' belief in the scientific basis of ascension means that he shares a conceptual common ground with someone—something so unquestionably evil.*

*But maybe that's not so surprising. He certainly can think of no one more ethically unqualified to attempt this, other than perhaps Telford himself.*

*He reaches up to brush his hair out of his eyes and looks over at Mandy.*

*If merit had been the criteria by which they had chosen, it should have been her, of course—little miss brilliant, so excited, so god damned positive about everything.*

*He hopes that this will help her.*

*He knows that even if he succeeds, it will be too late to help Gloria.*

*Probably.*

*Mandy is staring at him with an unreadable expression on her face.*

*"Don't do this," she whispers to him, too quietly for Telford to hear. "Please."*

*"We talked about this," he whispers back. "We agreed. There's no other way."*

*"But now that I'm here, I've changed my mind. This is wrong. There's something about this place that's been twisted. This isn't our legacy to continue. It shouldn't be." Her words are rapid and breathless, her eyes on Telford, who is circling back toward them, footsteps echoing in the cavernous space.*

*"I know that." He reaches forward, his hand closing around her delicate, nearly lifeless forearm. "It will be all right."*

*"It won't," she whispers.*

*"Mandy—"*

*"What are you talking about?" Telford asks sharply, coming back into view as he rounds a bank of monitors.*

*"Dr. Perry needs to be beamed out," he says smoothly. "She's not feeling well."*

*He looks back at Mandy but she shakes her head fractionally. "You shouldn't be alone down here," she mouths silently. "Don't send me away."*

*"You shouldn't have to see this," he murmurs, leaning in. "It may be upsetting."*

*She shakes her head, but before she can comment further, she is beamed away.*

*He looks over at Telford.*

*"It's probably better this way," the other man says. "I never understood why you wanted her along in the first place. With all that—" he makes a sweeping motion that seems to indicate a wheelchair. "She's a liability."*

*"She's brilliant," he replies. "That's never a liability."*

*"If you say so." Telford gives him a fixed gaze from beneath lowered eyebrows. "Let's get going, so you can—get back."*

*He has already made the necessary modifications. There is nothing left to do but to attempt it.*

*He walks over to the edge of a pale, rectangular depression in the floor where the faintest sheen of liquid glimmers in the dim light. He kneels, feeling his muscles knotting with tension as he unlaces his boots quietly, competently.*

*"Nerves of steel, that's what you've got," Telford says. "I fucking love it. How did you ever end up in academia?"*

*He resists the urge to roll his eyes.*

*"What a waste," the other man says.*

*He grimaces faintly. "I would hardly call it a waste."*

*He pulls off his socks and gets to his feet. The bottoms of his borrowed fatigues drag along the floor.*

*There is no point in delay. He steps carefully into the pool. The thin sheen of liquid turns out to be a watery gel. It clings to the bottoms of his feet and soaks the hems of his fatigues as he makes his way gingerly to stand in the center of the shallow depression.*

*The gel is going to have excellent conductance properties.*

*"Ready?" Telford asks him quietly.*

*"Yes."*

*"You're sure you wouldn't rather try this on Dr. Perry?"*

*"You're a cold-hearted bastard, David."*

*"Takes one to know one, Nick."*

*Telford drops his shoulder and levers up a switch with all of his strength.*

*He looks away from Telford, gazing up, into the blackness, as he listens to the charge mount in concealed capacitors.*

*His heart pounds in his throat.*

*He waits for discharge.*

*He may not survive this.*

*He may survive but never be the same.*

*But maybe—*

*Maybe he'll be different.*

*Maybe he'll be better.*

*Maybe there will still be a chance to save her.*

*The device discharges with a crack, and he feels the electromagnetic field run through him, disrupting his own gradients and internal set points, forcing a change, forcing a new configuration.*

*There is no sensation of hitting the floor but he finds himself there nonetheless.*

*He cannot move.*

*Above him, the walls fade into blackness.*

*Something is wrong with his heart; he can feel it flutter like a wild, trapped thing.*

*He thinks he might be dying.*

*His perception of time slows.*

*He had wanted to see her.*

*He had wanted to be there with her.*

*For her.*

*And the part of him that's sharing his mind, the part of him that is not Nick anymore but a blend of what he has become, a blend of Rush and Young, knows that here—here is where he will see her.*

*This time.*

*In this false addition to a memory he'd give anything to destroy.*

*"Sweetheart," she murmurs, her face improbably luminous against the black ceiling of the chamber. She's kneeling next to him. "It's all right." He can feel her hand on his forehead, brushing back his hair.*

*He reaches up to touch her, vision blurring as a sheen of water forms over his eyes, obscuring the edges of her silhouette.*

*"You're not real," he says, forcing the words past a throat that is trying to close. "You're not her. I never saw her. Not here. Even if she could have, she would never have come here."*

*"She loved you," Destiny says, tears smearing Gloria's carefully applied eyeliner. "I know she did."*

*"You tried this before," Rush whispers, reaching up to touch her hair. "You cannot forgive me in her place. It's not the same. It's not true."*

*"You wanted to save her." Destiny's outline blurs briefly into Emily, Gloria's hair darkening to a honey blonde before snapping back.*

*"She never knew that," Rush says to her. "All she ever knew was that I left her. I left her. Alone."*

*"Nick," her voice cracks on his name, as she shakes her head, her face distorting in misery.*

*"You can't fix this for me," Rush says with a gentle relentlessness, still stroking her hair. "Even though you want to. You can't stay here. You have to go back. The ship needs you. We need you."*

*"But this," she whispers, not looking at him, gesturing weakly at the room, "This is what will hold you back when the time comes. You have to let it go." She bites her lip. "You must let it go, or you won't be able to complete the mission."*

*"You can't fix this with a lie," he murmurs, his heart fluttering in his throat. "Even I know that."*

*"This isn't how it ended," she admits, her tears falling into his hair.*

*"No," Rush says. "It's not."*

*"I won't leave you here," she says, shaking her head.*

*"You have to," he replies. "Go back to Destiny. You can trace your way back out of my mind."*

*"You know how to escape the interface?" she whispers. "Colonel Young cannot pull you out like this."*

*"I do," he whispers. "Go. I'm not alone. I'm never alone anymore."*

*"I'm sorry," she says quietly. "I'm sorry I brought you here."*

*"Go," he replies, and she vanishes.*

*His remembered narrative resumes as if a switch has been flicked.*

*"Nick." Telford's voice comes from across the room.*

*"David," Rush coughs weakly, unable to get up as Telford drops to his knees beside him.*

*"It didn't work."*

*"It did," Telford whispers. "It did. It worked, it's just—not complete."*

*"David—"*

*He cannot sit and Telford does not help him.*

*"I'm sorry," Telford says. He hits a button on a remote he's holding.*

*The shallow depression containing the conductive material begins to sink into the floor.*

*Telford puts his hands on Rush's shoulders.*

*"What are you doing?" He tries to push himself up, tries to fight against Telford's grip, but his heart is barely beating. He can hardly breathe, hardly feel his hands and feet.*

*The gel numbs his skin as it comes up from somewhere in the center of the sinking floor, taking the energy out of his muscles.*

*In a few moments he will be entirely paralyzed.*

*"Don't fight this," Telford says, fisting his hand in the soaking hair at the back of Rush's neck and tipping his head back, opening his airway.*

*It is, for the moment, easier to breathe.*

*"It has to be this way. You know it does."*

*The level of the alien substance is slowly rising. It slides between his fingers and creeps into his borrowed uniform with a liquid intransigence.*

*"It doesn't." He can barely hear himself. He wants to say more, he wants to argue; but he can barely speak, half-submerged in an alien substance far away from Gloria, who, like him, is struggling to breathe.*

*Waiting for him to come home.*

*"This is part of it," Telford whispers, one hand over his heart, holding him down, the other tangled in his hair. "Don't tell me you never suspected. You must have. You can't truly break free unless there's an incentive."*

*Had he known?*

*It seems so obvious now.*

*Perhaps he had.*

*He's certain it wouldn't have made a difference.*

*"I'm glad that it's me," Telford whispers. "No one understands you like I do, Nick."*

*He opens his mouth to hurl one last piece of invective at the other man, but before he can say anything, Telford is kissing him. It's everything Rush would have predicted, if he had ever had the time or the inclination to give it any thought—aggressive and desperate and sad—an unreciprocated goodbye, that is, fundamentally, more of a final power play than anything else.*

*He can't breathe.*

*He relaxes entirely, hands unclenching, giving in to Telford because he cannot do otherwise, removing himself from his surroundings, trying to recall what Jackson told him—that it was, and had always been, less about perfection than acceptance.*

*Maybe that's enough. It will have to be.*

*And how is this—any of this, worse than what Daniel had described to him—drowning in his own blood, blamed for the fracturing of a nation, his wife dead because he had failed to save her.*

*He has to let go.*

*"I'll see you on the other side," Telford whispers as he pulls back and pushes Rush under in a blurring cascade of changing refractive index as air gives way to something else.*

*He cannot move.*

*Above him, the lights soften into edgeless obscurity.*

*He inhales, pulling the stuff into his lungs.*

*He wishes he knew where it came from, this substance that's going to kill him, or save him, or change him, or set him free. He wishes he knew whether it was Ancient, or Goa'uld, or some twisted combination of the two invented by Anubis.*

*He hopes it's Ancient.*



*And then—*

*He lets go.*

Young tore back into consciousness with an agonized gasp, his heart beating against his ribs, his muscles contracted with the shock of realizing that he was not, in fact, dying.

TJ hovered over him, hands on his shoulders, her face tight with worry. "Did it work?" she asked, her eyes flicking between him and the chair. "What's wrong?"

He realized his hands were wrapped tightly around her arms.

"What's wrong?" she repeated.

"Nothing." He let her go.

Turning his head he saw Emily, not Gloria this time but *Emily*, thank god, sitting beside him on the floor. The AI's expression was closed and distant.

It was watching Rush, who was sat motionless, still in the chair.

"Colonel," TJ whispered. "Did it work?"

"Yeah," he said, still looking at the AI. "Yeah, I think so."

"You can take a minute," the AI said quietly as he pushed himself up to his elbows, "if you require a minute. He's fine."

Young raised his eyebrows.

It did not look back at him.

"You gave us a bit of a scare," TJ said, helping him push himself into a sitting position, "but everything seems to be okay. There weren't any bolts this time at least," she said, glancing at Rush.

"Yup," Eli added, watching Young from behind the monitor bank. "All things considered, this wasn't so bad, except for the part where you passed out."

Young said looked at them in overt disbelief before veiling his expression as he remembered abruptly that they hadn't seen what he had—that the only thing they knew was a lack of bolts and bleeding.

Only Greer seemed to pick up on his mood as he locked eyes with Young, his expression dark and watchful.

With TJ's help, Young got to his feet. His link with Rush was wide open but he had only a vague sense of the other man before he slammed his hand down on the interface panel in the back of the chair and easily pulled the scientist out of Destiny.

Rush's thoughts sharpened immediately into consciousness; Ancient gave way to English in a fluid wave, as if the ship were surrendering him to Young, as if it knew that this time it had nearly pushed him too far.

The restraints disengaged with a simultaneous crack that made everyone except Young jump.

Rush opened his eyes and looked up at him.

Young had no idea what to say to the man, but he was certain that *something* needed to be said.

"Come on." He held out his hand.

Rush took it.

## Chapter Fourteen

They slammed metal cups down to the table with a synchronized clang; Young forcefully, Rush with a cocky shake of his hair. The sound echoed through the converted storage room, causing a room full of would-be drinkers to turn their heads, eyeing them with bemusement tinged with varying degrees of alarm.

"We'll be needing more than *that*," Rush announced, eyeing Brody, who was regarding them steadily from the other side of the table.

"A lot more," Young confirmed.

Brody looked unconvinced. "Should you *really* be—"

"Yes." Rush cut him off. "*God* yes. And if you're fucking thankful that your temporal reference frame is in fucking continuity with the hull of this ship, and hence, reality as it's colloquially understood, you'll keep pouring."

"I'm a fan," Brody said with a one-shouldered shrug, refilling their glasses as he shot Volker, Greer, and Park, who were seated at an adjacent workbench, a significant glance.

"Contemporaneous reference frames for all," Park exclaimed, lifting her glass.

"Yup," Greer said, touching his glass to hers with the subtle sound of metal-on-metal. "It's how we do."

"This should be good," Volker said as he watched Rush and Young knock back another shot in tandem. "Someone find a kino. That way we can either record this for posterity or, you know, use it as evidence."

"Shut it, Volker," Rush snapped, thankfully directing attention away from Young's poorly concealed wince at the astrophysicist's comment.

"For your information," Rush continued, "Colonel Young and I have not tried to kill each other for at least—what, eight months now? Arguably longer than that, depending on how certain events are interpreted." He shook his hair out of his eyes, the clarity of his thoughts and the lack of strain on his mind putting him in a better mood than Young had ever seen him.

"Um, congratulations?" Park said.

"Thank you, Dr. Park." Rush slid his metal cup back over to Brody.

"You sure you can handle this?" Brody asked him.

"I'm Scottish, man," Rush snapped. "Don't insult me."

//You realize you might be less Scottish than Ancient, at this point,// Young observed.

//How good were they at holding their alcohol?//

//I'm certain they were fucking fantastic at it,// Rush shot back.

"I never see you down here—your tolerance has to be pretty low at this point," Brody continued. "Plus, no offense, but you don't seem to be in the best shape at the moment."

"Yeah, or *ever*," Volker commented.

"I'm fine," Rush replied, shooting a cool look in Volker's direction.

"Did you come here *directly* from the infirmary?" Greer asked wryly.

Rush ignored both Greer and Volker with admirable poise. "I suspect that you lack any of the requisite credentials for bartending," he said, looking at Brody.

"True," Brody admitted, "but an argumentum ad hominem isn't going to change the fact that you're out of luck for the next twenty minutes."

Rush smirked at Brody, angling his empty cup in a mock salutation. "So it might appear. However, your admirably responsible stance is undercut by the fact that you lot need to clear out of here. The colonel and I are commandeering this fucking bar and an undetermined fraction of your alcohol, correct?" He turned to Young, raising his eyebrows.

Young hadn't necessarily intended to do any such thing, but found that it struck him as a good idea.

"Oh yeah. There's no way *this* could go wrong," Volker said.

"Everyone out," Young confirmed. "Leave the bottle," he said, catching Brody's eye.

Park straightened up as if she was about to say something. Rush narrowed his eyes at her, and she turned her motion into getting up from her seat, her expression anxious.

"If you guys kill each other," Volker said, "we're putting Eli in charge."

"Scott's in charge," Young replied. "Now go."

The room emptied and he was left alone with Rush, who immediately grabbed the alcohol and poured them both a third shot. To Young's relief, he didn't seem inclined to knock it back right away. He just picked it up and considered it, then took a small sip. Neither of them said anything for several moments.

"We're doing this," Young finally said, trying to build any kind of verbal, or personal, or alcoholic momentum as he threw back his third shot and slammed his cup down.

"Are we?" Rush said. "I committed only to your proposal as stated when we left the infirmary and you implied to Tamara we were going to do something prudent."

"Um," Young said, trying to remember any kind of 'stated proposal'. "Can you paraphrase?"

"Getting fucking smashed, and in short order."

"Right. Well, that was phase one."

"No other phases were disclosed," Rush said, sipping his shot.

"Rush. There's no getting around the fact that you're going to explain to me what the fuck I just saw," Young said, not looking at him. "Because otherwise, I'm going to have to ask you about it, which would be worse."

"Too right," Rush said. "I support your efforts to speak as little as possible."

"Jackass," Young said conversationally. "Start at the beginning, wherever you think that is."

Rush was quiet for so long that Young wasn't entirely sure he was going to say anything.

Only the agitated swirl of his thoughts indicated that it would be worth waiting him out.

"Did you ever wonder why I was recruited to the program?" Rush asked finally, continuing to sip his drink.

Young shrugged. "You're some kind of mathematical hotshot," he said. "It never seemed that complicated."

"Maybe not to *you*," Rush said, sipping his alcohol. "But the program does not generally make a habit of recruiting tenured professors of mathematics who have never shown even the slightest interest in anything beyond the terrestrial problems of academia.  $P=NP$ , or not. The Hodge conjecture. Et cetera."

Rush was sending him entire mathematical structures through their link, which, frankly, Young had little hope of understanding when he *hadn't* been drinking.

"Yeah, I guess the college-professor thing struck me as maybe a little bit weird," Young said, "though to be honest, it only occurred to me pretty recently."

"Yes well. It occurred to me *immediately*."

"Didn't you win some kind of fancy math prize?"

"As if a Fields medal qualifies anyone to muck about with alien technology." Rush gave him a disdainful look. "I resisted at first. I agreed only to consult."

"Because of Gloria?"

"Yes."

"So what changed your mind?"

"Colonel Telford," Rush said, downing the remainder of his third shot. "He knew why they needed me, and he spent a long time, a *long* time, figuring out how to convince me."

Maddeningly, Rush stopped there. Young could feel through the link that the scientist was right on the edge of revealing something, but hadn't decided whether to do so or not.

Young stayed quiet, knowing that if he pushed Rush at *all* he was likely to get nowhere.

"Telford had obtained permission," Rush finally continued, "to screen a selection of government-sponsored tissue banks for a panel of genes, including the so called 'Ancient gene' to identify members of the population that might be useful for his project. One of those tissue banks was the national bone marrow registry, which is how he found me."

Young nodded, staying quiet, trying to say nothing, to *do* nothing that might raise the other man's guard.

"There were other candidates for Telford's project, of course, but none with the same intellectual qualifications. It was, in the end, Dr. Jackson who made the final choice. There were ethical aspects of the project that made everyone nervous and there was an attempt made to balance Telford's influence with mine in some kind of replication of the famed O'Neill-Jackson axis."

Young raised his eyebrows and bit down on his urge to comment that Rush didn't really seem to have the same sort of moral cache that Dr. Jackson's name carried around the SGC.

Rush picked up on his train of thought anyway.

//Obviously,// the scientist shot back, switching abruptly to projecting. //I'm a far cry from Daniel fucking Jackson. But no one knew that at the time. How would they? In the beginning, I acted within well-demarcated boundaries. And Telford—well, he turned out to be no Jack O'Neill, let's put it that way.//

Young nodded, swallowing his questions.

"You're terribly restrained over there," Rush commented, *again* picking up on Young's train of thought.

Young was slightly unsettled at how unusually sensitive the scientist seemed to be and wondered whether it had anything to do with the alcohol.

"So, just to clarify, Telford's project was *not* Icarus, correct?"

"Correct. Telford's project was related. Unnamed."

To Young, that seemed ominous.

"Too fucking right," Rush commented absently in response.

//Stop that,// Young sent.

Rush opened his hands and then poured them both another shot.

"So which one were you initially recruited to?"

"The SGC found me through Telford's screen, but Jackson arranged a joint appointment."

"Why?" Young had never heard of a project's lead scientist splitting his time in such a manner.

It seemed impossible.

"It was a power play, orchestrated by Jackson, on my behalf." Rush smiled faintly. "It gave me leverage against Telford, without which—" he cut himself off, both verbally and mentally.

"So what was Telford's project?"

"I find it unlikely that you haven't guessed," Rush said, his diction losing some of its usual precision.

"Ascension," Young said.

"Yes."

They downed their fourth shot simultaneously.

"It wasn't clear where the nine-chevron address led to, but there was some evidence to indicate that it might allow one to connect to another plane of existence. Much like the city of the Ori, which Jackson had visited. In order to gain full access though, certain benchmarks had to be met."

"Benchmarks?"

"Yes. Electrophysiological requirements for full access."

"Stop doing that."

"What, using words with more than four syllables?"

"Stop being deliberately obscure because you don't want to say what you mean."

Rush looked at him, but could not veil the uncertainty behind his defensive hauteur.

Between their minds an unwelcome resonance reflected Young's assessment through both their thoughts—that the man's very existence, his entire manner of interacting with people, with the world, with technology, was a consistent invitation to destruction. The man seemed to do nothing but welcome it. No one could exist the way Rush did. It simply wasn't sustainable.

Rush looked away.

"So," Young said after a moment. "Benchmarks."

"Increased electrical activity in certain areas of the brain, seen briefly in Dr. Jackson before he ascended and also in the clone of Anubis that was studied at Stargate Command."

"So Telford's project was—what then? Altering someone's *brain*?"

"Not *someone's*," Rush said, eyes fixed on the wall in front of him.

"And you *agreed* to this?" Young asked incredulously.

"I did."

"*Why*?"

"Many different reasons." Rush ran his thumbnail along the rim of his glass. "Surely it's not too difficult to imagine what at least some of those might have been."

Young rubbed his jaw, his injured fingers giving him a sharp twinge for his efforts.

"What happened there?" Rush murmured, eyes flicking to Young's bruised hand. "I've been meaning to ask."

"Nothing," Young said, trying not to think about the incident in question. "Don't worry about it."

Rush narrowed his eyes, picking up on the brief flash of memory. "You punched a wall?"

This was getting ridiculous.

"Yes." Young said, "but we were talking about *you*."



Rush sighed and looked away. He drove the heel of his hand into one eye, his thoughts an evasive mass that clearly indicated that he could barely stand the thought of more discussion. "You saw the outcome anyway," Rush murmured. "There's not much more to say."

Young laughed shortly. "Not much more to say? Are you fucking kidding me? I just watched Telford try to murder you with his bare hands."

"He wasn't trying to murder me. Obviously the experience was a bit disturbing, but ultimately—"

"You can't lie to me, Rush," Young snapped. "I was there."

"No," Rush said quietly. "You weren't."

"Semantics. I felt what you felt. I don't know how you can so much as *look* at him. He tried to *kill* you and there were absolutely no repercussions."

"Well, he's hardly alone *in that*," Rush snapped acidly. "I can think of a few other individuals who fall into the *exact* same category. I can't just cut off all relations with *everyone* who tries to kill me," Rush said, his eyes narrowing, "from a professional standpoint, it's just not practical."

Young looked away. "How can you equate us?" he asked, thinking of Telford, knowing Rush would understand. "It wasn't the same."

"True," Rush said, his tone maddeningly reasonable. "You didn't apply the same kind of psychotic personal touch and, certainly, you had a reason to be angry, so congratulations there, but ultimately, for me, it was *your* attempt that was worse."

"How could it *possibly* have been worse?" Young snapped without thinking.

Rush blinked trying to *suppress* some of the flickering images that began to leak through his conscious control. But at the moment, with Destiny backing off and the alcohol lowering their defenses, they were too close for the scientist to effectively—

*It's almost a relief as they tear through his chest to implant the transmitter because for a moment they're out of his mind. He was not built for this, he knows he wasn't—it's only the increased neural activity that allows him one last level of insight into what they're doing as they try and fail to rip apart his mind. He has David to thank for this trade he's forced them into because if they cannot tear open his mind they will instead tear open his chest and that is an exchange he is grateful for because if they had been able to turn him, oh god, they musn't ever, ever succeed in turning him—*

The memory splintered and faded as Rush reasserted his control.

Young lurched forward in his seat, dropping his cup, his hands flying to his chest at the remembered sensation of his ribs splitting open, trying to erase the feel of something cold and metallic being placed next to his heart.

He felt like he might be sick.

"Fuck," he breathed.

"Well, how did you suppose it got there?" Rush asked mildly, sipping his drink. The only evidence that the scientist had ever been upset was his slowly settling pulse.

"I—" Young shook his head. "You were *conscious* for that?"

Rush didn't reply. But then, he didn't need to.

Young righted his cup and poured himself another shot.

"Don't worry about it," Rush said. "No harm done. Other than the pain. And the psychological trauma. And the abduction of Chloe, and *her* pain and *her* psychological trauma." He paused, sipping his drink. "The eventual mutiny of the civilians against your command. The genetic transformation of a crew member. The—"

"You've made your point," Young said.

"Yes, well," Rush murmured, "I'm sure it seemed like a good idea at the time. There's relatively little advantage to the kind of retrospective analysis that you're continually subjecting yourself to."

"Thanks," Young said dryly. "You're unexpectedly philosophical about this, especially considering you just had a full-blown, technicolor flashback about thirty seconds ago."

Rush gave him a one-shouldered shrug. "It's called perspective."

Young stared at him, seeing someone other than the man he thought he had known. Someone who had started to transcend the bounds of what a person could contain. Someone who had shattered every obstacle he'd ever encountered through sheer force of will, and had been shattered himself, through the effort expended.

It scared the hell out of him.

"So what happened between you and Telford?" Young asked, after he'd gotten himself back under marginal control.

"What do you mean?" Rush said, eyes half closed, thoughts a dark, unreadable swirl.

"We didn't see each other until he gated out to Icarus after you *finally* got around to refusing the command."

Young knew he should stay quiet, but he was unsettled and frustrated and fucking *uncertain* about nearly everything. Unfortunately, what he said instead came out less like a question and more like an accusation.

"Did you sleep with him?"

Rush's eyes widened, the rhythm of his thoughts slowing in astonishment before reengaging at a furious pitch.

"No," he said. "Were you not *paying attention*?" The scientist's thoughts were a miserable, protected swirl of Ancient, deliberately fracturing, fractal-like.

Young didn't need to know exactly what the other man was thinking. He could feel the disappointment radiating off Rush before the other man seemed to take it and transform it into something hard and determined that was about to be released in Young's direction—even though he was exhausted and hurt, and well on the road to being drunk as hell.

A wall of directed anger slammed into Young's mind as Rush began to speak.

"My often criticized and 'heartlessly' pragmatic approach to dealing with situations requiring cost/benefit analyses between two frequently terrible alternatives does not translate into a complete lack of every human sentiment. *I*," Rush continued, with an undercurrent of spite, "am not the kind of person who would ever, *ever* step out on his wife. Unlike *you*—"

"Shut up," Young snapped.

"*You* certainly seem to have no problem with it." Rush finished relentlessly. "Why do you want to know, anyway? What does it matter to *anyone*?"

"He *kissed* you."

"And how is that *my* fault? He's creepy as fuck, all right? Is this *news* to you?"

Young didn't reply.

"Look," Rush said. "I'm done here." He got unsteadily to his feet but Young grabbed his arm, pulling him back down.

"No way are we done, and where the hell were you planning on *going*, anyway?"

"As far as I could get," Rush said, giving Young a mutinous glare.

"That was going to be about fifteen feet. That's not even out the door."

"Yes well, not a perfect solution, I grant you." Rush poured himself another drink with dubious coordination.

Young thought about stopping him, but ultimately decided against it. If Rush wanted to remove himself from this miserable situation by getting plastered out of his mind, well—it was much more benign than some of the other options available to him.

They sat in silence for over ten minutes, sipping their alcohol, thoughts leeching between their minds like watercolors, before Young finally felt intoxicated enough to apologize to the other man.

//Sorry.// He projected not just the word, but the sentiment as well.

Rush gave him one of his fractional half shrugs.

"So, did it work?" Young asked, "Your electrophysiologic benchmark, or whatever. Did you reach it?"

"Aye. Too fuckin' right I did. You've seen my mind—the kind of order that exists there, if you'd even care to call it such a thing. Whatever it is—it's so fucking far from *your* solidly methodical approach that you're as difficult for me to follow as I am for you."

"So, you weren't always like this?"

"No," Rush said. "Initially, I found it—upsetting. But I've since adjusted. Even then, even early on, there were compensations. Gains in processing power. My thinking became more intuitive even as it lost order. The irony was that in gaining the ability to access what lay beyond the ninth chevron, I lost the ability to solve the problem of getting there. And I knew it. Everyone involved with David's project knew it. And they fucking felt sorry for me, the bastards."

"And now?"

"And now it's bloody well *worse*, as you know. Higher math has become dead *instinct* and not something I can verbally conceptualize anymore. I can't even *explain* something as simple as operator theory to Chloe, let alone impersonate a calculator, but I can manipulate shield frequencies, and generate force fields and—fuck, you don't care. Why am I telling you this anyway?" Rush pressed the heel of his hand into his eye socket.

"You're telling me," Young said, "because you're drunk, and I'm asking."

"Bang to rights."

"What?"

"Nevermind."

Young watched Rush run a fingernail over a dent in the metal of the cup he was holding as things slowly resettled in his mind. Unbidden, he remembered the sight of

Rush, working late nights at the Icarus base, his hair a mess as he stood in front of his whiteboard, one hand on the back of his neck, looking utterly defeated.

"Aye," Rush murmured, seeing Young's memory. "No one really understood why I could rebuild the mathematical structure that defined the entire problem and code it into a virtual interface in the span of one night, but I couldn't keep myself on track for a long enough period of time to just *solve* the damn problem. And I—well, I couldn't explain it to them. I can't explain it now. I don't have much insight into what happened on that planet. In that lab."

Young didn't reply.

He tried to think of nothing, of space, of the inside of a star, of *anything* except the terrible pity that rose up to drown his memories of Rush on Icarus.

The man had been falling apart.

And no one had noticed.

The silence descended between them again, but this time it was less frigid. Or it felt that way to Young, at least. He could feel Rush sliding progressively further from sobriety, his thoughts an unfocused stream of Ancient and math and code and ice.

There was one more thing Young needed to find out.

"So, if you knew you had been modified specifically for the express purpose of gaining full access to whatever was beyond the ninth chevron," Young asked carefully, "then why *didn't* you want to sit in the chair when we found it?"

Rush's thoughts exploded into utter incoherence, the most obfuscation that he had ever felt the scientist employ.

Young pulled back, giving him space. "Okay, so I'm getting that you don't want to answer that one right now," Young said quietly, curiosity gnawing at him, "but I'm going to need some kind of response."

Rush shut his eyes. "I didn't want to sit in the chair," he murmured, "because I was afraid of what would happen to the crew if I did. If *I* did," he repeated for emphasis, gesturing toward the center of his chest with an open hand.

"What did you think might happen?"

"Not this," Rush replied, "and so it's immaterial."

Young took a sip of his drink. "You have *no idea* how unsatisfying I find that response."

"On the contrary," Rush replied, "I believe I'm the *only person* who knows *exactly* how unsatisfying you find it." There was no mistaking the amused edge to his words.

"You're really god damn irritating," Young said conversationally. He tried to keep a tight control on his own thoughts, but was unable to contain a brief flash of Destiny-as-Emily, standing on the observation deck, the glow of FTL lighting up her hair.

*"He will tell you. When he's ready."*

Rush picked up on the memory and shot Young a wordless sense of inquiry.

//She talks to me too, you know. Usually when I'm being particularly stupid.//

Rush dropped his face into his hands. //That's brilliant. Intrapersonal advice from a starship.//

//You were pretty adamant about her personhood yesterday.//

//Yes well, I would be, wouldn't I, since enough dopamine got dumped into my brain to fair shut down my normal cognitive functioning. It's just not fucking *polite*, that.//

//Agreed,// Young said adamantly. //It's also a dick move to take on the appearance of someone's dead wife. Or ex-wife.//

//Aye, she feels not so great about that,// Rush replied. //She's actually been appearing to me as Daniel Jackson ever since you pulled me out of the chair.//

//That's nice of her. I'm still seeing Emily.//

"Well try having a near nervous breakdown." Rush smiled unsteadily as he switched back to speaking, his cheek twitching slightly. "It may be tha' she'll feel sorry for you as well."

"You're getting increasingly, um, Scottish, by the way."

"I'm not," Rush said, his diction sharpening instantly. "Shit. I hate that."

"S'okay," Young said, waving a hand at him. "Don't worry about it."

"You have to tell me something," Rush said, staring at the wall, looking miserable. "I told you all this shite because I'm fair fucking wrecked, and," again Young felt him make an effort to sharpen his accent back up, "And—fuck. This isn't a conversation. You're just getting me smashed and fucking *interrogating me*, and I don't—"

"Hey," Young said, reaching over and grabbing Rush's shoulder and shaking him slightly for emphasis. "Not true, okay? Definitely not true. What do you want to know? Ask me something."

Rush took a deep breath, steadying himself.

Young tried to avoid feeling too relieved.

Now that he had a bit more insight into what he was witnessing, Young found Rush's thought processes substantially more interesting. The other man's patterns of thinking were not temporally linear, but rather formed an adaptive network with thoughts interconnecting based on conceptual underpinnings that weren't obvious, at least not to him.

Though Young made a concerted effort, he still couldn't predict Rush's question before he asked it.

"Why did you turn down Icarus?"

"I wanted to fix things with my wife. I fucked everything up by sleeping with TJ, and Emily—well, she asked me to stay. I knew that if I took the command, I'd lose her for good. But—I goddamned lost her anyway. And she's—she's with Telford now I think. That's the worst part."

Rush grimaced. "Telford? Get to fuck. How did *that* happen?"

"When I went back to Earth, I'd usually switch with Telford, and dropping in and out of FTL—that's when he saw her."

Rush didn't say anything, just shook his head, eyes closed.

Young reached over and gently pulled his cup away before dumping the remainder of the alcohol into his own glass and knocking it back. "I think you're done, genius."

"Yeah," Rush agreed, "I'm pure wrecked at this point. Who the hell are you, anyway, that you can put away half a bottle of, I don't know, some grain alcohol equivalent and still be so bloody coherent?"

Young half shrugged and stood up, feeling the room spin unsteadily around him. "Come on," he said, pulling on Rush's arm. "Let's go back before I have to carry you. Again."

"Dinnae fash yersel'—ye wilnae hae t'do i'."

"You're really *very* Scottish," Young pointed out. "You've been keeping that one on the down low, haven't you?"

"Fuck," Rush said carefully. "I'm fine."

"Sure," Young said. "Sure you are."

He pulled Rush up, drawing the man's arm over his shoulder and handing him one metal crutch. Rush looked at it as though he weren't sure exactly what it was for. Young pulled him along for a few steps, trusting he would get the idea.

They crossed the room without much incident and as they approached the doors, they swished open of their own accord to reveal Eli sitting in the hallway, typing on his laptop.

"What're you doing here?" Young asked him.

"I relieved Greer about twenty minutes ago," Eli said, eyes glued to his computer screen. "He seemed to think it was necessary that you guys have some kind of escort, so—" he broke off, staring up at them. "Wait a second. Are you drunk? Is *he*? You got *Rush drunk*?"

"Um," Young stalled, not entirely sure why Eli was asking.

"God, Eli," Rush said, raising his eyebrows. "Do you have to state the obvious like it's a fuckin' *revelation*? Too right we were drinking. That's what people *do* in storage rooms converted to distilleries."

"This is," Eli said, shutting his laptop and pushing himself to his feet, "*amazing*. Do you have any idea how long I've been trying to do this?"

"What?" Young asked. "Get him drunk?"

"Yes," Eli said, drawing out the word before turning to Rush. "Okay, seriously, top five desert island movies. You owe me this one."

"If I were on a desert island, I'd sure as fuck be trying to get *off* it, not watching films."

"Oh my god, you are impossible. Top five things you miss about Earth."

"Eli, you're supposed to be *helping*," Young interjected, pulling Rush forward. "Not playing twenty questions."

"Coffee," Rush said as Eli pulled Rush's other arm over his shoulders, "cigarettes, paracetamol, having loads of those little fucking notebooks, playing the piano."

"You play the piano?"

"All civilized people do."

"I love the intense accent, by the way," Eli commented.

"Shut it."

"Do you think I'm smart?" Eli asked, without missing a beat.



"Obviously."

"How smart?"

"Pure dead brilliant. But you know that already, I should think."

Young glanced over at Eli to see a flash of surprise flicker across his face, drawing his eyebrows together. He suppressed it quickly, looking away from both of them for a brief second before coming back with a cocky, "yeah, of course I know. I just wanted to hear you say it."

"Eli," Young growled, "Enough already."

"Oh come on. Like you didn't do the same thing."

Young didn't have much of a response to that, so he just continued down the hall, listening to Eli, with his characteristic muted exuberance, gently draw Rush out, question after question.

"Top five people on Destiny, other than me and Colonel Young."

"As if either of you would be in my top five."

"Well you don't have to worry about that, do you?"

"Chloe, Brody, James, Tamara, Greer, and Wray."

"Was that in order? Also, that was six."

"No."

They paused briefly at a corner where two of Destiny's hallways intersected, Young heading one way, Eli the other. "Um, his quarters are this way," Eli said, his voice suddenly guarded.

"Yeah, I know. We're going to my quarters."

"Um, *why*?"

"Because." Young replied.

"I don't know if that's such a good idea," Eli said, inching forward before stopping again.

"Eli," Young said. "Come on."

Still, Eli hesitated.

Young tried not to be distracted by the dryly amused tone of Rush's disorganized thoughts and was completely unsuccessful.

"It's fine, Eli," Rush said, eyes half-closed. "We cannae separate. That's all."

"Since when?" Eli said, starting forward, shooting Young a watchful glance.

"Since Telford swapped me out and the ship lost power." Young sighed.

"I guess that explains why you've been MIA from—well, basically everywhere."

"Yeah," Young said shortly, fighting down a brief stab of guilt at the accurate assessment. "I'm still not clear on how things are going to work if we can't get more than fifteen feet away from each other. People are going to start to notice."

"Yeah, they've *already* started to notice, but it's only going to get more obvious when you guys aren't just sitting in the infirmary all day," Eli murmured, "especially since before like two weeks ago, you generally avoided each other like the plague."

"So people are talking?" Young asked Eli.

"Yeah, but not in the way you'd really think. There's actually a rumor going around that the chair did something horrible to Rush and now he's dying but doesn't want anyone to know, except TJ figured it out anyway, and then told you, and so you're trying to be nice to him."

"He's not dying," Young snapped in sudden irritation.

"I never said he was. Well—okay, I may have facilitated that rumor a bit, but it makes sense—"

"He's *not dying*, Eli."

Eli stared at him for a few seconds, his expression slowly closing. "Okay," Eli said, drawing out the word, "this just moved up to a whole new level of awfulness. I hate hanging out with you guys. I really do. I'm going." Despite his words, however, he turned to Rush. "Are you going to be okay?"

"You're a nice fuckin' kid," Rush replied.

"Thanks? You're a complete jerk, but I kind of like you anyway. *Kind of*."

Eli ducked out from beneath Rush's arm and headed back the way he had come. The door hissed shut behind him.

"Come on," Young said, tugging the scientist across the floor, toward the bathroom.

"You need help?"

"Hardly," Rush said, raising his eyebrows. "You can jis stop dragging me about. I'm not *that* smashed. I only had—what? Four point five shots?"

"You're pretty damn smashed over there, genius," Young said dryly. "But don't take it too hard. You're not really at the top of your game right now."

Young pulled back, experimentally abandoning Rush as the door of the bathroom. The scientist made a grab for the doorframe to stay standing, but missed. Before Young could restabilize him, the automatic door shot out to meet his grip and he steadied himself.

"Neat trick," Young said, leaning against the doorframe as Rush pulled himself over to the sink.

"Y'can stop fucking *hovering*. Ah'm no for havin' it."

Without any warning, the door to the bathroom swished shut, closing a few inches in front of Young's face.

//You're a lot of work,// Young shot in his direction. //If you pass out in there, I'm going to make your life miserable for the foreseeable future.//

Rush ignored him.

Young rolled his eyes and sat on the edge of the bed, removing his boots, belt, and jacket. After a few minutes, Rush emerged and Young got his own turn for teeth brushing and the like.

When he made his way out of the bathroom he found Rush lying on the floor next to the bed with an appropriated pillow, still fully clothed down to his boots. The man was already mostly asleep.

"Why do you do this?" Young asked him. "You know I'm not going to let you sleep there. You'll get pneumonia or something, and then what?"

"Old wives tale." Rush made no move to get up. "Besides. The deck plating heats up for me."

"Seriously?" Young looked down at him with raised eyebrows. "How does that work?"

"Energetic transfer in accordance with the second law of thermodynamics. Y' know, you have alarming deficiencies in your basic—"

"Shut up, *Rush*. I'm familiar with the concept of *heat*."

"Well then fuck if I know what you're on about."

"Forget it." Young bent down next to him and dragged him into a sitting position by his jacket lapels before pulling off his glasses. "Do you generally sleep with these on?"

"D' you hae to criticize *every* god damned *thing*?" Rush asked, sounding more plaintive than irritated, though Young was positive that was not the effect the scientist had been aiming for.

"Yes," Young said. "For you, I do it on principle. Now come on." He tightened his grip on the front of Rush's jacket and used it to pull the other man halfway to his feet and shove him onto the bed. Once the other man was situated, Young sat down next to him, on the edge of the bed. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Yes," Rush murmured. "Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"Look 't how well we're doing," Rush said. "Civilized as fuck."

"Yeah," Young agreed, trying to fight the sense of dread that he couldn't seem to shake—that had been hanging over him for days. "We're doing great."

## Chapter Fifteen

By Young's estimation, he was roughly two weeks in the hole when it came to reading reports prepared by the science team and Wray.

He was also certainly a good three weeks behind on writing his own.

Which was why, after spending a few days putting in the obligatory appearances in the mess, on the bridge, and at Wray's constitution-drafting meetings, he was in his quarters, catching up.

*...closer examination of the viral samples obtained revealed that although this strain has similar features to the plague that wiped out the Ancients, it is not identical. Full sequencing of the viral genome recovered from samples on Destiny revealed substantial differences on both a nucleic acid and protein level. Results from maximum parsimony analysis with bootstrapping using viral sequences from Destiny's database are attached as Appendix D. Results indicate that this virus is likely a precursor to the strain that was ultimately responsible for the near extinction of the Ancients. If this is indeed the case, it may have been aboard Destiny since the ship was launched. Alternatively, it may have been liberated following the full activation of areas of the ship that had previously been dormant. The likelihood that it came from the second obelisk planet is very small—*

"Shit," Young murmured. "Did you know about this?" he asked Rush absently, his eyes still scanning over the report.

No answer.

He looked up, raising his eyebrows at the scientist, who had, at some point in the last hour, relocated from his previous position on the couch down to the floor.

Rush had his feet hooked over the low table to keep them elevated and was lying on his back, staring at the ceiling.

"Rush."

If Rush wanted to ignore him for an hour, Young couldn't really blame him.

He'd been dragging the scientist around the ship for the past week while he followed Wray's advice of maintaining a high degree of visibility to improve morale. Unfortunately, as he and Rush still couldn't separate by more than twenty-five feet, that meant that he had been forced to accompany Young.

Rush hated mingling with the crew and his temper had become increasingly short in the past two days.

Young had taken this as a sign that that he was feeling better.

God knew the other man had needed a break.

At the moment, Rush was listening to the harmonies of Destiny's shields, only peripherally aware of either Young or his surroundings. Young could hear them as well, a faint echo reverberating through his mind—but he knew it paled in comparison to what the scientist was getting.

The shields sounded nice, certainly, but Young really needed to talk to him about TJ's report.

"*Rush*," Young said more emphatically, giving the other man a mental shove to get his attention. Rush looked over at him, taking a few seconds to sharpen his focus before levering himself up on one elbow.

"We're about to drop out of FTL," Rush said.

Sure enough, only a few seconds had passed before the sound of the FTL drive cut out and Young felt the unpleasant sensation of his stomach getting left behind as they dropped into normal space. He pulled out his radio.

"Bridge, report."

"Colonel, you're not going to believe this," Volker said.

"What?"

"I'm looking at a *seed ship* right now."

Rush raised his eyebrows.

"I'll be right there."

"Bring Rush with you," Volker said.

"I'll try to find him," Young replied.

"Yeah, good plan," Volker said, in a manner that suggested that Young wasn't fooling anyone.

//Not your best work,// Rush said. //If *Volker* can see through it, then, I assure you, so can everyone else.//

//At least I'm trying to behave at least somewhat normally,// Young snapped back at him. //Unlike you.//

//I never have,// Rush replied. //Starting now would be out of character.//

Young picked up Rush's crutches and extended a hand to pull the scientist to his feet, wincing slightly at the tearing sensation.

Within ten minutes they had made it to the bridge, and stood side by side, looking at the long expanse of a seed ship. It was clearly battle-damaged, with several visible hull breaches sealed over by flickering yellow force fields.

There was nothing nearby that Young could see.

No other ships, no planet, no gate.

"What have we got, Eli?" Young asked.

"Well," Eli said, "I can't tell you a whole lot because *amazingly*, their shields are still up at a minimal level, which prevents me from finding out much about the internal state of the ship. But judging by the exterior, I'd say they were in a pretty intense firefight."

"How long ago are we talking about?"

"There's no way to know, really."

"Actually," Chloe said from her position at the forward monitor, "there is a way to get at least a rough estimate. I just opened the lower bound of the size detection parameter for the long-range sensors. I picked up a debris radius consistent with a two to six month window." Her eyes flicked from Eli to Rush and back.

Rush raised his eyebrows at her and stepped forward, taking a look at her monitor. The intent swirl of his thoughts lightened substantially as he scanned over the modifications that she had made to the sensors.

//?// Young sent him a wordless burst of inquiry as Rush's mouth quirked.

//Nothing,// Rush replied, making some attempt to modify his thoughts. It was to no avail, as Young was able to pick out what he was interested in anyway.

Rush was *proud* of her.

Chloe was looking up at them, her dark hair picking up blue highlights from the monitor beneath her fingers.

Rush gave her a fractional nod before turning his eyes back toward the ship centered in the forward view.

"Nice job, Chloe," Young said, joining Rush in front of the forward window. "So—is docking and boarding an option?" he asked the room.

"No," Brody replied.

"Maybe," Eli modified.

"Of course it is," Rush said.

"Guys," Young said, exasperated.

"The only way to dock with that ship would be to match their shield frequencies to ours. This would require continuous modulation of our shields in real time as the two energy fields merge," Brody explained.

"That's not an obstacle," Rush stated flatly.

"Um, why not?" Volker asked.

"Because I'm telling you it's not."

//Easy, Young projected toward Rush. //He doesn't understand.//

"The pertinent question is *should* we do so," Rush continued, his tone slightly mollified.

"With its shields up, we can't scan for life signs."

Young rubbed his jaw with his still-splinted hand, staring out across the space that separated them from the other vessel.

"We could always use additional supplies, a chance to look at their database," Young said.

"Undoubtedly," Rush murmured.

"What's your feeling?" Young asked in an undertone.

Rush angled his head, glanced at Young, and then back out at the damaged ship.

//Usually I'd be all for a salvage mission like this as we desperately need the resources, but—// he broke off, his thoughts dissolving into an uneasy swirl.

//But what?//

//Nothing. We should do it.//

//What were you going to say?//

//Nothing, Rush replied, making no effort to hide the unease that disrupted the flow of his thoughts.

//You have a bad feeling about this, Young said.

//True. That, however, is not adequate grounds for passing up such an excellent opportunity for salvage and research.//

For moment they hesitated on the brink of indecision before seamlessly tipping over into the inevitability of Rush's cost/benefit analysis when Young found himself unable



to justify a more cautious course based on nothing more than a visceral sense of warning that hadn't even originated with him.

"Okay," Young said turning back to the rest of the bridge and pulling out his radio. "Let's do this, unless anyone has any objections." He scanned the room, getting a nod from Eli, a half-shrug from Volker, and an enthusiastic nod from Park. Brody didn't look up from his monitor.

The only objection that was voiced came from an unlikely source.

"I don't think we should go," Chloe said quietly. "I have a bad feeling about this."

Young and Rush locked eyes.

"I'm going to need more than that, Chloe," Young said, his voice as encouraging as he could make it. "If you have a good reason—" he broke off, inviting her to speak.

"No, no. It's not anything specific. Something just seems—not right."

"We'll take every precaution," Young reassured her.

"Lieutenant Scott," he said into his radio. "We're going to be boarding the seed ship shortly. Start assembling an advance team and meet me at the docking port."

"I'm still not sure how this docking is happening," Brody said skeptically.

"Ask the ship-whisperer over there," Eli replied.

"Just—initiate the protocol," Rush snapped, irritation and anxiety seething through their link.

//This is going to go better for you if you're *nice* to them,// Young sent. //You have enough common sense to realize that, right?//

"If you're wrong, and you can't match the frequencies, when the shields collide we could be looking at an explosion that's of a similar intensity to what you'd get with a *hydrogen bomb*," Volker said. "I, for one, would like to know how *exactly* you plan on accomplishing this frequency-matching business. I don't think that's too much to ask."

Rush didn't reply.

Young could feel him searching for how to explain what he was going to do in such a way that at *least someone* would understand it.

He wasn't coming up with anything.

The entire bridge crew was watching him, waiting for an answer.

Still, Rush said nothing.

"You guys," Eli said, breaking the increasingly awkward silence. "Seriously. How does he do *any* of this? He's linked to the ship. It's going to be fine."

"Famous last words," Brody said bleakly.

"Thank you Eli," Rush said, ignoring Brody's comment, his tone landing just on the haughty side of grateful.

//You owe him,// Young shot at Rush.

//Yes, I realize that. Thanks for backing me up.// Rush said, acidly.

//What the hell am I going to say?//

//Just *order* them to initiate the docking protocol. *Obviously*.//

//Yeah. That's worked so well for me in the past.//

//So you *are* capable of learning. A longstanding internal debate of mine has now been put to rest.//

"Okay," Young said, suppressing the urge to roll his eyes and addressing the room at large. "Let's do this." He turned to Rush. "You ready?"

Rush nodded fractionally. //I don't need an interface.//

//How about using one for show?//

//This is going to be difficult enough as it is without *pretending* to do it via computer.//

"Go when you're ready," Young said, turning to Chloe.

The docking protocol was initiated and their trajectory changed so that they were heading directly toward the seed ship.

Rush reached forward, his hands closing around the railing in front of the forward view.

Young felt him let go of his surroundings and focus first on the harmonies of Destiny's shields and then on the subtle tones of the other ship.

With a compelling crescendo, Destiny's pull on Rush's mind rapidly became nearly unbearable as the sounds of the shields morphed into something tortuously melodic; subtleties expanding into modifiable harmonies that drew Rush in, separating him further from the bridge.

Young gritted his teeth, his heart rate rising as he tried to keep Rush present to at least *some* degree.

"Umm," Brody said, "I thought there was going to be frequency modulation happening here."

"It *is* happening," Eli replied, sounding as if he didn't quite believe his own words. "Check it out," he switched his display to project into midair.

In his peripheral vision Young could sense the unified turning of the science team toward the display where, as though behind a gray mist, he could see red and blue wave functions move progressively into sync.

His breathing was loud in his own ears.

His vision was wavering, graying out, with the effort of keeping Rush grounded.

His pulse pounded in his temples as he tightened his hands around the forward rail.

What attention he could spare was focused on staying on his feet.

Young was about ten seconds from passing out—maybe less, when Rush seemed to suddenly become aware of the herculean effort that Young was exerting on his behalf. The scientist abruptly shifted his weight forward onto his right leg and flexed his left foot, stressing his injury, grounding himself.

Young took a deep breath as some of the pressure eased on his mind.

After only a few more seconds, the shields merged with a satisfying final harmony, and Rush turned his entire focus to fighting the pull of the ship. It took almost twenty seconds of their combined efforts to break Rush free entirely.

//Shit.// Young projected at the scientist, glancing around the bridge to see if anyone had noticed anything out of the ordinary. Most of the science team were still huddled around Eli's display. Only Chloe was looking in their direction, her expression carefully neutral.

Rush looked over at him and Young could feel the effort it was *still* costing him to stay focused on the bridge.

//How's the foot?// Young asked him, trying to pull him in.

"I barely feel it," Rush murmured aloud.

Chloe looked up, startled, but said nothing.

//I know,// Young shot back, not bothering to hide his concern. //What's going on? I thought things had gotten *better*. Our link is healing. The ship—//

Rush shook his head, picking up on Young's train of thought. //The past few days have been better because—// he broke off, shaking his head slightly. //Because the AI has been protecting me to some degree. But if I purposefully integrate into Destiny's systems, there's nothing it can do.//

//I almost couldn't keep you here,// Young said.

//I'm aware.//

//I hate to say this, but tearing the hell out of your foot has actually turned out to be a helpful strategy.//

//Yes well. I've always assumed that was the primary purpose of the bolts.// Rush flexed his fingers absently, causing a jolt of pain to radiate down his arm to his elbow.

//Ugh,// Young sent back, disgusted.

Rush gave him a half shrug. //Efficient and effective,// he replied.

"Dr. Rush?" Chloe asked, her voice cautious, her head cocked, eyes full of wordless inquiry.

"Everything's fine, Chloe," Rush said quietly.

The hallways of the seed ship were long and dim, lit by faint emergency lighting that flickered wildly in places. Changes in pressure as his teams opened different sections of the ship caused cold air to whistle past them at intervals, lifting their hair.

Young grimaced, one hand on his assault rifle, the other on his radio.

They had assessed life support. It was online.

They had scanned for lifesigns. They had found none.

They had secured the ship as far as it was possible.

But—it was a big ship.

Scott had designed a total of six teams comprised of four people to board the seed ship. Four teams were focused on salvage operations and were made up entirely of military personnel. Two teams contained three scientists and one military escort—either Scott or Greer.

It was a good setup.

As far as it went.

"Does anyone else find this creepy?" Eli whispered.

Rush, of course, had been adamant about leaving Destiny and checking out the seed ship in person.

This was how Young had found himself in command of the seventh team, consisting of Rush, Eli, and Chloe.

"Yes, actually," Rush said, sounding genuinely unsettled.

Chloe said nothing. Her face was remarkably pale under the faint blue light.

"How would you rate this?" Eli whispered. "Like if zero is an adorable baby rabbit and ten is the upside-down spider-walk from *The Exorcist*."

"Shh," Young said, shooting Eli a pointed look.

An draft of icy air flowed past them.

Young could feel Rush's thoughts churning with anxiety.

There was something—*off* about the ship.

It was nothing like *Destiny*—Rush could barely feel it with his mind, and it ignored him with an indifferent menace.

No doors opened, no lights came on where he walked.

At Rush's suggestion, their team had made straight for the control interface room on the seed ship.

When they reached it, their instinctive cluster broke apart in an abrupt whisper of self-assigned tasks.

Eli accessed and began to download the ship's database.

Chloe combed through the ship's logs, looking for information about the battle that had stranded it here—in this stretch of empty space.

Rush assessed the ship's CPU, trying to determine whether it came equipped with an AI.

Young stood in the doorway, his hand on his assault rifle, watching the long, dark expanse of corridor that stretched out into blackness in both directions.

No one spoke.

In the back of his mind, Rush's sense of unease continued to slowly ratchet up.

"Radio check in," Young murmured, broadcasting on all channels a good five minutes before the designated time. "This is team seven." He listened to the other six teams sound off, trying to feel reassured at the sound of their voices.

After only a few seconds, the oppressive quiet descended again, broken by the intermittent whistle of air currents around metal corners.

Young stood in silence, looking out into the dark, until—

A surge of icy terror poured from his link with Rush, driving his heart rate through the roof, threatening to choke off his breathing.

Behind him, a datapad clattered to the floor.

Young turned to see Chloe, standing like she had been frozen, her hands outstretched in front of her, as if to ward something off. Her eyes were enormous, her expression tight and pained and panicked.

She was looking directly at Rush.

"Chloe," Rush whispered, his eyes locked on her, his thoughts swirling frenetically beneath a sudden headache that was nearly lost in the uncontrolled horror of his thoughts. Rush had both hands raised, mirroring Chloe's frozen stance.

"Don't panic," Rush whispered, clearly trying to calm them both. "*Do not*—" broke off, one hand coming to his temple, "*panic*."

"*Rush*," Young hissed, his eyes flicking over to Eli who had gotten to his feet and moved in. "What's going on?"

It was Chloe who answered.

"They're here," she whispered, her eyes never leaving Rush. "The ones that changed me. They're close."

He felt an intolerable prickling sensation as the hair at the back of his neck stood on end.

God.

*God.*

How could they have *missed* this when they scanned for lifeforms?

His gaze flicked wildly between the corridor and the room.

It was immediately clear to him that this situation was about to crystallize into an unmitigated catastrophe.

Almost certainly this had been a trap—an attempt to gain access to Destiny. An attempt to finally take the ship. His best people were spread out over this dark, skeletal vessel, separated from Destiny, from each other.

All the aliens would have to do would be to undock the two ships and they would be cut off.

Permanently.

That *had* to be their plan.

It was what *he* would have done.

"No," Rush whispered, responding to Young's thought. "They may try it, but no one, *no one* is capable of cutting *me* off from Destiny."

Young believed him and that—*that* was enough, just barely, for him to bring this situation back under control.

He nodded, still watching the corridor.

"They're very close," Chloe whispered, her voice barely audible.

Young felt Rush focus in on his headache, pulling it to prominence, trying to look past the sense of rending to focus on the alien presence, trying to get any kind idea of how many of them there might be.

Despite his efforts, his sense of them, remained vague, difficult to localize, and painful.

"How many are there?" Rush asked Chloe, his voice low and intent.

"Five," she whispered. "Maybe six, all in a group. Close. Very close."

"God," Eli hissed, picking up the datapad that Chloe had dropped and shaking it. "Why aren't their life signs showing up? This thing is a worthless piece of *crap*. Why does this *always* happen to us?"

A short burst of distant gunfire caused all of them to jump.

"This is Greer," Young's radio cracked and he turned down the volume immediately.

"We are taking fire. I repeat, *we are taking fire*."

Young pulled out his radio and broadcast on all channels. "This is Colonel Young," he said rapidly. "All teams fall back to Destiny immediately. We have confirmed enemy contact. Destiny may have been boarded. Radio chatter to a minimum."

"They're getting closer," Chloe whispered.

"This room has only one exit," Rush hissed at him. "We need to get out of here."

Young looked down the long, dark corridor.

There was, of course, no cover.

Getting back to Destiny without sustaining casualties would be difficult with a trained group of soldiers. He had three untrained civilians, one of whom was injured.

Between them, they had only his assault rifle and handgun.

They weren't going to make it.

//Get it together,// Rush snapped, anxiety pouring through their link, //and do *not* frighten them.// He shot a meaningful look toward Eli and Chloe, who had inched closer together, their shoulders hunched, eyes wide.

Young gave him a short nod before pulling out his handgun and chambering a round. He handed the gun to Eli with a brief, "You've got our six. Don't fire unless you're *sure* you're going to hit something."

"I—yeah. Okay. I can do that."

"Chloe," Young said, and her eyes briefly snapped toward him. "You're with Rush."

They were the most vulnerable members of the team. Putting them in the middle made sense. Plus, Chloe seemed to be oddly reassured by the scientist's presence and if he kept her from panicking, so much the better. There was a huge drawback the strategy he was choosing, however, because if Rush really went down, Chloe was not strong enough to be able to keep him on his feet.

They would cross that bridge if and when they came to it.

"Okay," Young said, unslinging his weapon. He reached over, pulled a crutch out of Rush's hand and laid it silently on the deck plating.

Chloe moved in and pulled the scientist's arm over her shoulder.

"You promised me something," she murmured to Rush.

"It won't come to that," he whispered back. His thoughts were an edgy, unreadable swirl, but Young could tell that he didn't like what she had said.

"But if it does?"

He nodded at her.

Chloe drew in a shuddering breath, calming perceptibly.

//?// Young shot at Rush.

//Not now,// Rush replied. //Let's go.//

Young grabbed the lifesigns detector from Eli, looking for the locations of his teams, even if it wouldn't show him the aliens.

The sooner they could run into some backup, the better.

Not everyone he'd sent to the seed ship was showing up on the small screen.

He hoped that meant they were out of range of the device, and back on Destiny.



Young took one last look down the corridor, before leading them out of the control interface room.

They moved silently down the darkened hallway but much, *much* slower than Young would have preferred.

It had been less than two minutes when Chloe's frightened whisper broke the stillness.

"Behind us."

There was an intersecting corridor one hundred feet in front of them.

"Go," Young whispered, stepping out and around Chloe and Rush, catching Eli's eye.

"The cross-corridor," he said to the younger man. "Make sure it's secure."

Eli gave him a startled look, but moved out ahead of Chloe and Rush.

//Please tell me you can make force fields here.//

//No,// Rush said shortly. //There's no power to draw from, and I can't intraconvert.//

//Intraconvert?//

//Don't worry about it. The answer is no.//

Young continued down the corridor, walking backward just behind Chloe and Rush, eyes sweeping the darkness, waiting for the aliens to appear.

His nerves were tingling with the desire, the *absolute necessity* to make it to the minimal cover of the intersecting corridors.

He heard them before he saw them, coming with a faint rushing sound, their quiet gait echoing on the deck plating like the wings of birds.

His heart pounded in his throat and he brought his weapon up to his shoulder.

They were thirty feet from the intersection.

Twenty-five.

The things came into view, six of them solidifying out of the blackness as a mass of blue, their movements unfamiliar and alien. Their eyes were a deep, unfathomable black, but the straightening of their postures and the clicks of weapons being pulled from holsters was not difficult to interpret.

He wanted to shout to Chloe and Rush to run. But the words died in his throat.

They couldn't.

Rush couldn't.

Young sighted down his weapon, continuing to back up, his finger on the trigger.

At his back, maddeningly, Rush and Chloe *slowed*.

In his peripheral vision he could tell Chloe had half-turned to look back over her shoulder, her face obscured beneath a curtain of dark hair.

"*Chloe*," Rush snapped in a whisper, dragging her forward.

As Young watched, two of the aliens switched weapons, holstering their plasma guns and pulling out something else.

Something smaller.

He did not want to find out what.

He opened fire, feeling the gun press satisfyingly into his shoulder as he sent rounds flying into the dark. In this confined space, with an assault rifle, he was able to take out three of the six in his first burst, but not before they got off several shots with their small, handheld weapons.

Behind him, Chloe and Rush finally ducked around the corner to join Eli in the cross-corridor.

He had just begun his second burst when something hit him square in the chest. His finger slipped from the trigger of his weapon and he staggered slightly with the impact before bringing his gun back up to resume firing.

He didn't look down.

He saw two more hit the deck before the last alien turned and retreated back into the darkness. He ducked around the corner, breathing hard.

Eli was standing, gun in hand, looking watchfully into the darkness.

Chloe had collapsed into a crouch against the wall, her hands pressed to her mouth.

Rush was waiting for him.

As Young rounded the corner, the scientist grabbed his jacket, shoving him against the wall, running his hands over Young's chest, searching for something. Only a few seconds passed before his fingers closed on an object buried in the kevlar of Young's vest and he viciously yanked it out.

It was a dart. As they watched, a small bead of liquid appeared at its tip, glinting in the flickering light.

//Tell me this didn't penetrate your vest.//

//It didn't.//

//Thank *god*.// Rush carefully placed the dart against the wall, out of the way.

"They want us *alive*?" Eli murmured, horrified.

//I shouldn't have said her name,// Rush projected. //They recognized her. And me, I believe. One got away, correct?//

Young nodded, his eyes shifting to Chloe, who sat against the wall, her face pale and expressionless, tear tracks catching the dim blue light. He wished that Eli had just kept his mouth shut.

A quick glance at Eli confirmed that Eli also wished that.

Chloe looked up, but not at him. At Rush.

"Come on, then," Rush whispered to her, holding out his hand.

Chloe took it, but stood under her own power and pulled Rush's arm back across her shoulders.

They moved out silently, making good progress.

Suspiciously good progress.

There was only one exit from this ship available to them—and it was likely that they had suddenly become high priority targets.

The docking port was a perfect place for a flanking maneuver.

He envisioned the narrow passage—it was entirely exposed. No cover.

At this pace, they wouldn't reach the port for another seven or eight minutes, giving the aliens plenty of time to prepare an ambush if they hadn't already.

They would all be cut down.

It was inevitable.

He could feel Rush searching for another solution, his mind flipping through ideas at a breathtaking pace until finally—

//Yes,// Young projected, pausing to look back at the scientist. "Let's try it," he mouthed silently.

"Did you guys just make a secret plan?" Eli murmured.

Young held a finger to his lips, then paused to look at the datapad in his hand. As he watched, the final set of four blinking dots vanished from the detector in the region of the docking port.

He held out the datapad, pointing with his index finger to the seed ship's port shuttle.

"The *shuttle*?" Eli whispered, his voice barely audible. "Are you *crazy*? We don't even know if it's operational."

"The docking port is not an option," Young whispered back.

"Why not?" Eli replied.

"They're gathering there," Chloe confirmed, her eyelids flickering. "Waiting for us."

Eli looked at her silently, a pained expression on his face, before nodding shortly. He fell in behind Chloe and Rush.

//When we're back on Destiny,// Young projected to Rush, //I assume you're going to be able to do something to get them off the ship?//

//Yes,// Rush said grimly. //There are several options.//

//Well, do yourself a favor and choose one that doesn't nearly kill you.//

//I'm touched, colonel, really I am.//

They continued to move silently through the dim, dead corridors, trying to ignore the ominous flickering of the emergency lights.

They had nearly made it to the shuttle when Chloe suddenly stopped, stiffening.

"What is it?" Young whispered.

"Two groups of them," she replied, "coming up fast from behind and—" she broke off, her brow furrowing. "To our left."

"How fast?" Young asked, picking up the pace marginally, bracing his weapon against his shoulder. He glanced back at Eli to see him holding the handgun low, clutched tightly in both hands.

"Fast," Chloe said, her voice breaking. "Very fast."

Again he heard them before he saw them, the sound of their approach like wind tormenting a sail; coming from a corridor directly ahead and to their left.

This time, Chloe was dragging Rush into a near run, her breath coming like sobs from behind him.

They appeared abruptly as Young entered the intersection point of the two corridors.

He opened fire immediately.

A few short bursts slowed them down, and he continued to move forward, aiming again for the limited cover of an upcoming cross-corridor. He slowed to let Chloe and Rush move ahead of him as he took down two, then four more.

He was distracted by the sound of Eli opening fire.

One shot.

Another.

Young turned his head to look and saw the second group of aliens, coming from behind. Eli brought one of them down on his third shot, but more were right behind.

They had plasma weapons, but *they weren't firing*.

In that moment, he felt the unmistakable sensation of a dart burying itself in his right shoulder.

Shit.

He kept firing, taking down two more even as he pulled the dart out with his left hand.

"Eli," he shouted, prompting the young man to hurry up, waiting for him before he followed Chloe and Rush around the corner.

He fired a broad spread, his aim deteriorating as a tingling sensation shot along his arm. By the time he made it around the corner, he could barely hang on to his gun. Numbness was spreading from his shoulder rapidly down towards his hand, up his neck, and across his chest.

He locked eyes with Rush.

"Keep firing," Rush snapped at Eli, taking Young's gun and lowering it to the floor.

"Oh crap," Eli breathed, his shoulders square, the handgun held level in a death grip as he saw Rush try to control Young's slow slide down the wall to the floor. "Oh *crap*." He fired again. "Shit." He fired again. "*Fuck*." He fired again.

Rush, his hands and thoughts flying, tore off Young's outer jacket, and then his kevlar vest, his movements economical and sure. In a few seconds, he had removed the darts protruding from the thing and had pulled it over his head.

"What's the plan?" Chloe asked, her voice wavering, but her hands steady as she helped Rush tighten the straps.

"You two drag him to the shuttle. I'll cover you. Once you get there, run the startup sequence."

She nodded at him.

In that moment, as his vision was fading, as the numbness became complete, Young understood what Chloe saw in Rush. Why she had backed him in the civilian mutiny, why her eyes always snapped to him on the bridge, in the lab, on *this* godforsaken ship. Because as Rush picked up the assault rifle, Young knew, he *knew* that there was no one else he would rather have had by his side in this situation.

No one else who was crazy enough to pull this off.

//Stay with me as long as you can,// Rush projected, looking him briefly in the eye.

The scientist surged to his feet, placing a hand on Eli's shoulder to pull him back and push him in Chloe's direction before taking his place, firing a sustained burst down the corridor.

His silhouette was dark against the flickering blue of the emergency lights.

Young tried to hold onto consciousness, but sensation faded first, and then sight.

In the end, he was left only with the clatter of gunfire falling like hail on a tin roof before darkness claimed him completely.

# Promise

January 30, 2009

She is cold.

She is cold and she is frightened.

Nearly all sensation has left her after hours of floating in this glass cage, her hair spreading around her like a fan, her eyes wide, tears invisibly mixing with the saline that surrounds her.

Not even turbidity gives them away.

She thinks of her mother—so fragile now, and so angry. Of all the things that her mother feared would befall her, this, *this* had never made the list.

Chloe hopes that it never does.

When she dies here, she prays that no one will know—that they will think of her forever as she was. A girl too inquisitive, who cried too much at the loss of her father and at the prospect of the long journey home—but who, despite all that, could have contributed something, eventually, given time and training.

A girl with promise.

She's different now.

She's not that girl anymore.

They have torn information out of her thoughts, unfolding its excesses and the vanities of the human condition from her Harvard educated mind. They have unpacked her flawed recollections of political theory and math and science and the release and the stillness at the peak of the parabola she had made when she had jumped from the safety of a swing into the crisp September sun that time when she was seven; they have learned of how she had crashed back to earth and wept; from that they have taken the context of tears and the meaning of pain.

For all that they have ripped from her, for all the agony that the reaping of her mind had caused, they have sown a compensatory violation beneath her consciousness. Something that feels as though it will germinate in the places they have ruined.

It is something she doesn't think she wants.

It is something she doesn't think she can survive.

So this is the last thing that Chloe Armstrong can offer the people of Destiny—this wish for their ignorance.

She wishes for it with everything she is.

For Colonel Young, who is hurt and stoic, for the lines of guilt and remonstrance that he carries around his eyes that Chloe is sure he can't truly deserve.

For TJ, the sister she wishes she'd had, and for Camile, who wants to live so badly.

For Riley and Greer and Park and Volker and for Matthew, who has been so kind to her.

For Eli.

Let them never find her here like this.

Let them never see.

Let them always wonder but never, *never* be sure.

Her eyes shut. The space beneath her lids where the tears well up is the only place she feels warm.

Something cracks against the glass and her eyes fly open, her hands reflexively rising through liquid.

On the other side of the transparent barrier is a man who is dead.

Or—who is supposed to be.

She half believes that this is somehow another simulation, another attempt to pull yet more information from her mind, but the energy of his movement, the set of his shoulders is vivid and unmistakable.

He slams the piece of metal he is holding into the glass again and this time it shatters and she's falling, flowing down and out with the liquid into a soaking mess on the floor.

Dr. Rush rips the breathing apparatus off her and disconnects the tortuous metal *thing* on her temple in seconds.

Like he's done it before. Like he's always known how.

They stare at each other.

He's soaking wet. His feet are bare, and he's clothed in the same ridiculous black body suit that she is.

Like her, he is shaking with the cold.

He may be the most reassuring thing she's ever seen in her life.



He doesn't say anything.

He doesn't need to.

He just holds a finger to his lips and drags her off the floor, motioning for her to follow.

It's easy to walk silently in bare feet, and they steal quickly along icy corridors, heading toward a goal that Chloe can only guess at.

She trails behind him, but it's getting harder to move, harder to breathe.

She can feel *them*, the others, in the back of her mind; in the disfigured, bleeding space that their interrogation left behind.

She falls quietly, hitting the icy floor like the soaked, shed leaves that had covered the cement of the sidewalk outside a school halfway across the universe where, so often, her father had come to pick her up.

She's terrified that Dr. Rush will leave her here.

Maybe he should.

She's weak.

She's useless.

She adds nothing of value to their mission.

She cries too much.

She's crying now.

He turns immediately and comes back for her.

She almost sobs aloud in relief.

"Chloe," he whispers, pulling her up. "You're all right, lass."

"I can't," she says, her voice barely audible, her fingers digging into his forearms. "I shouldn't. They did something to me. I shouldn't go back."

He makes a distressed sound in the back of his throat and shakes her once, his fingers closing around her upper arms.

She's upset him, but she doesn't know why.

Is it because he doesn't want to leave her here, but knows that he should?

Is it because he hates thinking of what they've done to her, like she hates thinking of what they did to him?

Nowhere in the universe is one so human than on the silent deck of an alien ship.

"I will not leave you here," he says, every word snapped in half with the cold.

He pulls her forward, fingers closed around her wrist, and that is the end of their argument.

He doesn't let go of her. Not when they're almost discovered by a group of what appear to be alien scientists, not when some kind of alarm begins to sound, and not when the ship rocks from a blast of enemy fire and they're both thrown off their feet.

They're on the black deck plating and she looks over at him.

His eyes are shut, his lips and nail beds blue with the cold, and he has a hand over his chest, right over his heart, like he's in terrible pain, and for the first time she wonders how he got here, and what exactly they did to him, and *god* she realizes that they left him behind on that planet almost a *week* ago and in here, on this ship, that's an eternity, and maybe, *maybe* he's strong enough for that but she's not.

She knows she's not.

"Promise me something," she says, but no sound passes her lips.

He understands anyway. "What."

He's already pushing himself up, like the contained explosion he's always been. She's never appreciated him for all that he is—until this moment, when she's going to ask something of him. He owes her nothing, but still, she'll ask for something more important, something greater than anything she's ever asked for in her life.

From anyone.

"Promise me that if they catch us again, you'll kill me yourself. Before it's too late."

She needs this to keep going, and he sees it in her eyes, he must, because even though he looks exhausted and horrified, he hasn't refused her.

"Please," she whispers. "Please say it." She needs to hear the words because she knows that even though he's lied in the past, if he says it to her, if he looks her in the eyes and he says it to her, he'll do it.

She's sure of it.

He gives her a look of pained understanding. "I promise."

## Chapter Seventeen

Young regained consciousness in pieces, unable to move, unable to open his eyes or feel the deck plating that was presumably beneath him.

His hearing was the first thing to return.

All that he could discern at first was the quiet hiss of air passing over metal.

He tried mentally searching for Rush but got only the faintest hint of the other man's mind through their link.

Young was starting to panic in earnest when Eli's voice cut through the darkness.

"Seriously, Chloe." His voice was low and quiet. "It's going to be okay. I know it is, because let's be real. This is exactly like the part at the end of *Empire* when everything looks bad, but then they fix the hyperdrive and—"

"Eli." Chloe sounded exasperated and thick, like she was smiling through tears. "We have to focus."

They sounded as if they were only a few feet away and not in any *immediate* danger.

Again, he tried to open his eyes.

Again, he failed.

"Right. No. You're right. Okay. But seriously, if there's someone here who needs to focus, it's not me." Eli paused. "Rush. *Rush*, come on, man." The sharp crack of snapping fingers broke the quiet, echoing off nearby walls.

The softer sound of skin on cloth interrupted the snapping, and Young heard Rush fire off a sentence in Ancient.

The wave of relief that washed over him was so intense that he felt vaguely sick.

"Ow!"

"*Eli*," Chloe snapped disapprovingly.

"Don't 'Eli' me. *He* grabbed *me*."

"You can't just yank away like that. His wrists are *injured*."

"Crap. Yeah. He scared me though."

"Well, what do you expect?" Chloe asked. "He's distracted, not dead. What did he say? Did you get that?"

"I think it was something like 'stop doing that, you ridiculous child.' It may have actually been more offensive. It's hard to tell when he uses colloquialisms."

"So, not helpful."

"Not really, no."

"Dr. Rush?" Chloe tried this time, speaking clearly and distinctly. "Dr. Rush, can you talk to us?"

No response.

"What's wrong with him?" Chloe murmured. "Why is he all—Ancient-y?"

Young finally managed to open his eyes, and was rewarded with a brief glimpse of Chloe and Eli silhouetted against the forward view of a shuttle. From what he could tell, he was lying on the floor a few feet behind them.

So they had made it. All of them. Thank god.

"Why is he 'Ancient-y'," Eli repeated slowly, clearly stalling for time. "Umm, not sure."

"God, you're such a liar."

"What do you mean?"

"Eli. If you didn't *know*, you'd be absolutely climbing the walls to try and figure it out. Plus, you'd be talking about it nonstop. Clearly you know *exactly* what's going on. Now spill."

"I can't."

There was a long pause.

"Really I can't," Eli continued, defensively. "I promised. But hey. I'm just saying that maybe if you guess correctly, then, you know. I won't have actually told you anything."

If Young had been able to roll his eyes, he would have.

It was clear that he was going to need to have a conversation with Eli about the meaning of the word 'classified.'

Chloe sighed. "We don't have time for this."

"Actually, we do. We're parked underneath the FTL drive, we have no weapons, we have no communications, and Destiny's not going anywhere, so—"

"Eli. We could jump to FTL at literally any second."

"Not true. First of all, we're sitting under the drive, so we'd have at least a good twenty seconds of warning—"

"You know that's not what I meant."

"Second of all," Eli said, talking over her, "I'm pretty sure that Destiny's not going anywhere without Rush on board. Literally. Boots to deck plating, if you know what I mean. They'll be lucky if they have even minimal power."

"Seriously? He's *that* integral?"

"Seriously. So, we have some time."

"Okay. So. Guessing. I can guess." Chloe was silent for a moment. "Rush is linked to Destiny," she murmured. "Everyone knows *that* at this point, but—"

"But?" Eli said encouragingly.

"But there's something weird going on between him and Colonel Young."

"Weird! Yes! Keep going."

Young forced his eyes open again, this time recognizing the gentle curve of the FTL drive that made up the back of the ship.

"They're always together," Chloe said. "I haven't seen Dr. Rush on his own since we lost power for eleven hours."

"*Interesting*," Eli said.

"Rush is right. You *are* ridiculous," Chloe snapped, sounding more relaxed than she had all day. "And then Colonel Young gets shot with one of those darts and Rush gets— weird? Almost immediately? That's more than a coincidence."

"It does seem that way."

"On the bridge this afternoon it was almost like they were talking to each other but not actually saying anything. And earlier—" she paused. "He told me he felt like he was getting pulled in two different directions."

"Hmm, that makes—wait. He talks to you? Like, actually *about* stuff? Stuff that matters?"

"Are you jealous?" Chloe sounded amused.

"Jealous? No. *No*. Definitely not," Eli said, his tone carefully nonchalant. "Keep going."

"So I'm going to guess that he's somehow linked to the colonel," Chloe said quietly, "in the same way he's linked to Destiny?"

"Got it in one," Eli murmured.

They were quiet for a moment while Chloe digested this new piece of information.

Young managed to crack open his eyes, and keep them open. Try though he might, he still couldn't even so much as turn his head. He could see Eli and Chloe fairly well and in his peripheral vision he could vaguely make out Rush's outline at the science station.

After a few moments, he heard Chloe sigh. "So what's happening right now? Colonel Young is out cold and therefore Rush—can't speak English? How does *that* make sense?"

"I'm not one hundred percent clear on it either, since neither one of them ever tells me *anything*. But I think that without the colonel, Rush gets sort of 'trapped' with the ship. Most of his attention is being taken up by Destiny right now. Like, he has to have absolutely no idea we're talking about him. Otherwise he'd look—I don't know. More pissed."

"Yeah," Chloe said guardedly. "That's what it *seems* like. Although, he was with it enough to yell at you when you were snapping your fingers in his face."

"In *Ancient*."

"Whatever," Chloe replied.

"Bottom line, though, he's not going to be much help in terms of figuring out what the hell we're going to do."

"I suppose not," Chloe murmured. "I think it's up to us."

Young managed to shift his head marginally.

Some of his sensation was coming back; he could feel the cold of the deck plating and a powerful burning sensation at the point where the dart had penetrated his arm.

Hopefully *that* was going to be temporary.

Feeling a bit more awake, he made another attempt to reach Rush.

His sense of the scientist's mind sharpened as the drug started to wear off and, finally, Rush seemed to become aware of Young's efforts to touch his mind. As Young's sense of him became more nuanced, he attempted to pull the scientist away from the darkness of the ship.

For the first time, Rush pulled back, exerting a nebulous, powerful pressure on his thoughts.

Alarmed, Young ceased his extraction attempt.

Rush, however, kept pulling and now Young was in the odd position of trying to ground *himself* against the interwoven forces of Rush and Destiny.

He resisted for all he was worth, his heart rate rising.

In response, the pressure on his mind eased slightly and he got a faint sense of exasperation coming from the other man.

//All right, fine,// he sent in Rush's direction. //Don't make me regret this.//

He shut his eyes, stopped grounding himself, and let Rush yank him out of his body.

There was a brief tearing sensation in his mind, and then—

He opened his eyes to see the inside of the shuttle lit up by a friendly yellow glow.

Young sat up easily, the pain in his arm gone.

Chloe and Eli were nowhere to be seen, but Rush was watching him with an amused expression.

Young cocked his head, taking in Rush's altered appearance. His hair was shorter. A white collared shirt and jeans had replaced his black military jacket. His glasses were intact.

"Hi," Young said cautiously.

"Hello," Rush replied, leaning back in his chair as he propped his feet up on the science station console, clearly quite pleased with himself.

There was nothing about his movements or his manner that was pained.

Young felt a brief flare of something—regret, maybe, or jealousy that it was only with the ship that Rush could be like this.

"Um, where *are* we right now?" Young asked him, feeling strangely adrift.

"We're with Destiny," Rush said, opening his hands to take in the bright interior of the shuttle. "How do you like this interface?" he continued. "I made it for you, you realize."

"You *made* this?" Young repeated, getting to his feet.

"I got the idea from Destiny's AI—in a manner of speaking." He paused, shaking his hair out of his eyes in a manner that suggested that he found something amusing. "She's used a similar construct when it suits her, so I figured it should work to talk to you."

"Why bother with an interface at all?" Young asked, crossing his arms and coming to lean against the science console immediately next to where Rush had propped his feet.

"Because," Rush said, "the unaltered human mind can't interpret direct input from the ship. This allows me to interpret it *for* you. Without the interface, this would not be a pleasant experience."

Young raised his eyebrows. "So what the hell is this supposed to be?" he asked dryly waving a hand to encompass their surroundings. "Hmm? A shuttle with improved lighting? You can build any interface you want? And you choose the *shuttle*?"

"And what's wrong with the shuttle?"

"Nothing." Young shrugged, fighting a smile. "It's just not very imaginative."

"Nor is it psychologically revealing. Look. Unlike *you*, I am actually extremely busy right now," Rush said, but again, his delivery had an undertone of casual amusement.

"I'm sure you are," Young said, sobering immediately. "What's going on?"

"The most concerning thing that our uninvited guests have done thus far is rigged the communications array to broadcast a signal designed to alert neighboring ships to our presence, presumably with the intention of notifying reinforcements. I'm currently suppressing that signal, but there was approximately a three-minute window when it was broadcasting live."

"Okay," Young said. "Good. What else?"

"They've got barely any power to work with, so that's making their lives difficult—"

The man couldn't give a report in a military manner to save his life.

"Rush. Numbers. Locations."

"I don't know. The sensors aren't picking them up."

Young sighed. "Right. Why is that, do you think?"

"They've made some kind of modification since the last time they boarded us, the probable purpose of which is to prevent our tactic of venting them to space in a targeted manner. They're likely carrying transmitters capable of broadcasting some kind of interference pattern."

"Any information on the crew?"

Rush shook his head.

"We've got to get back to the ship." Young said. "Physically."

"I agree, but this precise moment is certainly not the most propitious time to re-board."

"Why not?"



Rush gave him a look that clearly implied that he should know better than to ask such a question.

"First of all," Rush said, "let's not forget that outside my head, you're currently lying paralyzed on the floor. Second, I'm mostly stuck with Destiny at the moment, and third, well—I'll illustrate," Rush murmured. His eyelids flickered slightly as the lights in the shuttle dimmed.

Like transparent specters, the forms of Eli and Chloe faded in, their voices faint, the outlines of the main console visible through their bodies.

"We've got power," Eli said, his eyes on the monitors. "We've got navigation—mostly. Pitch is a workaround, but that's okay because there's two of us, and someone can do yaw and roll while the other one does pitch, so we can go where we want. The question is—"

"Where," Chloe finished. "We have to decide *now*. It's already been forty-five minutes. We have to help them."

"Chloe," Eli said gently, "We have no idea what's happening on Destiny. Plus, we have two injured people here. Or, one injured person, one sanity-challenged person. Who, okay, actually also has injuries. Anyway, the smart thing to do is to wait and let the cavalry take care of things," Eli said.

"We very well may *be* the cavalry, Eli," Chloe replied.

"Okay, in *principle*, maybe. But if *we* are the cavalry, then we're the *worst* cavalry in the history of all cavalries. First of all, we have barely any ammo left, and I for one don't think that we can really take these blue guys on without lots and lots of bullets. Second of all, what the *heck* are we supposed to do *with them*?" Eli asked gesturing toward the rear of the shuttle. "At a minimum we need one of them."

"Eli, we've got to do something before—" she broke off, raising her hands in a helpless gesture. "They'll tear through the crew," she said, speaking with difficulty, her expression distorting under the pressure of threatening tears. "You *don't know*—"

"Okay," Eli murmured. "Okay, we'll go."

Rush let Chloe and Eli fade from his interface and they vanished from the shuttle. The scientist raised his eyebrows at Young. "It's a bizarre mixture of adorable and terrifying, is it not?" he asked dryly. If we make any kind of move *now*, Chloe and Eli are going to be the ones implementing it."

"This is maybe a bit out of their league," Young admitted.

"You think so?" Rush asked. "You had better go back," the scientist said, "and stop them from doing anything premature. When *you're* ready, and just to be explicit here, by 'ready' I mean *not paralyzed*, tell them to proceed to the port side of the ship. There's a cargo bay about three quarters of the way toward the bow. I can open it and pressurize it when necessary."

"Got it."

"And get them working on a way to modify the sensors to track our guests."

Young nodded. "When do you want to be pulled out?"

"I don't think you should attempt it until we get back to Destiny. The ship—is more than a bit anxious, frankly, and it's got an—" he broke off, his eyes sliding away. "An unusually good grip on me. I'm not inclined to fight it at the moment, as I'm actively suppressing outgoing communications, amongst other things."

Young nodded. "Are you going to be able to keep suppressing that signal when I pull you out?"

Rush's expression was pained. "I'm not certain. There will probably be at least a brief window of time that they can transmit as you're pulling me back, before you tell me that I have to block the signal again. As you know, I have a difficult time holding myself in that middle ground between reality and the ship when I'm trying to manipulate systems. It ends up being quite a bit harder on *you* than on me, I'm afraid."

Young nodded. "Like with the shield harmonics."

"Precisely. And you're not in the best shape at the moment."

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

"Too bad we can't separate. Then you could just leave me on the shuttle."

"There is no way that I would *ever* consider that."

Rush raised his eyebrows.

"Oh stop," Young said, rolling his eyes. "I should get back before Chloe and Eli do something—" he paused, searching for the right word.

"Unadvised?" Rush suggested.

"Exactly," Young replied.

Rush nodded, tipping his chair forward and removing his boots from the console. He looked up, meeting Young's eyes. "Are you all right? I can't tell for certain."

Young shifted minutely, feeling slightly uncomfortable as nearly the full force of Rush's attention was directed at him. The intensity of the other man's eyes was difficult to withstand, and he had to look away to collect himself. At the back of his mind he could feel the distant, muted swirl of Rush's thoughts, almost entirely shrouded in darkness.

"I'm fine," he said, hoping it was true.

Rush said nothing.

The silence lengthened between them.

When Young finally looked back at the other man, he was still getting that same intense expression.

"Shut your eyes," Rush said, finally.

"Seriously?"

"I have to dismantle this interface and as I do so, you're not going to be able to interpret any residual sensory input that you might get."

"So?"

"So it's going to be unsettling if you try to watch it."

"I'll take your word for it," Young said, shutting his eyes.

The sound of rushing water filled his ears.

He felt the brief press of something ominous and unknown on his mind as he transitioned away from Destiny.

With an immediacy that was shocking, the full force of his senses slammed into him.

The deck plating was colder than he remembered it, the air was raw over his skin, and the pain in his shoulder was almost unendurable.

"—and you're the super genius, so, you know, do your super genius thing."

A distressed hiss escaped through Young's clenched teeth.

"Sure. My thing. So we know we can't land at the normal docking sites because—" Eli broke off and turned, looking in his direction.

"Sweet," the young man said in relief.

Both Eli and Chloe shot to their feet and were at his side in a matter of seconds.

"Hey," Eli said, "Are you okay? Can you talk? Can you move? Do you know where you are? Probably that's a no, actually, because you didn't really see how we got here, so

I'll just tell you that we made it to the shuttle. Can you talk though? How's your arm? Are you poisoned? Okay, two blinks for yes, three blinks for no."

"Eli." Young managed. "Settle down."

The relief on both their faces was intense and he gave them a wan smile.

"You can't move, can you?" Chloe asked.

"It's coming back to me," he said, clenching and unclenching the fingers of his still-bruised left hand. He couldn't move his right arm at all.

He noticed that what appeared to be a makeshift bandage comprised of Chloe's undershirt and Rush's belt was wrapped around his upper arm several times in an attempt to stop the bleeding.

It didn't seem to be working.

"You've lost a lot of blood," Chloe said worriedly. "We haven't been able to stop it."

"How much is 'a lot'?" Young asked.

Eli shrugged at him, opening his hands. "Your jacket is soaked through and Chloe's shirt is ruined, that's about all I can tell you."

"Great." Young shut his eyes briefly and opened them again. He felt reasonably good, though it was difficult to accurately assess his physical condition. "Report," he said.

"So we got to the shuttle, obviously," Eli said, "and we're currently sitting on Destiny's hull about two hundred feet from the FTL drive, powered down except for minimal life support. We're not sure exactly how to get back on board, but we're working on it."

"Don't worry about that," Young said. "Rush has it covered."

"So, um, I'm thinking that maybe actually he doesn't? He's gotten progressively more—" Eli trailed off, waving a hand in a circular pattern. "Or maybe progressively less—"

Young shook his head. "He's okay."

"Really? 'Cause just looking at the guy, it doesn't seem like he's okay in *any way*." Eli moved over to give Young a better view of the science console. He could see Rush in profile, hands gripping the edges of the monitor bank, eyes unfocused, muscles locked, posture rigid. He was fighting extremely hard to retain even this limited connection with his body.

"He's okay," Young repeated. "He'll be better when we get back to Destiny."

This was an explanation that both of them seemed to accept for the time being.

"Have you tried your radios?" he asked.

"Yeah," Eli said. "Our creepy friends are broadcasting some kind of electromagnetic interference. I can't get anything but static. Communications on the shuttle are down.

"Of course they are," Young sighed. "What happened after I passed out?"

"Um, you missed what was possibly one of the most badass Rush moments *ever*," Eli said. "I wish I'd had a kino. Because, you know, when you think of Rush, or at least when *I* do, the word badass does not necessarily come to mind, but seriously—who knew? It was awesome. He literally stood in front of Chloe and I while we dragged you backwards and took out all of the remaining aliens that were moving in on our position."

"Sorry I missed it," Young said, suppressing a smile.

"Me too," Eli said. "No one's going to believe me, except for maybe Chloe, who saw it *anyways*."

They continued regaling him with the details of their escape and repair of the shuttle. Young let them do it, because it was clearly improving their spirits, and because he needed the time to regain his ability to move. Once they had run out of things to tell him about, he put them to work on the problem of modifying the sensors to detect whatever type of interference the aliens had begun to employ.

Despite their easy banter with one another, he could tell that they were deeply unsettled—especially Chloe. Eli was doing his best to keep her mind off their current situation by continuously referencing obscure science fiction movies, amongst other strategies, but when she wasn't actively engaging with him, her expression took on a pained, pinched look.

She glanced often at Rush.

As Young finally struggled into a sitting position, he tried to fight the rising sense of anxiety he felt for the safety of his crew.

Anything could be happening on Destiny.

Anything.

The thought of losing even one person was intolerable to him.

Half an hour after he had regained consciousness, he was finally able to push himself to his feet. He was forced to grab onto the nearest console to keep from losing his balance as the room spun around him.

That would be the blood loss, he supposed.

His right arm and shoulder were still throbbing mercilessly, and he could barely move his arm at all.

If he had ever been in worse shape going into a firefight, he couldn't remember it.

"Okay kids," he said to Chloe and Eli, trying to put forward the appearance of more strength than he actually felt. "We're going to need to head down the port side of the ship. About three quarters of the way down there's a cargo bay that Rush is going to open and then pressurize for us."

"Seriously?" Eli said. "And he knows this?"

"It's his plan," Young said mildly, glancing at the scientist, who was still sitting rigidly at his station.

"Well, does his plan involve keeping us off Destiny's sensors? Otherwise, this is gonna be a real short trip."

"I'm sure it does."

"Did he say that explicitly? Because sometimes he—"

"Eli," Young said. "Let's go."

It didn't take long to reach the point that Rush had indicated. True to his word, the cargo bay doors opened at their approach, then sealed behind them, allowing the bay to pressurize.

There was no indication that they'd been detected.

Chloe and Eli were watching Rush uncertainly.

"He doesn't seem better," Chloe said, looking at Young.

Young stepped forward, unsteady on his feet, and leaned against the science console that Rush was still gripping with a disturbing intensity.

He took a moment to steady himself.

He hoped Rush was going to be able to help him out to some degree, because Young was fairly certain that in his current state, he wasn't going to be able to manage it entirely on his own.

He placed a hand on Rush's shoulder, took a deep breath, and shut his eyes.

Young seized onto his sense of Rush and began to pull. He could feel the scientist trying to help him, trying to fight his way free of the darkness of the ship, but almost immediately, Young's vision began to gray out. Blood roared in his ears and he could feel his heart pounding in his chest.

Dimly, he was aware of Eli talking to him, of Rush flexing his foot.

It wasn't enough.

Not nearly enough.

Rush was more entwined with the ship than he'd ever been, and Young had no stamina left for this.

He was going to fail.

Distantly, he felt Rush make a snap decision.

For the second time that day, the scientist did something unexpected; instead of trying to escape the ship, Rush used their link to move into Young's mind, much as he had done on the obelisk planet.

As he moved in, he brought Destiny with him.

Young's consciousness expanded out into a terrifying, uninterpretable landscape defined not visually, but in terms of circuits and energy gradients, their currents shrieking viciously through his mind; rushing around and through him like waterfalls in the dark. There was nowhere to ground here, in the face of this void that was not a void, this space that existed nowhere but between Destiny and Rush.

He was losing his sense of himself.

But—

He wasn't alone.

Rush was with him.

With complete access to Young's mind the scientist was able to use their connection to separate himself from Destiny enough to escape the ship's hold on him.

As soon as he did so, the intolerable pressure vanished from Young's thoughts.

He gasped, finding himself in his own body again.

"Fuck," Rush said from somewhere to his right. *"Fuck."*

It occurred to Young that the other man sounded upset.

His knees buckled and he started to fall forward just as Rush shot to his feet and grabbed him in a sideways tackle.

The room spun around him as they went down together in a fall that Rush barely managed to control.

He could not move.

"What's going on?" Eli's voice sounded distant.

"Quiet," Rush said, his voice cracked with strain. "Go do something useful."

"But you—"

"I said *go*."

*He could not move.*

Rush was kneeling next to him, ignoring the pain tearing through his feet, his mind a dismayed swirl of thoughts that Young couldn't even begin to follow.

"Colonel Young," the other man said, his voice low and insistent. "Answer me."

He could not *move*, he could not *think*, he could do nothing but *watch* as his body failed to obey any intention coming from his mind.

Rush's hands grazed over the makeshift bandage that Chloe and Eli had constructed, his expression tightening.

"Colonel," he said again. "*Everett*. Come on." Rush closed his hands into fists and then opened them again, trying to control his anxiety. "*Fuck*."

Young felt Rush cautiously bring their thoughts into apposition and as soon as he did so, Young projected a wordless wave of reassurance at the other man.

Rush looked at him sharply in response. //Talk to me,// the scientist projected.

He couldn't.

He was locked in his own mind, unable to do anything other than send a wordless burst of frustration along their open link.

Eyebrows drawing together, the scientist laid a hand on his forehead.

//Talk to me,// Rush projected delicately, his thoughts flowing like water over and through the damaged places in Young's mind. //Talk to me.//

Rush was *healing* him. Healing his mind, repairing pathways that had buckled under the strain of too much information.

//Talk to me,// Rush continued to project with a gentle insistence.

//What are you *doing*?// Young was finally able to ask.

//Fixing things,// Rush replied, his tone deliberately undemanding. //You're not so different from Destiny, really. Voltage differentials. Neuronal impulses. It's all the same.// The scientist was pouring energy into their link, his presence easing away some of the existential horror of what he had just experienced.



//I'm flattered.//

//You should be.//

//When did you figure out how to do this?//

//Just now,// Rush replied, his tone controlled and reassuring, soothing away what was left of Young's unease. //It's not so difficult. A circuit is a circuit, after all.//

Young could feel his own thoughts settling into their normal, linear, interpretable pattern.

"Can you speak?" Rush asked him finally, pulling his hand away from Young's forehead.

Young nodded at him, bringing a hand up to his temple.

"Very helpful," Rush said dryly. "You've overshot stoicism and landed squarely in the realm of stupidity."

"Are you seriously harassing him?" Eli called from across the room. "He just *fainted*, and it was probably your *fault*."

"I can speak," Young said, squinting up at Rush. "You're such a jackass sometimes."

"I've never claimed otherwise." Rush replied, his thoughts a relieved swirl as he helped Young sit.

"Are you—" Young broke off, hissing as a sudden shock of pain jolted down his injured arm. "Are you still blocking the signal?"

Rush looked at him blankly. "What signal?"

"The aliens are broadcasting our position. Calling for reinforcements?"

Rush stared at him. "And I was preventing this?"

"That's what you said."

"When?" Rush asked, uncharacteristically confused.

"About an hour ago? You built an interface and we talked?"

Rush shook his head.

He clearly had no memory of their previous conversation.

"This day just keeps getting better," Young murmured, running his left hand over his injured arm. "Look, you need to try and stop Destiny from transmitting that signal."

"I can't," Rush said, looking away briefly. "I can't do that."

"What do you mean you *can't*?" Young repeated.

"We're just going to have to be quick," Rush said, avoiding Young's question. "And hope we can kill them all before reinforcements arrive. Worst case scenario, I'll jump us to FTL."

Rush's thoughts were splintering like cracks feathering through brittle glass, evading Young's attempts to look deeper.

"Have you two been able to modify the lifesigns detector yet?" Young asked Chloe and Eli, who were sitting at the forward monitors, ostensibly working but, in actuality, clearly focusing on every word of the conversation between himself and Rush.

"Nope. I'm not *magical*, okay?" Eli snapped. "Chloe? Are you magical? No. You're not. We can't just modify sensors to detect some unknown interference pattern that is broadcasting *somewhere* on the electromagnetic spectrum."

Young caught a hint of a smile in Rush's expression as he snapped, "Eli."

"*What?*"

"Don't panic."

"Oh, 'don't panic'. That's great. That's just great. Coming from the guy who regularly passes out from stress, it really means a lot."

"Yes well," Rush said, reaching underneath the science console and dragging out his one remaining crutch, "in order for us to retake the ship, we need to know how many of them there are. We also need to *know where* they are. Therefore, it follows that we're going to have to—" he broke off, looking away from all of them. "We're going to have to capture one of them and determine how they're generating the interference pattern."

Young, Chloe and Eli all stared at Rush in naked disbelief.

"*Capture* one?" Chloe asked faintly into the ensuing silence.

"That's what I said," Rush replied, getting painfully to his feet. The scientist reached over to collect Young's sidearm, which had been abandoned on the science console. He ejected the clip, checked the ammunition, and then snapped the component parts back together.

Young watched him with a disconcerting mixture of horror and admiration.

"Are you *crazy*?" Eli asked.

"Are you taking a poll?" Rush replied, handing Eli the gun. He picked up Young's assault rifle and checked it over briefly before handing it to Chloe.

"Wait a second, why—" Eli started.

"She's a better shot than you are," Rush replied. He limped over to Young and held out a hand.

//Can you stand?//

Young grabbed his arm behind the elbow and Rush slowly pulled him up.

"Let's go," Rush said.

## Chapter Eighteen

Young gritted his teeth against the nearly unbearable pain in his right arm and the slow dizzying whirl of walls that he was certain weren't really moving. As he watched Eli struggle with the door controls to the cargo bay, he tried to maintain even the smallest sliver of hope that the situation in which they found themselves was going to be resolved in their favor.

They were facing a foothold situation of undetermined magnitude.

His team was untrained, terrified, and injured.

The only assets they had going for them were a handgun, an assault rifle, Chloe's ability to sense the enemy, and Rush's—well, Rush just generally counted as an asset, he supposed.

At the moment he was leaning heavily on the scientist, who, unbelievably, was on his feet despite his own injuries.

Young had always wondered about Rush's abnormally high energy level—where the hell it came from, how the man maintained it, and why he never seemed to know when it was entirely exhausted. Young knew that the other man had the capacity for preternatural toughness, but he had never witnessed it directly.

Now he was getting his chance.

The scientist was in rare form—Young could feel him practically vibrating with energy as they waited, pressed against the wall of the cargo bay, waiting for Eli to open the doors to the ship.

"Eli," Rush snapped, after giving the young man about twenty seconds to fiddle with the relevant controls. "What in god's name are you *doing*? This shouldn't be complicated."

"There's very limited power available here," Eli responded, frowning.

"Have you—"

"Oh my gosh," Eli said, exasperated. "Yes, okay? Stop backseat troubleshooting. You always do this. It drives me nuts. Can I have fifteen seconds? Is that too much to ask?"

Rush rolled his eyes, but stayed quiet.

A few seconds later, the cargo bay doors slid open.

Chloe moved out into the open space without being told, raising her assault rifle and sighting down the corridor.

Young watched her critically through intermittently blurring vision. The tension in her muscles was slowing her down, but otherwise, her stance was passable, her expression pinched and determined.

Someone had been giving her some training. Scott, most likely.

//Are you sure it should be *Chloe* with the assault rifle?// Young shot at Rush.  
//What if she panics?//

//She performs better with a defined task.//

"Okay," Chloe said quietly, motioning them to join her.

"The word is 'clear'," Eli said, "Not 'okay'. Even I know that."

"Whatever," Chloe replied.

//Besides,// the scientist added, //nothing deters panic better than an assault rifle.//

//Maybe in *your* version of reality. So, let me get this straight. You gave her the gun because she *was most* likely to panic?//

//Not *anymore*,// Rush snapped in irritation.

//I hope you're right about that.//

Rush didn't bother to respond. His attention was suddenly elsewhere, his eyes flicking between the long stretch of corridor and a point just inside the cargo bay doors. Directly in front of them, Chloe shifted nervously, waiting for some instruction.

"Let's move out," Young said quietly. "Eli, do you still have that lifesigns detector?"

"Got it," Eli whispered, pulling the device out of his pocket. "We should at least be able to see our people."

Eli pressed a few buttons and held the display out so that he and Rush could look at it. Young studied the distribution of glowing dots carefully. Most of the crew seemed to be in the mess. Young hoped that was by choice, and not because they were being held there. Several other groups of four were scattered around the ship. Young assumed that they were the teams that had made it back from the seed ship. Most importantly, the path to the nearest armory was clear of any of Destiny's crew. Young hoped that at least that meant they wouldn't be walking into the middle of an in-progress firefight.

After thirty seconds of studying the detector, he noticed that Rush hadn't looked at it once. The scientist was staring at a point about five feet to their right.

//Rush.//

"No," Rush whispered flatly, shaking his head at the empty air next to them. "That's not an option. I need something else. Something that falls within the parameters of my *own*—" Rush paused for a moment, then snapped, "well, thanks a lot."

They all stared at him.

After a few seconds, Rush seemed to notice that something was wrong, and looked back at them. "What?" he hissed, defensively.

"So," Eli said, drawing out the word, "talking to invisible people now? Unbelievably, that's a step *down* for you."

Rush sighed and looked away, his thoughts an unhappy swirl. Something in the young man's statement seemed to have hit a nerve.

"Give it a rest, Eli," Young said.

"No—I didn't—I mean, yeah. You're right. Sorry." Eli shifted his weight, clearly uncomfortable. "You uh—you just talk to invisible people all you want. Go crazy. I mean—well. Not *literally* crazy, obviously, but—"

Rush looked back toward Eli, leveling a glare in his direction.

"I'll stop talking," Eli murmured.

"You do that," Rush replied.

//Are you okay?// Young projected.

//Fine,// Rush said shortly. //Armory?//

Young sent him a wave of assent, and motioned to Chloe with his head to take point. She nodded and moved out ahead of them into the darkened corridor.

Without being told, Eli brought up the rear.

Their movements were nearly silent, but, again, their progress was so slow that it set Young's teeth on edge.

As they moved down the corridor, Young noticed that the emergency lighting at the base of the walls came up in a slow flare that faded as they passed. While it was somewhat helpful when it came to seeing where they were going, it was certainly not conducive to passing unnoticed along corridors.

//Are you doing that?// he projected at Rush. //Cut it out.//

//?//

//The lighting.// Young sent him an image, directing his attention.

//Oh for *god's sake*.// Rush projected back in aggravation. For a moment, Young thought the outburst was directed at him, but then the scientist briefly pressed a hand to the corridor wall, and the little blue lights along the deck plating faded a dim uniformity.

//So not you then?// Young asked.

//No. Destiny.//

//It what? *Missed* you?// Despite the gravity of their situation and the gut-wrenching pain in his arm, Young couldn't help but be slightly amused.

//Can we stay focused, please? Losing thirty percent of your blood volume is an unacceptable excuse for the level of distractibility you are currently displaying. Don't you *train* for this sort of thing?//

//Look, I need to know if the ship is going to do anything to give our position away.//

//I don't think so. The AI is inhibiting most of what might indicate my presence.//

//I still don't really understand the difference between 'Destiny' and the AI.//

//I still don't understand why you're talking to me right now.//

//You're a lot of work.//

Rush ignored him, his attention focused completely on the span of corridor ahead of them. The faint, parallel tracks of emergency lights disappeared into the darkness.

In the back of Rush's mind, a sense of unease was growing again.

After a few minutes, they had made it to the armory. They ducked through the door and sealed it behind them. Rush pushed Young against the wall just inside the door, and tried to control his slow slide down the cold metal with limited success until Eli moved over to lend a hand.

Young shut his eyes against a heaving, nauseating visual field, and joined up with Rush to the extent that it was possible. After a moment, he was looking out through Rush's eyes at a thankfully stable array of weapons.

"How do we know what to pick?" Chloe asked uncertainly.

Rush had absolutely no idea, but Young quickly directed his attention appropriately, and after a few moments, each of them had a fully equipped assault rifle, a kevlar jacket, a handgun, and all the extra clips that they could reasonably carry on their persons.

Eli and Rush pulled him to his feet, and Rush shoved an extra sidearm into Young's empty holster.

"So, do we actually have a plan for how we're going to do this?" Eli asked, his usual sarcasm absent.

"It's not exactly conceptually *difficult*, Eli," Rush replied. "Chloe finds one, or several of these things, we shoot most of them, we disable one, we drag it to the nearest lab, we scan it for EM interference, modify our detectors appropriately, then eliminate all of them."

They stared at him.

"Why does it have to be *alive*?" Chloe asked. "You know what they're like."

Rush looked back at her steadily. "They have the capacity for telepathic communication, so they're capable of generating EM fields at baseline. This may be an inherently biologic phenomenon and if that's the case, I don't want to have to do this twice."

"*What?*" Young said.

"They may be generating the interference patterns with their brains, so we can't scan them if they're dead," Eli translated.

"And you couldn't just say that?" Young hissed at Rush.

"I believe I just did," Rush replied coolly.

Young motioned for Eli's lifesigns detector and the young man handed it over.

He studied it for a moment.

"Let's head toward this group," he murmured, pointing out four glowing dots on the display. "A bit more firepower wouldn't hurt—but if we meet up with some of these things on the way, then so be it."

Rush nodded, and they left the armory in the same formation they had entered, with Chloe in the lead and Eli on their six.



After only a few minutes, Chloe stopped them, holding up a hand. She looked back and made a vague, nonspecific hand gesture that seemed to indicate that there was a group of aliens around the corner.

Rush nodded at her and gave Young a gentle shove in the direction of the nearest wall, then caught Eli's eye and pointed at Young. Eli took up a position directly in front of him. Young shook his head, hating the idea of Rush and Chloe, *Rush and Chloe*, doing this *alone*.

It was both idiotic and intolerable.

Rush's consciousness pressed against his projected anxiety as the scientist carefully laid his metal crutch on the ground near the wall. Then, with a slow familiarity, he moved in on Young's mind for the second time that day. They linked up with a satisfying mental snap, and Young's influence immediately crisped up Rush's movements. Young raised their assault rifle, helping Rush ignore the pain in his feet, the ache in his wrists.

They felt sharper together than either had apart.

They stepped forward, next to Chloe. Young felt wave of disorientation as he looked at her, now just marginally shorter than he was. She caught Rush's eye.

"I'm glad it's us," she mouthed without sound.

They gave her a crooked smile and stepped gracefully around the corner, sweeping the rifle up as they did so.

Chloe was right behind them.

In front of them a group of six aliens spanned the corridor, moving toward them, their movements insectoid and familiar.

They opened fire.

Four went down in the first sweep. It was Young who made the call to switch to the handgun, and Rush let him have control. It was oddly satisfying to use the other man's body—his reflexes were sharp and he *was fast*, as Young had known he would be.

How could he have possibly been otherwise?

The sidearm came up as Chloe took down the fifth member of the enemy team, and they exhaled, gun held with two hands as they fired one shot, straight into the narrow blue shoulder of the remaining target. The alien went down as its plasma weapon discharged, a single shot impacting the deck plating above their heads before being dissipated along the ceiling.

They moved forward, shoulder-to-shoulder with Chloe, to inspect the downed alien. It was struggling to rise, clearly not entirely unconscious. Rush reached forward with the intent of ripping a small metal device off its temple.

As his fingertips brushed the gel that coated the creature's skin, it tore into both their minds.

The pain was unbelievable.

It shredded coherent thought as it sought information about Destiny, rending through irrelevant memories that Rush was throwing in its direction and trying to reach those it was looking for. Rush, still somewhat in control, tried to pull back, even a fraction of an inch, but the thing reached up, icy blue fingers closing relentlessly around his wrist, holding him, holding *them* in place.

They could hear it telepathically calling for reinforcements.

Their resistance was breaking down.

Dimly, they were aware of Chloe kneeling next to them.

Abruptly, the pain was gone.

Chloe was using a pocketknife to pull the small metal transmitter toward her.

They watched her do it, the drag of the blade over the metal deck plating strangely absorbing.

They could not seem to—

Chloe pried the sidearm from Rush's grip, and held it to the alien's head, digging it in to the place where the transmitter had been removed. She hissed something at it that neither of them caught, but finally it released its mental hold.

They pitched forward. Young was with it enough to get Rush's left arm out in front of them before they did a face plant into the deck plating.

They were shaking.

At the edges of Rush's mind, a darkness began to press its way in, urgently trying to pull Rush out, trying to join with his mind in any way that it could.

It was Destiny.

It had to be.

Even this close to Rush, even connected fully, as they were, Young couldn't penetrate the obscurity of the ship. He got only an echo of its intent from Rush's thoughts.

It was afraid.

It wanted Rush back.

It *needed* him back.

And there was a part of Rush that very much wanted to go.

Chloe continued her sibilant, threatening litany.

This was it.

Young braced himself against the coming onslaught.

Rush clenched his hands and flexed his foot.

"Nick." His name seemed to come from far away.

"*Nick.*" They looked up at the sound of Daniel Jackson's voice to see the AI kneeling directly in front of them, looking at them urgently. "Focus," the other man said. "Focus on what you *want*. Destiny is trying to *help* you. Give it something to do. Don't fight it. You'll lose. You'll lose every time."

With a fierce shift in focus, Rush shut his eyes and twisted his attention outward toward the lab, projecting a rough idea of their goals toward Destiny. All over the ship, they began to hear the sound of bulkhead doors slamming shut, trapping intruders behind them. Force fields sprang up like sparks in Rush's mind, and the equipment in the lab that was their destination started booting up.

Beneath Rush's hands, the deck plating began to warm.

Destiny backed off.

They took a shuddering breath and looked at the AI.

"Adequate," Daniel said, and his eyes flicked in Chloe's direction. "You'd better stop her," he murmured, his expression closed, worried. "She's in control right now, but that connection she's making goes both ways."

With that, Daniel vanished.

By mutual consent, Young loosened his connection with Rush, letting his own surroundings fade back in. He managed to push himself to his feet, and, with Eli's help, he rounded the corner to see Rush already up, standing immediately next to Chloe, who stood over the alien, speaking in an unnatural hissing language that Young had never realized that she'd learned.

"Chloe," Rush snapped in a whisper. "Stop." When she didn't respond, he laid a hand on her shoulder, his eyes never leaving the thing on the floor. "*Stop*. We're scanning it, not engaging it in conversation."

Slowly her eyes refocused on Rush and she nodded, sidearm wavering for a moment before snapping back into position.

Her expression was horrified.

Eli moved up to stand next to them, his eyes still sweeping the darkened corridor behind them, occasionally flicking over to Chloe.

"I just want you guys to know that this is making my top ten list of worst days ever," Eli hissed. "How *the hell* are we supposed to get this thing to the lab? You practically passed out when it touched you," he murmured, glancing at Rush. "Besides. It's still *conscious*."

Rush shook his head and waved Eli back a pace, looking down at the alien over the barrel of his sidearm with narrowed eyes.

"Vos mos vado qua inquam." The scientist's voice was low as he addressed the alien, and as dangerous as Young had ever heard it.

It hissed back at him angrily from the floor.

"Did it understand that?" Rush murmured to Chloe.

"Yes," she replied, her voice barely audible.

"Vos sto sursum," Rush said, tightening his grip on the sidearm.

Slowly, very slowly, the alien got to its feet.

"Chloe," Rush said, tilting his head marginally toward Young.

With no other prompting, she slid into place at Young's side, pulling one of his arms over her shoulders.

"Teneo is. Ego mos iuguolo vos indubitanter," Rush hissed at the alien.

"What the *hell* are you telling it?" Young asked quietly.

"Don't worry about it," Rush said, not taking his eyes off the thing.

"Know this," Eli murmured near his ear. "I will kill you without hesitation." Young looked at him. "That's what he just said to it," Eli whispered, before falling back behind him and Chloe.

Their progress toward the lab was agonizingly slow, punctuated by occasional commands in Ancient by Rush. Young kept an eye on the lifesigns detector that Chloe now held, and noticed a team of eight approaching their position.

Distantly, he heard the sound of gunfire.

Finally, they made it to their destination. Rush backed the alien against a wall, onto a low platform made out of some kind of light metallic alloy. Eli sealed the door behind them as Chloe and Young fanned out alongside Rush.

Young pulled out his sidearm, and Chloe followed suit, her eyes unreadable, her expression blank.

"Eli," Rush snapped. "Start looking for that signal."

"Already on it," Eli replied quietly.

Young grimaced, looking at the thing. It hissed aggressively at the three of them.

//Can we question it, while we have it here?// Young projected at Rush.

//The only way we can understand its answers is by either using Chloe, or the interface device that it was wearing. I'm not sure that either is a good idea. We have the upper hand at the moment, but just barely.//

For a few moments, they stood in silence while Eli worked. The alien seemed to retreat into itself. It ceased its hissing. Its restless movements stilled. The only sound in the room was Chloe's shallow, rapid breaths.

Five minutes passed.

Ten.

Chloe's breathing slowed.

Young glanced over at her. Her face was still. Blank. Tear tracks glittered in the dim lighting, but her gun was steady.

He looked back at the alien. It was staring fixedly at her.

When her voice broke silence, it was like he'd been expecting it.

"Let me go." The words were flat, expressionless, and so unlike Chloe that it sent chills racing down his spine.

He tightened his grip on his sidearm and glanced at Rush.

The scientist closed his eyes briefly, his expression pained.

"Um, Chloe?" Eli asked, his voice frightened.

"Let. Me. Go."

"Who are you?" Young snapped at the alien. "What do you *want* with us?"

"We are Nakai," Chloe said, in that same, flat voice. "We want what we have always wanted. To discover all that is. To continue without end. To read the pattern beneath existence. Let me go."

"You release Chloe, and we'll talk about it."

"This one means nothing. She is weak. She cannot fight even one mind."

Young *really* wished that Chloe wasn't holding a sidearm.

"She's important to *us*."

"You are *all* weak," Chloe continued. "You are unworthy of this vessel. We seek to liberate it from you. You will be torn from this plane of existence and cast into the void."

"I'm not interested in your opinions," Young snarled. "You want to be released, then you *leave her alone*."

"You will freeze in the vacuum of space," Chloe said, her voice rising. "You will cease to exist."

"Eli," Young said quietly, back over his shoulder.

"Almost got it," the young man responded through clenched teeth.

"You will *never* return to your people," Rush hissed, stepping forward. "I will see to that. At the moment of your death you will fail to find your way back to them. Your knowledge will be lost. Your consciousness will be unmoored. Unless—" he shifted the grip on his sidearm and pulled the small, silver transmitter out of his pocket. He laid it on the floor, lifting the heel of his boot over it in a threatening manner. "Unless you *let her go*. Immediately."

"I remember you," Chloe said, her voice slow and cold.

"I'll bet you do."

"You are unlike the others," Chloe's gun was still fixed on the alien, but her gaze and the gaze of the Nakai had both shifted to *Rush*.

Rush wasn't looking back at her. He was still staring at the alien over the barrel of his sidearm.

Young kept his eyes on all of them.

"You will unlock this ship for us," Chloe said, her voice a command.

Her hands, which had remained so steady, began to shake.

"Unlikely," Rush shot at it contemptuously.

It hissed back at him.

Young's eyes flicked back and forth continuously between Chloe and the Nakai.

At his side, in his peripheral vision, a familiar outline appeared.

"Kill it," Emily said quietly. "Kill it now."

Young's finger tightened on the trigger.

Chloe swung her weapon around to her left, the arc of her arm leaving no question as to whom she was aiming at.

Young fired, putting a bullet straight through the head of their prisoner.

Eli came from behind, tackling Chloe, but not in time to keep her from getting off a shot as well.

Rush jerked back into Young, overbalancing both of them, and sending them to the floor.

The crack of metal on metal sounded as Eli knocked the sidearm out of Chloe's unresisting grip.

Young felt a fresh stream of blood pouring out of his injured right arm as he forced himself up, his hands tearing Rush's jacket open.

"I'm fine," Rush said breathlessly, pushing his hands away.

"Shut up, you *idiot*," Young snapped at him. "She hit you, I *know* she did."

"I'm wearing a *vest*," Rush replied impatiently. "You're bleeding more than I am at the moment. Get *off* of me, for god's sake."

Young backed off, letting Rush up, and drew in a shaky breath as he looked over at Chloe. She had her arms locked around Eli's neck, her head buried in his shoulder.

"You're okay," Eli said, his expression pained as he wrapped his arms around Chloe. He was looking away from Rush and Young, away from the dead alien, up toward the ceiling. "You're okay," he murmured. "Rush is okay. *Everyone* is okay."

//Do you want to handle this one?// Young projected at Rush.

//No. Not particularly,// Rush replied, but he got painfully to his feet and walked over to stand over Eli and Chloe, who were still huddled on the floor.

"Eli," Rush said shortly, "did you map out the interference pattern?"

"Uh, yeah," Eli replied.

"Well, start modifying the sensors. We haven't got all day."

"Kind of busy right now," Eli snapped in irritation.

"Go," Rush said shortly. "And you," Rush said, kneeling down to pull Chloe away from Eli. "Stop crying."

//Are you even a *human*?// Young snapped at him. //I thought you were supposed to be *helping*.//

Chloe looked away from Rush, her face was hidden under a curtain of her hair, buried in her hands. "I *am so sorry*," she whispered, her voice barely audible.

"And what are you sorry for, then?" Rush asked her, his tone deliberately light. "You're by far the nicest person who has ever attempted to kill me. And it wasn't even your fault. I'm not particularly inclined to hold it against you."

She still wouldn't look at him, and he inched slightly closer toward her, gingerly placing a hand on her shoulder.

As if that had been the only signal she needed, she wrapped her arms around him in a brief hug, before pulling away and flinging her hair back out of her face.

"I'd better help Eli," she said.

"Off with you," Rush said, waving a hand in the direction of the monitors.

//So that wasn't *completely* abysmal,// Young projected at him, as Rush started readjusting the belt and shirt that made up the bandage around his upper arm.

Rush shot him a look that Young was going to classify as 'unimpressed'. //This is bleeding *again*.//

//It never really stopped. Shouldn't *you* be the one modifying the sensors, by the way?//

//In combination, they're faster than I would be. At least via the conventional way. Normal interfaces are beginning to feel somewhat—foreign to me.//

//Maybe I should replace you with Eli,// Young said dryly.

//Maybe you should,// Rush agreed, his projection slightly wistful.

//Rush. I wasn't serious.//

//I was. Eli's more reliable in every sphere that you might consider.//



//Why are we even talking about this right now? Jesus Christ. You're it, okay? You're my choice—for a lot of different reasons. You always have been. You always will be.//

Rush shrugged, pulling his belt tight around Young's upper arm, but Young could tell that he was trying to suppress a feeling of relief and—something else.

Something harder to read.

"Okay guys," Eli called quietly across to them, "the modifications are done, and they should be syncing up to the lifesigns detectors now."

Rush reached over to grab the detector from where it had fallen to the deck plating as Eli had tackled Chloe.

They had only been studying it for a few seconds when an array of red dots appeared on the screen. Young did a quick count and came up with eighteen. He raised his eyebrows.

"Not as many as I would have thought," he murmured to Rush.

"Yes well. It's enough. We have to retake the bridge so we can undock and get the hell out of here before their friends show up."

"For that," Young said quietly, "we're going to need more people. It's time to find Greer and Scott. Let's move out."

Eli and Chloe gathered their weapons.

Rush pulled Young to his feet, steadying him as the room spun around him. After a few seconds, he had regained his equilibrium.

"Chloe," Young said quietly. "Leave your weapons here."

She dropped her eyes.

//Don't,// Rush said. //Don't do that to her. We need her.//

//We need *you* more. She nearly killed you.//

//That was an unusual circumstance which is not likely to be replicated.//

//Are you *sure*?//

Rush sighed, looking away.

"Chloe," Young said insistently, and she looked up at him. "This isn't a punishment. You've done a fantastic job today. Better than anyone could have ever asked for. Better than a lot of the trained military personnel on this ship."

"It's all right," she said quietly. "I understand. Maybe—" she paused, swallowing, glancing briefly at Rush. "Maybe you should lock me up somewhere until this is over. It might be safer."

Young considered it.

"Don't be *stupid*," Rush snapped. Young wasn't sure if the scientist was directing his comment toward him or toward Chloe. "Help the colonel."

Chloe looked at Young uncertainly and he nodded. She slipped in beside him, pulling one of his arms over her narrow shoulders.

They moved out again, with Chloe holding the lifesigns detector and Rush on point. Young gritted his teeth against the constant sense of dizziness that plagued him more and more as time progressed.

He suspected that it was getting harder to stay on his feet because *Rush* was starting to tire. The constant flow of energy he had been getting from the other man was wavering, and the grind of the pain in Young's shoulder was slowly being matched by the knife-like sensations coming from Rush's feet. The man was walking without any kind of support, having left his last remaining crutch in the corridor near where they captured the Nakai.

They'd only been walking for a few minutes when they heard the sound of gunfire up ahead. Chloe held out the lifesigns detector and they saw that the nearest group of four on the screen was flanked on both sides by red dots.

Young motioned Eli forward, and the young man joined up with Rush, leaving Young and Chloe as rearguards.

//Don't fire until you've got a clear line,// he projected at Rush. //No need to give away our position unnecessarily.//

Rush nodded.

//And don't shoot any of *our* people.//

//I'll try to remember that one. Thanks.//

Young rolled his eyes.

"You keep an eye on our six," Young murmured into Chloe's ear as he pulled his sidearm. She nodded.

His heart was pounding in his ears.

The gunfire was becoming louder.

Ahead of them, arrayed across the corridor, they could see five of the Nakai.

//Now,// Young prompted Rush.

The scientist opened fire, and Eli followed suit immediately.

Young fired several single shots, left-handed, from his sidearm. Three went down, but two turned, and immediately fired bursts from their plasma weapons. Young tackled Chloe to the deck plating, knocking her out of the way of one of the blasts. He lifted his head and saw that Eli and Rush were untouched, and had opened fire again, taking out the last two.

As the last of the Nakai fell, Rush staggered sideways, his outflung hand coming into contact with the metal of the corridor wall. Eli stepped in to grab his upper arm, steadying him, as Greer, James, Barnes, and Thomas came around the corner.

"Sweet Jesus, but it's good to see you people," Greer whispered, eyes quickly assessing Rush before he knelt down next to Young and Chloe. "What the hell is *this*?" he asked, looking at Young's blood soaked uniform.

"It looks worse than it is," Young said.

"Yeah, or *not*," Eli snapped back.

"Report, sergeant," Young said, pushing himself up with Chloe's help.

"The civilians are secure in the mess," Greer murmured. "We've been taking back strategic locations all over the ship since we got back on board. The bridge is already ours, there's a three-man detail there. We weren't sure where to head when suddenly these guys started showing up on our detectors."

"Yeah," Young said. "That was us."

"I figured," Greer said. "A sudden, unexplained tactical advantage? That's classic Rush."

Young raised his eyebrows, suppressing a dry smile.

"Sir," Greer said, "Scott and I can mop up the rest of these things, if you four want to head to the bridge."

Young nodded.

"You need a hand? We could spare Barnes or Thomas," Greer offered.

//Can you walk?// Young shot at Rush.

//What kind of question is *that*? Of course I can walk. I've been doing it for the past several hours, haven't I?//

"We're fine," Young said, not wanting to draw any additional firepower away from the cleanup efforts. "The bridge isn't far."

Greer nodded and helped Young to stand.

"Watch yourself, sergeant," Young said.

"You too, sir."

They made it to the bridge in short order, and Chloe helped Young sit in the central chair before ducking away to her usual station. Rush stayed on his feet for reasons that were totally obscure to Young, shifting his weight constantly, clearly uncomfortable.

"Is everyone off the seed ship?" Young asked.

Rush turned his head, eyes fixed on a point in empty space before snapping back to look at the monitors. "Yes," he replied.

"Okay," Young said, blinking against a sudden wave of vertigo. Across the room, Rush swayed as well, fingers closing onto the edge of the console he was monitoring. "Let's undock."

"Initiating the undocking protocol," Chloe said, her fingers flying over her console.

Slowly, ponderously, Destiny began to move away from the other ship.

"Eli," Young snapped. "What's the status of the FTL drive?"

"We're good to go as soon as—"

A sudden shriek cut across the bridge as the sensors picked up four ships dropping into normal space in their vicinity.

"*Damn* it," Rush hissed.

Almost immediately, they opened fire.

"Shield status," Young snapped.

"Forty percent," Rush said, looking pained. "Our shields are still merged with the seed ship—the greater area is weakening their intensity."

"Well, undock *faster*," Young snapped.

//Not helpful,// Rush snarled back at him.

"Firing maneuvering thrusters," Eli yelled over the alarms.

//Maybe now would be a good time for you to join up with Destiny,// Young projected at Rush.

//That won't end well,// Rush warned.

//Neither will *this*,// Young snapped back.

Another wave of vertigo hit, and he dropped his forehead into his hand to try and prevent the spinning of the room. When he looked back up, he was aware of Emily, standing in his peripheral vision.

"Don't push him, Everett," she said quietly.

"Shields are at twenty-four percent," Eli called out. "Four minutes to undocking."

"Are we going to make it?" Young asked.

"Keep asking pointless questions," Rush snapped. "That will certainly help."

"Shields at fifteen percent," Eli said. "We're definitely *not* going to make it."

//I'm going to try something,// Rush said, fingers flying over his console. //Don't talk to me.//

"Rush," Eli snapped. "Are you *coding*? There's no time for this!"

Rush was borrowing Young's energy and focus to augment his own. He was writing the skeleton of a short program, the primary purpose of which seemed to be to speed up the undocking protocol. Young could tell that that there was no way the scientist was going to finish in time.

He'd typed less than fifteen lines of code when he initiated the program. He sent his consciousness after it, projecting his intent at the ship even as he tried to strengthen the link between his mind and Young's—desperate not to get pulled in.

Finishing the program had never been his intention.

"How the *hell* do you *do* this stuff?" Eli yelled over to Rush as their speed increased. "Shields to *eight percent*."

Rush had created a new kind of buffer between his mind and the ship, but on the edges of the other man's consciousness, Young could feel the dark press of Destiny becoming more insistent. He yanked Rush back as much as he could, but he had hardly any energy left.

"We're out," Chloe called. "The drive is spinning up."

Rush directed Destiny's attention back out, focusing on the FTL drive, distracting the ship from its attempt to pull him in. In that moment, Young was able to wrench him free entirely.

He opened his eyes in time to register the sudden blurring of the stars as they entered FTL. Young struggled to stay conscious, but the exhaustion and blood loss had finally caught up with him.

The last thing he saw before his vision darkened completely was Rush, turning toward him, silhouetted against the forward view.

## Chapter Nineteen

The first thing that Young noticed when he regained consciousness was the sling holding his right arm across his chest.

The terrible burning sensation in his bicep had faded to a dull ache and, if he focused, he could wiggle the fingers of his right hand—thank god.

He took a deep breath, trying to clear his head.

All things considered, he felt terrible.

Young looked over to his right and saw Rush sitting cross-legged on the adjacent gurney, staring at his laptop screen, his fingers and thoughts flying. The scientist was sufficiently absorbed in what he was doing—something involving power distribution systems—that he apparently hadn't yet noticed that Young had regained consciousness.

Rush looked a hell of a lot better than Young currently felt.

He levered himself up on his good elbow, trying to push himself into a seated position.

"Stop that," Rush snapped, eyes never leaving his computer. "You're not supposed to be sitting."

"Nice to see you too," Young said, rolling his eyes, but lying back all the same.

The scientist continued to ignore him; his thoughts swirling in chaotic, unhappy eddies.

"Rush," Young growled.

"What?" he shot back. "What do you want from me? Fucking breakfast in bed?"

"I'll take it if you're offering," Young said acidly, his temper rising along with his anxiety regarding the outcome of the foothold situation. "But I was more in the mood for a *status update*?"

Rush leveled a glare at him. "We're still at FTL. All of the Nakai have been eliminated. We suffered no loss of personnel."

Young felt almost sick with relief.

"The only significant injury was Greer, who, in typical fashion, offered to donate blood to *you*, and then, like an idiot, didn't know when to stop." Rush glanced at a point somewhere beyond Young's shoulder, and he followed the scientist's gaze to make out Greer in a gurney across the way.

"Hey sir," Greer gave him a halfhearted wave.

"Sergeant," Young replied.

"Don't mind Rush," Greer said. "He's just pissed because he was worried." The other man raised his voice, deliberately needling the scientist.

"I was not, in any way, *worried*," Rush said, defensively.

"Oh yes he was," Greer said.

Rush looked up at the ceiling, as if praying for patience, and then went back to his laptop.

"Thanks for the blood," Young said, shifting his gaze to Greer.

"Don't mention it."

"So," Young said, turning back to Rush, "you're doing *what* right now?"

"Trying to determine whether the Nakai made any systems modifications while they were on board."

Young nodded. "Seems reasonable."

"So glad I have your *approval*," Rush snapped.

//What is the hell is wrong with you?// Young projected. //You're obviously upset about *something*. What happened?//

//Nothing,// Rush said, but Young could feel the chaotic mess of his thoughts start to settle, and the edge that had been present in his tone when he spoke began to fade from his projection. //You were unconscious for a bit more than sixteen hours. Nothing happened. Nothing noteworthy. Nothing that changes *anything*.//

Young grimaced, noting the odd choice of wording with a sinking sense of trepidation. He tried to get a better idea of what the scientist was talking about, but Rush's thoughts were splintering into countless, barely traceable pathways.

Young was starting to hate it when he did that.

//What happened to you while I was out? Did you get pulled in to Destiny?// he asked, following a hunch.

//No. I've been redirecting her. Him. Whatever. Nothing happened to me. I just sat here and combed through critical systems while you nearly died from blood loss and some unknown alien toxin.//

//You *were* worried about me.//



//Not even remotely.// He wasn't imagining it—Rush's entire demeanor was softening.

//You absolutely were.//

//Don't flatter yourself.//

//Yeah yeah.//

From around the corner, the sound of TJ's laughter startled all of them.

Greer and Rush looked up, the sergeant smiling briefly at the sound.

Young smiled reflexively as well, despite himself.

He literally could not remember the last time he had heard TJ laugh. Certainly not since Carmen—

Well. It didn't matter. It had been a long time.

In the next moment, however, his good mood vanished. He experienced a sudden surge of irritation to hear Varro's voice coming out of her office.

Rush glanced at him sharply. //Careful,// he sent, his projection subdued.

//Mind your own business,// Young shot back at him, as he raised himself up on his left elbow again.

Greer was diplomatically staring at the wall.

He was about to call TJ into the room when Rush stopped him.

//Don't,// Rush said simply, going back to his typing.

Young looked at him in overt disbelief, irritation flowering into anger in the space of a heartbeat. //What did I just say to you? Do I have to be accountable for every god damned *thought* that I have? Just *stay out of it*.//

Reflexively, Young pulled back from Rush's mind. Not all the way. He was in control enough to realize that particular course of action would be—unadvised.

Despite his restraint, the effect on Rush was immediate. The scientist stopped coding, his eyes losing focus as he swayed sideways before he was able to compensate for the pull of the ship. Rush blinked rapidly as he recovered his equilibrium. He stared at the wall, clenching his hands in the sheets beneath him. When he finally turned to look back at Young, his gaze and his thoughts were furious.

//What are you going to do?// the scientist asked coldly. //Are you going to go in there and sweep her off her feet? No. You're not. For a lot of reasons. Some good, some *fucking stupid*.//

//Back off,// Young snarled.

//She's *happy*,// Rush snapped. //Don't ruin this for her for *no goddamned reason at all*.//

//Oh this is good. *You're* dispensing advice on interpersonal relationships now? I can't think of *anyone* I know who's completely and utterly screwed up more of them than *you* have. By all means, continue.//

//You know I'm right about this,// Rush said relentlessly. //That's why you're upset. She deserves to be happy. Her time—// and here he broke off, his thoughts flashing rapidly through remembered footage from the society established by their descendants. //Her time is limited, as you are well aware.//

In that moment, Young wanted Rush out of his head more than he'd ever wanted anything in his life.

//As if *you* give a *damn* about that,// he snarled furiously at the other man. //You don't care *about anything* other than fulfilling this ship's goddamned *mission*. And who the *hell* knows what that's going to entail—we'll be lucky if you don't end up killing the entire crew in some half-cocked megalomaniacal attempt to unravel the mysteries of the fucking *universe*. Heaven forbid that you tell me *anything*—//

//You have no idea what you're talking about. You couldn't logically reason your way out of a *paper bag* let alone—//

//That's right,// Young broke in. //I'm an idiot. But at least I'm not a manipulative, heartless, *lying* son of a bitch who's so goddamn unstable that he can't even tolerate being so much as *questioned* about what the *fuck* is going on at any given time. When have you *ever* given me a straight answer about *anything*?//

Rush shut his laptop and snagged his boots from the floor using his one remaining crutch. He started putting them on, his thoughts a shrieking, uninterpretable mess of Ancient. The only thing that Young could get was that the scientist wanted *out*. Just as much as Young did.

//And where the *fuck* do you think you're going to go?// Young asked, acerbically.

//Away,// Rush responded coldly, Ancient echoing over the English that he was projecting at Young. //Only block me if you enjoy going into cardiac arrest trying to pull me out of the ship.//

//You can't leave,// Young hissed at him.

"Watch me," Rush snapped, his voice cold. He scooped up his laptop in his free hand and grabbed his crutch in the other, heading toward the door.

"Doc," Greer said in confusion.

Rush rounded the doorframe and paused fractionally to look in at TJ and Varro. "The colonel's awake," he snapped as he turned, heading for the main infirmary doors.

"Rush," TJ called, appearing in the doorway. "Where are you going? I didn't clear you for—"

"What's there to clear?" he threw back over his shoulder.

"We need to talk about—"

"It can wait," Rush said. As he passed through the infirmary doors, they shut behind him.

"Damn it," TJ said, turning back toward Young and Greer as Varro appeared in the doorway of her office, leaning against the frame. "I hate it when he locks me in here."

"He *locks* you *in*?" Varro asked, moving quickly toward the main doors and trying to pry them open. "But how—" he broke off as he put his full energy into a wasted effort at pulling them apart.

"Don't bother," TJ sighed. "He always releases them after two or three minutes. At least so far."

Half of Young's attention was on the pair of them, the other half was with Rush, waiting with a kind of twisted anticipation for the headache and nausea that was going to come whenever the other man reached the edge of the radius that defined their slowly-healing link.

Rush passed the fifty-yard mark, then the one hundred and fifty yard mark with no difficulty for either of them. He continued on, past the mess, past the control interface room, past Eli, who tried to flag him down, but to no avail.

//What happened to our radius?// Young projected at him.

//Don't talk to me.//

//Damn it, Rush, stop being such a fucking prima donna for two goddamn minutes and *answer* my goddamned *question*://

Rush stopped in the middle of the corridor, his thoughts violently incoherent, his heart beating wildly in his chest, his breathing coming in panicked, shallow gasps. His urge to *get away* from Young, to be alone with his own thoughts was unendurable. He was, Young realized, on the razor's edge—contemplating joining with Destiny to escape Young's hold on him.

Anything that Young said could push him over that edge.

And, if he were to be completely honest with himself, at that moment there was a part of him that wanted the scientist to go.

Young shut his eyes, blocking out TJ's infectious laughter and Greer's watchful gaze.

He tried to calm himself down.

With his own anger and frustration and hurt churning in his mind, and Rush's hysterical despair tearing through their link, it was nearly impossible.

It was also absolutely imperative.

Rush was physically shaking with the need to pull away. Any second now, he was going to make the attempt.

Young tried to brace himself.

"Nick."

Rush whirled around and found himself faced with the AI.

"Nick." It repeated his name slowly and evenly, holding out its hands, palms forward, in a perfect impersonation of Daniel Jackson. "Nick, come on. We talked about this. Not a good idea."

Rush took a deep breath, clearly making an effort to calm down.

"Come on," Jackson said gently, taking a few steps in Rush's direction. "You've got things to do."

Rush stood for a moment, then abruptly spun and started walking down the corridor. The AI fell into step beside him. "Leave me alone," Rush said to it.

Destiny-as-Daniel had its hands in its pockets, its head down. "Sure," it said, affably. "In a minute."

This seemed to mollify Rush to some degree and, satisfied that the AI had talked him down and that the scientist wasn't going to retreat into Destiny, Young let the infirmary fade back in around him, trying to give the other man as much space as he could.

He opened his eyes to see the infirmary doors suddenly give way under Varro's attempt to force them open.

Young released a shuddery breath.

"I don't envy you, sir," Greer murmured, just loud enough for Young to catch it.

He wondered what the sergeant was referring to—the situation with TJ and Varro, the messy, dangerous relationship he had with Rush, the damned poisoned dart he'd taken in the shoulder, the sleepless nights, the constant terror of losing personnel—maybe all of it.

"Yeah," Young said shortly as TJ swept back into the room, approaching his bedside.

"Colonel," she said, smiling at him. A real smile. "How are you feeling?"

"Terrible," he replied, giving her an attempt at a smile in return. He was sure it didn't look remotely passable.

"I'll bet," she murmured, reaching into a cabinet to pull out some of her salty, budget Gatorade. She set it down next to him before starting to fish around for a cup. "There was a pretty nasty anti-coagulant in those darts, not to mention a local neurotoxin. It took you nearly ten hours to metabolize most of it."

"I'm still having trouble moving my arm," Young commented, hoping he wasn't about to be told that this would be a permanent problem.

"That should wear off," TJ said, pouring him some of the fake Gatorade. "Drink. It will help."

Young obligingly downed half a cup. "I hear I have Greer to thank for a blood donation."

TJ nodded. "You were in bad shape," she murmured, looking down.

The silence stretched between them for a moment.

"How's Rush?" Young asked her. "Is he okay?"

TJ compressed her lips, looking away briefly. "He's okay," she murmured, a hint of reservation in her voice. "He had a tough time for the first few hours that you were out; he wasn't talking very much, and I'm sure that was at least partially because he was having a hard time speaking English."

Young nodded. "That's better than I expected."

"So, I guess your link is repaired now?" TJ asked.

"I'm not entirely sure," Young admitted. "Unsurprisingly, I managed to piss him off within five minutes of regaining consciousness and therefore he's not telling me *anything* at the moment. *He* seemed to know that he'd be able to leave. Which is pretty typical." Young brought his left hand up to massage his jaw.

TJ gave him a brief, sympathetic smile.

"Do we need to talk about this virus in our ventilation systems?" Young asked, changing the subject. "I was in the middle of reading your report when we dropped out of FTL to investigate the seed ship. How concerned do we need to be about this?"

"We can talk about that later," TJ said quietly. "It's not urgent."

"TJ," Young said, a hint of admonishment in his tone.

TJ's eyes flicked toward the open infirmary doors. "I don't think it poses a danger to anyone," she murmured. "At the moment."

"At the moment?" he echoed.

He did *not* like the sound of that.

"I've confirmed that the virus is not capable of infecting human cells," she said quietly, by way of explanation. "And, I have a hunch about where it came from."

"Let's hear it," he said, his tone indicating that this was *not* a request.

"I think it came from the chair," she murmured. "I think the virus was the vector used to modify Rush on a genetic level and that it's still present in his system, *continuing* to change him."

"*TJ*," Young snapped. "I thought you *cleared* him."

"Is that what he told you?" she asked quietly. "I let him go because I couldn't detect the virus in his blood or saliva and because it's incapable of infecting human cells. I never stated that he was entirely clear."

"Lieutenant, you can't bury stuff like this in a report that I might not get to for *days*—"

"The safety of the crew was never in danger," she said, her expression forbidding. "This affects only him, and he *asked* me not to tell you."

"He *what*?"

"He was within his rights to do so."

"Jesus *Christ*, TJ. What were you *thinking*? You—"

"What." Her voice was cool, professional. "I *what*? Protected the privacy of a man who has none left to speak of? This was my call, colonel," she said. "It falls well within my latitude as chief medical officer on this ship."

It did, at that, he supposed.

"So why are you telling me *now*," he snapped, trying to bury his irritation, "What's changed?"

"I wasn't sure before," she said slowly, "but I can tell you that as he continues to change —" she broke off, eyes flicking away, and then back to fix him with her serious, quiet gaze. "He's going to start to get sick."

Fuck.

*Fuck.*

"Of course he is," Young sighed, dropping back against the gurney. "How sick?"

"It's hard to say," TJ murmured, looking away. "It depends on how much he changes."

"Does he know?" Young asked.

"Yes. I told him last night."

"How did he take it?"

"He didn't seem surprised."

Young covered his eyes with his left hand, massaging his temples.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke.

"You need to get some rest," TJ said finally. "You've got a ways to go before you're back to baseline." She stood, one hand squeezing his shoulder on her way out. "Drink your electrolytes."

Two beds away, Greer was staring fixedly straight at the wall.

Young shut his eyes against his headache. Against the glare of the too-bright lights. Against everything.

He couldn't handle this right now.

Any of it.

In the past year, his wife had left him for David Telford. He'd effectively lost TJ. He'd lost his daughter. He had done nothing but struggle to get his people back home as they fought to survive out here, traveling through the void at the edge of the universe,

constantly under siege, constantly challenged, constantly running out of resources and goodwill and morale, barely surviving one crisis to make it to the next.

To say nothing of Rush.

He could feel it in his bones—the man was going to be the defining relationship of his life. He already was. Young needed Rush, and he *always* had, right from the very beginning. He'd saved the man's life. He'd left him for dead. He'd beaten the shit out of him on more than one occasion. He'd gotten drunk with him. They'd been in firefights together.

He was closer to Rush than he was to anyone else—living or dead, on Destiny or off.

Too bad that Rush could barely stand the sight of him. Too bad that the strain of being linked to Young was nearly enough to drive the other man to throw his lot in with a mentally voracious hunk of metal; risking death, risking insanity, risking who the hell knew what, *exactly* in order to get away from him for even a few minutes. Too bad that Rush was so god damned mercurial and legitimately half-crazy that any kind of relationship with him, personal or professional or psychic, was like walking on eggshells concealing hot coals. Too bad that Rush was the kind of person who obviously, *obviously* was going to burn out like a fucking sodium flare, bright and hot and painful to look at.

And soon.

Very fucking soon.

Despite the distressing trajectory of his thoughts, Young was exhausted enough to fall asleep.

When he awoke, Greer had been released and he was alone in the infirmary.

The light in TJ's office was on, a yellow glow spilling out from the open door frame. He wasn't sure of the time, but the automatic dimming of the overhead lights told him that it was past twenty-two hundred hours.

He was alone.

On his nightstand, TJ had left one of her chocolate covered power bars with a note that said: 'Eat this when you wake up', in her delicate loopy hand. He raised the back of the gurney to a sitting position, then started in on the power bar, trying to enjoy the taste, but failing miserably.

"Hi." Eli's uncertain voice came from the doorframe, startling him.



"Hey Eli. Come on in."

"How's the arm? And the toxins and stuff? Are you better?"

"Yeah," Young said with a sigh. "Mostly."

"Good," Eli said, standing awkwardly next to the bed, looking like he wasn't sure what to do with his hands. "That's good."

"Take a seat," Young said, motioning with his head toward the adjacent gurney that Rush had occupied earlier. "What's on your mind?"

"I'm hiding. Rush is absolutely *terrorizing* the science team downstairs," he said with a wry smile. "I only just escaped. Chloe agreed to talk him down in an hour if he hasn't gotten it out of his system by then."

Young took another bite of his power bar and washed it down with budget Gatorade.

"An hour?" Young asked. "It must be nearly midnight."

"Yeah," Eli said, his expression tiredly amused. "Everyone's kind of enjoying it a little bit except for maybe Volker. It's like old times, just a little bit more—friendly, I guess is the word." Eli paused briefly, glancing at Young uncertainly before continuing. "So I see that your um—link thing" he made a vague hand motion, "or whatever? It's fixed? You guys can separate now?"

"Yeah," Young said. "That was news to me."

"Did *he* fix it?" Eli asked quietly.

"He must have," Young replied. "But ah—he's not really in a talkative mood at the moment."

"Did you guys have a fight?"

"You might call it that."

Eli looked at the wall.

It occurred to Young that they were perhaps about to have a serious conversation—the kind of conversation that he generally tried to avoid with his subordinates, and that, to his knowledge, Eli avoided at all costs.

Young's eyes raked the room, searching for some way to divert the conversation, to bring it back into the realm that he was comfortable dealing with.

But it was just an empty room.

"Have I, um, ever told you about my mom?" Eli still wasn't looking at him.

Young knew about the situation with Eli's mother, of course. Wray had filled him in several months ago when she had obtained special permission for Mrs. Wallace to use the communication stones to come aboard Destiny. But Eli had never said anything to Young about it. Not directly.

"No," Young said quietly. "You haven't."

"Yeah, you know the big stuff, I'm sure, what with the HIV and the depression and all that."

"Wray told me some of it. I'm sure it must have been difficult for you."

"No. Well, *yeah*, I mean, of course it was, but that's not why I'm bringing it up. I can deal with it, and I have. I don't need a pep talk or a shoulder to cry on, or any of that, if that's what you're thinking."

"Okay," Young said, not entirely sure where he was going with this.

Eli paused for a moment. "My mom never really talked to me about any of what she was going through. I mean, it makes sense, right? I was just a kid when it happened. How could I have really understood? But the thing that I tried to explain to her, but that she never really got, was that it's hard to be the one on the outside, looking in at this secret, horrible thing that you don't understand, and that you don't really want to understand. It sucks. It really really sucks. And I get that." Eli stopped talking, his eyes fixed on the line in the darkness where the wall met the ceiling.

Young stared at him.

"And in a situation like that, people don't lie to you about what's going on because they want to hurt you or because they have secret nefarious plans. Usually. Anyway, I think they do it because they want to stop you from feeling something that they don't want you to feel. Maybe they don't want your pity, or your concern, or maybe they don't want to upset you. Sometimes they lie to you because they don't want to hurt you."

"I'm sure that was the case with your mom, Eli," Young said gently, "but if we're talking about what I think we're talking about—well, it's different."

"You watch him," Eli said quietly. "And I mean *really* watch him. And then talk to me."

Young wasn't sure what to say, so he said nothing.

"Well, anyway," Eli said with false bravado, "that's pretty much all I wanted to say, except for that Chloe and Matt and Greer and I had an idea. We were thinking that tomorrow, after you get released from the infirmary, maybe the entire crew could have a '*social gathering*'," he paused for emphasis, making scare quotes with his fingers.

"Because a *party* would be very inappropriate in miserable times like these what with the aliens and the chasing and the injuries and the lack of food, *but*—" and he paused with an expansive hand gesture, "*but*, it *is* true that everyone's alive, *and*, the first of the seeds from the seed bank just sprouted in the hydroponics lab part two, *and*, Brody was just downstairs, and he was like 'what should I do with all this alcohol that I have?' because apparently there hasn't been that much social drinking going on, plus we have a few people who are very close to winning Destiny bingo—"

"Bingo?"

"Did I just say that? Don't even worry about it. Anyways, what do you think?"

"That sounds fine, as long as we don't use any extra rations."

"Food would just dilute the effect of the alcohol anyway."

"Yeah," Young said, biting the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling. "I suppose so."

"Awesome. And you're definitely coming, right? Because you kind of have to. For morale and all."

"Yeah, I'll be there."

"Excellent. Chloe's plan is to try to get Rush to come by telling him there's some kind of math-related emergency in the mess. I say he's going to see right through that one. He's so suspicious. An instrumentation overload? *That* he might believe, but what the heck kind of instruments are in the mess? None really. But we're working on it."

"Don't *actually* create an overload," Young said, looking at him meaningfully.

"Duh. Obviously."

Was it his imagination, or had Eli looked slightly guilty at that comment.

"Even if you get him there, you're never going to convince him to stay," Young said, raising his eyebrows.

"One step at a time," Eli said airily as he hopped off the gurney. "I'll see you tomorrow."

After Eli left, the room seemed empty.

He spent five minutes finishing his power bar and fake Gatorade before finally giving in to the temptation to check in on Rush. The barest touch of his thoughts against the scientist's mind showed him to be in the control interface room, absorbed in assessing the integrity of power relays. Young didn't stay long enough to know if Rush sensed his brief intrusion.

He sat forward, grabbing the radio that TJ had left next to his bed. His hand closed around its comforting weight. He wanted to call Rush, but he had no idea what he was going to say. He couldn't exactly apologize over an open channel.

He sat in silence, trying to think of something to say to the other man until sleep finally claimed him.

When he awoke the next day he felt significantly better. TJ confirmed that he had metabolized all of the last traces of the toxin that had been present in the dart, and consequently he managed to convince her to release him by early afternoon.

The first thing he did was set out in search of Rush.

He found him, unsurprisingly, in the control interface room, feet propped on the chair next to him, eyes scanning rapidly back and forth between his laptop and one of the monitors. He didn't look up, not even when Young hit the door controls and leaned back against the metal of the doorframe.

They were alone.

"Hi," Young said finally.

"Hello." Rush responded without looking at him.

Already this was going much better than Young had expected.

"I'm a jackass," Young stated.

"You will get no argument from me on that count," Rush replied coolly.

"I'm sorry," Young said, forcing the words out.

"Yes."

That one was hard to interpret. Was it a 'yes, I'm sorry too,' or a 'yes, you *should* be sorry?'

The man had probably left it ambiguous on purpose.

"Are you okay?" Young asked.

"I'm fine."

"You look exhausted."

"You look half-dead," Rush replied, still not looking up from his computer.

"Did you fix our link?" Young asked him.

"It's not fixed," Rush said with a sigh, his eyes finally flicking to Young's face.

"It *seems* fixed."

"It's better than it was, certainly. Likely that's a result of all of the linking up we did when we were trying to take the ship back from the Nakai. Even so, our radius would only be about thirty meters at the moment if we weren't getting additional help." He paused, digging the heel of one hand into his eye. "Destiny's gotten a feel for the problem and is pouring energy into our link. It's boosting our range. Outside the context of the ship, we'll still be limited."

"Ah." Young really hadn't understood hardly any of that. "Would this be Destiny-the-ship, or Destiny-the-AI?"

"The ship." Rush sounded genuinely exhausted. "I'm giving it things to do."

Young studied him, trying to discern any sign of illness. Any sign of infection with an Ancient virus. He saw nothing out of the ordinary.

"Can I *help* you?" Rush said, his words taking on the faux smoothness of mounting irritation.

It occurred to Young that he'd been staring at Rush for several seconds.

"I talked to TJ," he said.

"Ah," Rush said, his hands freezing in midair above his keyboard. "I was going to tell you. Eventually."

"She said you weren't surprised."

Rush shook his head. "It's how the plague *began*, you know. They were trying to effect the genetic changes required for ascension and created a virus that destroyed them out even as facilitated the willful transition of matter to pure energy."

"Great," Young said.

"There were many who could not ascend," Rush murmured, his thoughts echoing with people in clothes of a foreign cut, of spoken Ancient inside elegant, alien architecture.

"Many who wished for a different path."

"What happened to them?" Young asked.

"They died," Rush said.

Young said nothing.

Rush looked at him.

"Those aren't your memories, Rush."

"I know that," Rush replied, shaking his hair back. "Of course they're not. How's your arm?" Rush asked, his thoughts shattering apart with his overt subject-change, his eyes flicking toward the sling Young was wearing. "Tamara said you'd get full function back eventually."

"I can move my fingers. More and more all the time."

"Congratulations."

"Thanks," Young said dryly. "How long has it been since you *slept*?"

"Do you know how many times I get asked that in a given day? As if chronic sleep deprivation explains everything about me."

"It would clear up a lot of things," Young said dryly. "You're avoiding the question."

"We're unusually perspicacious today," Rush said dryly, his thoughts colored with amused overtones. "What's the occasion?" There was a notable lack of animosity in his response.

"Rush."

"What?"

"Stop being so difficult."

"That will never happen."

Young sighed and spent a brief moment considering the merits of trying to force the other man to take a few hours off. The idea of *forcing* Rush to do anything was, at the moment, an extremely unappealing prospect. So instead, Young hit the door controls.

"You know what you are, right?" he asked.

Rush looked up, his expression guarded. "A lot of work?" he hazarded.

"Yeah, but I like you anyway." And with that, Young left the room.

The party had been in full swing for an hour when Chloe finally got Rush to make an appearance.

Young was sitting at a table near the back with Scott, Eli, Park, and Greer when the pair of them approached.

Chloe looked extremely satisfied.

Rush looked—hmm.

Young wasn't sure what that look was exactly. He decided on a mixture of confused, suspicious, and disdainful. So—situation normal, in other words.

"Hey guys," Chloe said taking a seat next to Scott. "Dr. Rush was just going to settle a little debate between me and Eli."

"Actually," Rush said, edging backwards slightly, clearly intending to make a break for the exit, leaning on his remaining crutch, "I have to—"

"Get over here," Young said gruffly, reaching out with his left hand to snag Rush's jacket sleeve and pull him forward. Rush grudgingly allowed himself to be dragged into a seated position with an irascible swirl of thought that began without direction and then seemed to center on Eli.

"Why are there so many kinos in here?" Rush asked, raising his voice to be heard over whatever it was that was coming out of the jury-rigged sound system. He gave Eli a pointed look.

"We're recording this for posterity," Eli said.

"And this requires over *twenty* kinos?" Rush's eyes were narrowing.

"Yes. Yes it does. You need a drink. I'll be back."

Young was slowly sipping on his first and ideally his *only* drink of the evening.

"You should take it easy," he murmured to Rush.

"Yes, thanks, I remember last time."

Eli returned shortly with Rush's drink, and he and Chloe launched into their point of contention in their attempt to prove that for any compact simple gauge group  $G$ , a non-trivial quantum Yang-Mills theory existed on  $R$  to the fourth—

And, Young stopped listening.

He was more interested at what seemed to be going on at the front of the mess hall, which looked like it involved Brody and Wray setting up some kind of viewscreen. After about twenty minutes of math, which ultimately expanded to involve Park, leaving Young, Scott, and Greer to reminisce about the steakhouse which was roughly ten minutes down the road from the Cheyenne Mountain base, Wray got up on one of the tables, balancing carefully in her practical black pumps.

Greer whistled loudly. "Take it *off*, woman!"

Park slapped him on the shoulder with the back of her hand.

"I'm citing you for that, sergeant," Wray called back, mouth contorting slightly with the effort to suppress a smile.

"I just remembered that I—" Rush began, half-standing, but Chloe pulled him back down.

"So, as you all know, we've recently had three teams claim to have *won* 'Destiny Bingo'."

"What the *hell* is 'Destiny Bingo'?" Young asked the table at large.

Greer reached inside his jacket and pulled out a small, handmade card arranged in a five-by-five grid, passing it over to Young. Tiny, neatly scripted text filled each box.

"Now, there are certain members of the crew who have not been introduced to this version of bingo, and the main reason for this is that they feature prominently in the game itself. So, here to explain it to them is the game's creator. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Eli Wallace."

Eli shot Young and Rush a guilty look.

"Night shifts for a *week*," Rush hissed at him, "and I don't even know what it is you've done yet."

"I second that," Young called after him.

Eli rolled his eyes at them as he approached the front of the room.

"Hey guys," Eli said, climbing up on the table next to Wray. "So, um, as you all know, we have a really awesome commanding officer—" he broke off for a moment to let the whistles and table banging subside, "and a chief scientist that we all kinda love to hate on, but he pulls us out of the fire regularly, so—" and again the room was filled with an eruption of noise. "Anyway, the idea for this sort of came out of the fact that neither Colonel Young nor Dr. Rush ever want to put anything down for the record on the kino footage that I'm assembling to document our progress. And our mission. And whatnot."

"Get to the good part," Greer yelled.

//I'm leaving,// Rush projected at him.

//Don't you dare,// Young replied, his hand closing in an iron grip around Rush's forearm. //If I have to sit through this, then so do you.//

"So Chloe and I made up these cards," Eli said, holding up an example, "with different events on them that people had to capture on kino footage involving Rush or Young or both. You have to get five squares in a row to win."



Young looked more closely at the card that Greer had given him.

'Young tells Rush he's A.L.O.W.,' was the first one he read. 'Rush says something nice about Volker.'

Oh god.

"Okay," Eli said, "so since we have three teams claiming victory, we're going to have to vote on the best overall compilation. We'll start with Team Future—which, I'm sure no one is surprised to learn, is Brody and Volker."

Eli leaned over to start his computer.

"Please let me form no memories of this," Rush murmured.

"Square D1—'Rush fails to answer his radio'."

*Rush is sitting in the control interface room, a pen held between his teeth like a cigarette as he types furiously on his laptop.*

*"Volker to Rush," his radio crackles.*

*Rush looks at it, raising his eyebrows.*

*"Volker to Rush, I know you're there. Pick up the damn radio."*

*Rush rolls his eyes and continues to type.*

*"What if this were an emergency?" Volker says in aggravation. "I could be dying right now."*

*Rush continues to type.*

*Ten seconds pass.*

*"Young to Rush."*

*Rush sighs. "What."*

*"Volker says you're not answering your radio."*

*"Clearly untrue. Rush out."*

*"Rush."*

*"Maybe his radio isn't working."*

*"For the third time this week?"*

*Rush shrugs and goes back to typing.*

"You *bastard*," Volker shouted from the back of the room amidst laughter, turning to look over at Rush. *"I knew it."*

Rush dug the heel of one hand into his eye socket.

"Square D2, 'Young deliberately baits Rush'."

*"Why is this taking so long?" Young says, looking back over his shoulder and then getting up to move over to Rush's station and perch on the edge of the monitor banks.*

*"I'm testing the integrity of every component of a complex mixed-signal circuit." Rush is trying to ignore him.*

*"Is that supposed to impress me?" Young responds.*

*Rush glares at him briefly before going back to work. "Do you think I'm doing this for my own amusement?"*

*"Maybe," Young says, "I can never tell with you."*

*"Would you mind taking your useless commentary elsewhere?"*

*"I would, actually. Look, we need these repairs completed this afternoon."*

*"Is that so?" Rush snaps.*

*"Is there anything I can do to expedite this process?"*

*"Shut up," Rush suggests.*

*"That would be shut up, colonel."*

*Rush looks up at him with narrowed eyes. Young crosses his arms.*

*"Oh my god," Eli whispers, and the kino pans over to take him in, eyes flicking between his monitor and whomever is directing the camera. "Seriously? They need to, like, get a room." He pauses. "Wait. Did you just film that? I swear to god if this appears in Destiny bingo I'm going to disqualify you immediately—" he reaches over, blocking the camera.*

*"And yeah, you're totally disqualified for that," Eli said good-naturedly, yelling over the whistles and general disruptiveness of the room. A faint blush was coloring the back of his neck.*

*//Do I bait you?// Young asked.*

*//You're certainly very irritating.//*

*"Wait—on what grounds?" Volker yelled.*

*"Humiliating the inventor of this game will get you booted out. It's in the fine print. We're moving on to Team Chloe and Matt. You guys. Seriously? That is the worst team name ever. I expect better from you. Okay, square A1, Rush says something nice about Volker."*

*Chloe and Rush are sitting in the control interface room, a kino hovering beneath a nearby monitor.*

*"Volker did these calculations," Chloe says.*

*Rush says nothing.*

*"He's really very nice," Chloe continues, "don't you think?"*

*"I don't spend much time contemplating Volker," Rush replies absently.*

*"He has nice hair," Chloe says. "He always looks very professional."*

*Rush gives her an odd look.*

*"I heard that he was a national ping-pong champion. Did you know that?"*

*"I'm sure that's untrue," Rush replies.*

*"Oh I don't know. He's got good reflexes. Too bad we don't have any ping-pong balls."*

*Rush says nothing.*

*"He's got a great sense of humor."*

*Rush looks up at her. "Are you—no longer involved with Lieutenant Scott?"*

*Chloe stares at him. "What?"*

*Rush stares back at her.*

*"Oh. OH. No. No, I just—I'm not—I mean, Matt and I are great. Matt is great. Matt is like, one hundred percent the best."*

*Rush cocks his head.*

*"It's just I think Volker is underestimated sometimes. He's got a lot of really great qualities, don't you think?"*

*Rush narrows his eyes at her. "Are you trying to set me up with Volker?"*

*"No! I just—no, I mean, why would you even—like, I couldn't imagine—you and Volker would NOT be a good match. I'm just trying to say that it would be really great for the science team if the two of you got along a little bit better."*

*Rush looks back at his laptop. "I see."*

*Several seconds pass.*

*"He does have excellent penmanship," Rush says.*

*Chloe winks at the kino.*

*//Do you think this is going to be over any time in the foreseeable future?// Rush projected weakly.*

*"Okay, square B1, 'Colonel Young uses a gun for something other than its intended purpose. I see that this is a montage?"*

*//I hope so,// Young replied, watching himself rig up a system of two unloaded rifles to prevent the automatic closure of the infirmary doors as they relocated medical equipment. //I really hope so.//*

The entire thing dragged on for an embarrassing, interminable fifteen minutes.

Ultimately, in the end it was the team of Park, TJ, and Wray who won the enviable prize of 'lifelong respect and a mention in the credits of Eli's documentary,' primarily for their artistically arranged montage of eye-rolling from both himself and Rush.

To his credit, Rush stayed for the whole thing—a harassed, incredulous expression on his face. He seemed too surprised, or maybe too exhausted, to maintain any level of anger for very long, but as soon as it was expedient to do so, the other man made his exit.

Young let him go.

There was really only so much general goodwill that Rush could handle and still retain his mental equilibrium.

And there *had* been a lot of goodwill. Eli had been careful to keep any of the categories from devolving into anything mean-spirited or too revealing. Whether or not it had been Eli's original intention, Young was certain that the entire project had been an extremely successful exercise in misdirection—a distraction from some of the more concerning gossip that had likely been making its rounds through the crew. Eli had managed to smooth out the differences between Young and Rush—making them seem humorous, making them seem harmless.

If only they really were those people on the kino footage.

If only their relationship always had that same harassed camaraderie, that same venomless banter. But John Sheppard and Rodney McKay, they were not.

Everything that really defined them had ended up on the cutting room floor.

Young stayed for several more hours, watching the night slowly degenerate into something wilder, soaked with alcohol, drowned out by music. Chloe was in her element here, and Greer, and Park. He let his eyes pass over TJ, dancing with Varro, feeling more than a twinge of regret. His gaze landed finally on Eli, who was leaning against the wall, drink in hand, watching the festivities with an expression on his face that Young couldn't make out. As if he could sense Young's gaze, Eli looked over at him.

Young beckoned.

"Hey," Eli said, after he'd threaded his way through the crowd, managing to avoid being flagged down by Barnes and Atienza.

"Hey," Young said.

"Um," Eli said, immediately looking slightly abashed. "Sorry about that kino thing. I started it before the stuff with the chair and all, but it seemed too suspicious not to continue it. But I looked at everything beforehand, other than that part that Brody inserted at, like, *literally* the last minute. He's sneaky when he wants to be."

"I thought it was great," Young said.

"Nah. Really? Um, in that case, do you think you can you protect me from Rush? I'm pretty sure he *was not* kidding about night shifts for a week. And that's probably the least of my worries."

"I'll do what I can," Young replied dryly.

"Good. He listens to you."

Young shot him a skeptical look.

"Okay, he listens to you about fifteen percent of the time, and only if he happens to already have decided that he agrees with you, but that's better than *my* track record."

"Don't sell yourself short."

"Yeah," Eli said with a sigh. "Sure."

Young crossed his arms. "You're really something else, you know that?"

"Um? Thanks?"

"Eli!" Chloe called from across the room. "Eli!"

"Duty calls," Eli said, disappearing into the crowd.

He stood against the wall, alone, watching the crew, until, in his peripheral vision, he became aware of a familiar silhouette leaning against the back wall between him and the doorway.

It was a good ten seconds before it spoke.

"I like him," it murmured with Emily's friendly simplicity.

He looked over to watch its gaze follow Eli as he moved towards the front of the room.

"Me too," Young said, watching the dim lights reflect off Emily's upswept hair. "What brings you here?"

"Come with me," it said, glancing over at him.

He nodded and ducked out of the room to follow it into the dark, quiet corridor.

Its footfalls were eerily noiseless on the metal deck plating.

"So," he said, once they were out of earshot of the mess. "I've been expecting you to show up and read me the riot act for a day and a half now. What's taken you so long?"

"This has been difficult for both of you," it replied quietly.

Young raised his eyebrows. "True. And speaking of that, any chance that you might consider switching over to Dr. Jackson?" he asked.

"This is the form that your subconscious chooses for me."

"If that's true, why are you manifesting as Dr. Jackson to Rush? I'm pretty sure his subconscious is not calling up the SGC's most tactful member of the formerly ascended."

"No," it said quietly. "But—" it paused, oddly hesitant.

"But?" Young prompted.

"There were several occasions on which he had difficulty separating me from Gloria. The real Gloria. This seemed—not ideal."

"*Not ideal?*" Young growled, stopping to grab her arm and spin her around, but meeting only air. "God. That's what he needs right now, isn't it? Something else that's just going to mercilessly fuck with his sanity."

"That's why I stopped, *Everett*." It spit out his name like a curse.

"Okay," he said, holding up his left hand. "Okay. Good. I guess. Now, how about you just stick with Dr. Jackson for both of us."

"Why?"

"Because I don't like talking to you as Emily."

"But *why?*"

"Because it causes me psychological distress to interact with a woman that I loved, but then lost."

It didn't speak for several seconds, its head down.

They resumed walking shoulder to shoulder.

"So it's not her presence that pains you, but the reminder of her absence?"

"Yes," Young said.

"Interesting," it responded. "I had not considered that." She slowed for a moment, and, with a flicker in his peripheral vision, her silhouette changed. "Better?" Jackson asked.

"Yes. Thank you."

He followed the AI down into one of the unexplored areas of the ship. Young estimated that they were somewhere beneath the gate room, near the very bottom of Destiny. The hallways were dark and quiet, but not unfriendly in feel.

After walking for a good five minutes in silence down a long, straight stretch of corridor, a door opened for them to their left, spilling a pale golden light into the hall. The AI motioned Young into the room.

Rush was seated at a table, his laptop open in front of him, plugged into one of the instrumentation panels using a homemade adaptor of some kind that had been constructed out of what looked like a USB cable and some of the inner workings of a datapad.

The scientist's hands rested over the keys, but he wasn't typing.

The screen of his laptop was black.

His eyes were open but unfocused.

With a reflexive horror, Young reached out to Rush via their link, but the scientist's mind was far away, half-dispersed in the complex, darkened circuitry of the ship.

"Shit," Young sighed. "What happened?"

Jackson crossed his arms. "It wasn't his fault," it said quietly. "He was tracing power relays and he was tired. It's easier for him without a computer, but he has difficulty grounding himself, and he lost his connection with his physical body."

"Yeah," Young murmured. "Of course he did."

"I think you're underestimating how difficult this is for him," Jackson said. "He's been trying to protect you from the strain that Destiny is exerting for two days now."

Young looked up sharply, his brows drawing together. "Why? Why would he do that?"

"You needed time to recover, and not just from the physical injuries. When he pulled Destiny into your mind on the shuttle—he very nearly killed you."

Young shook his head. "That's not possible. I barely felt anything."

"Such injuries don't hurt, Everett."

Young sighed, looking back at Rush, who was still sitting motionless in front of his computer.

"Why don't you just shove him out of your circuitry?" Young asked.

"I can't," the AI said quietly. "Like this—I can't separate him from the space he occupies within Destiny's systems. Only you can do that."

"So, am I okay to pull him out? Physically? Mentally? Whatever?"

"I think so," Jackson said, "but let me give you a word of advice. Take your time. Find a way to do it that doesn't nearly kill the pair of you."

"How am I supposed to do *that*?" Young asked him.

The AI shrugged. "This isn't really my area." With that, it disappeared.

Young looked back at Rush, at his eyes, which were still fixed on empty air.

He crossed the room, his boots scraping faintly over a nearly invisible coating of dust on the floor. He stood opposite Rush, the table between them, and reached out, dragging the laptop from under Rush's fingers.

Friction carried Rush's hands along with the keyboard, extending them slightly along the table until Young lifted the machine away.

Compared to the party he had just left, the room was heartbreakingly quiet.

He set the laptop on the end of the table with a quiet click.

He picked up a chair, positioning it directly across from Rush, and dropped into a seated position. He fingered his sling absently as he looked at Rush.

"Okay genius," Young murmured. "How are we going to do this?"

The table wasn't wide. Young reached forward and swept the scientist's hands together under his left hand.

He sat there for a moment, not doing anything, watching Rush stare, unseeing, in the direction of their entwined hands, his hair brushing the rims of his glasses.

The scientist's hands were cold.

"You're just a mess, aren't you?" Young murmured. "All the goddamned time."

Carefully, he followed his link with the other man down into the scientist's mind, not attempting to pull him out, just—for the moment—being there.

He felt Rush distantly become aware of his presence and the other man tensed abruptly, hands clenching together under Young's, muscles contracting as he began to fight the ship. Young felt him begin to flex his left foot.

Adroitly, Young swept his boot beneath the table, catching Rush's foot behind his ankle and dragging it forward, preventing the scientist's attempt to tear it open.

//No,// he projected at Rush, sending both the word and the idea of negation as forcefully as he could through Rush's mind.

He got a vague sense of distress in return—disorganized and from very far away.



//You're okay,// he sent, not entirely sure if Rush could understand what he was saying. //Just relax.// He projected as much reassurance as he could through their link. //We've got some time to work this out.//

Rush's hands slowly began to unclench.

Methodically, carefully, Young started to untangle the scientist's mind from the ship. When the pull of Destiny intensified, they simply stopped and waited, until—invariably, it released its hold, increment by slow increment.

It took twenty minutes to drag Rush back far enough that he was aware of where he was and somewhat connected with his body, but his thoughts remained entirely in Ancient, his eyes still unfocused.

They couldn't seem to quite get all the way there.

Again, Rush tried to flex his foot.

Again, Young prevented it.

Carefully, he turned Rush's right hand over and pressed his thumb into the base of the scientist's palm, massaging away tension, working his way slowly over tight musculature.

Rush blinked.

Young scraped his thumbnail across the delicate skin at Rush's wrist, and the other man's mind snapped back into place, his eyes focusing, the familiar tension returning to his shoulders. He looked at Young with a startled expression.

"Hi," Young said quietly.

"Hello," Rush whispered back.

## Chapter Twenty

"So," Rush said, his expression held in careful neutrality. "That was new."

"Yup." Young pulled back, releasing Rush's trapped hands.

Rush looked away as he swept a piece of hair out of his face, tucking it behind his ear in what was probably the only self-conscious gesture that Young had ever seen him make.

The silence stretched between them.

"What happened to my laptop?" Rush asked finally.

"I moved it."

"Really."

"Do you actually want it back? It must be two in the morning."

Rush looked at him as if he weren't sure why the time was relevant.

"Don't give me that," Young said, but the words had no bite. "You're familiar with the idea of sleeping at night. I know you are. I've seen you do it."

Rush shrugged.

"How long have you been awake?"

Rush looked away. "It's immaterial. Even before all of this," Rush broke off, waving a hand. "I was never much for sleeping."

"Rush."

"Clearly I'm perfectly functional. I don't see why you're so hung up on this."

"Perfectly functional. Sure. Other than going completely unresponsive while you were *alone* in an unexplored part of the ship, you're fine. Yup, that sounds totally reasonable to me."

"I feel like there's been a recent upswing in your employment of sarcasm. Do you think I'm rubbing off on you?"

"It's not you. It's Eli." Young gave him a pointed look. "How long?"

"As of right now? Sixty seven hours."

Young stared at him.

Rush raised his eyebrows.

"So you haven't slept since before we boarded the seed ship."

"That's correct. But as I said, I am *fine*. Obviously."

"Keep telling me that. See how far it gets you." Young looked away, then followed up with, "so what's the story? Do you forget to sleep? Do you not get tired? Do you not *want* to?"

"Yes," Rush said unhelpfully.

"You're impossible. You realize you're *sick*, right? You realize you have some kind of alien virus that you're trying to fight off, and working to the point of collapse is *stupid*." Young sighed, getting to his feet. He walked around the table and extended a hand to help Rush to his feet. "Can you finish this tomorrow?"

"I suppose," Rush said.

"Come on then."

Rush took his hand and Young pulled the scientist up. Despite his claims of being fine, the sudden shift in position seemed to take him by surprise and he overbalanced. Young steadied him as he instinctively grabbed the edge of the table to compensate.

"You're such an *idiot*," Young said. "Why do you *do* this? You're driving me insane."

"Oh give over," Rush snapped, finally losing his temper. "I'm not acting this way for the *hell* of it. I've been staying awake so that I could prevent the ship from pulling on *your* mind while you recovered from nearly *dying*, all right?"

Young grimaced, looking away. He reached over to pick up Rush's laptop. "Yeah," he said after a few seconds. "Thanks."

"You're fucking welcome," Rush snapped, clearly still irritated. He maintained his grip on the table edge as he reached down to pick up his crutch. "It's not like it was remotely difficult."

They started down the hallway, the corridor lights subtly rising as they passed and fading out behind them.

As usual, this creeped the hell out of Young.

Rush didn't seem to notice.

It bothered him, this close connection between a person and a starship. At first, his sense of unease had been instinctive, rooted deep in his gut and having very little to do

with Destiny or Rush specifically. It had been an unconscious response to an unnatural situation.

In the interim, things had become much more personal.

He didn't like the way Destiny responded to Rush. He didn't like the extent to which it was entwining itself with the scientist. He didn't like the casual ease that Rush displayed toward his increasingly demanding connection with the ship, nor the fact that Rush didn't seem to be aware that there was any kind of problem in behavior like staying awake for nearly three days, like repeatedly being forced to continuously tear open an injury just to maintain his grip on reality, like getting purposefully infected with a dangerous alien virus.

As if none of that really bothered him.

As if he didn't resent any of it.

It was a pretty bizarre frame of mind in Young's opinion, especially considering Rush's occasional inability to tolerate even so much as Young's *presence* in his mind.

Young didn't like it.

But—maybe it was supposed to be this way. Maybe he was *supposed* to feel like this—to distrust the ship, to distrust the motives of the AI. Maybe that was just a function of the role he was supposed to be playing here.

The problem was, he had a feeling that he wasn't doing a very good job of keeping Rush grounded.

Part of that, he suspected, was that by nature Rush was very difficult to restrain in *any* arena. The man certainly would have made *the* worst soldier in the history of the profession. He didn't take orders, had no respect for authority, and seemed to have no conception of his own limits or the limits of others.

All of these things were true, but none of them really helped him, going forward.

His strategy had always been shit when it came to dealing with Rush.

His strategy was *still* shit.

It was time to revamp, yet again.

Young couldn't *force* him to do anything because it was ineffective and also had the drawback of making Young feel like shit at the end of the day.

For unknown reasons, Rush also seemed to view Young's attempts to be *nice* to him with a considerable amount of suspicion.

I was time to try something else.

"So, does it look like the Nakai were able to make any modifications to the ship's systems?" Young asked.

"Don't you think I would have told you by now if that were the case?"

"I would *hope* so." Young said mildly, trying to project amusement rather than irritation at the other man—though he was feeling both. "Don't think that it escapes me that you just neatly sidestepped my question."

"Mmm," Rush said, with a twisted smile. "You're getting better at this."

"Flattery gets you nowhere. Your next sentence better start with 'yes' or 'no'."

"No. They made no modifications, though they did attempt to embed an executable program in Destiny's mainframe which would have allowed them to remotely deactivate the shields."

"You were able to get rid of it, I take it?"

"Of course," Rush shook his hair out of his eyes. "They aren't as computationally sophisticated as one might expect, but that may be a function of their limited experience with Ancient systems."

"From the kino footage we found on the obelisk planet, it sounds like they've been pursuing Destiny for a very long time," Young said, subtly steering their path in the direction of his quarters as they returned to the more populated areas of the ship.

Rush didn't seem to be paying attention to where they were going. His thoughts were elsewhere, a turbulent, unreadable swirl that seemed to center on the Nakai.

"True. My impression of them is that they are persistent and long-lived, but not very adaptable. There's not much common ground between our species, except for, perhaps, our appetite for discovery, which, let's face it, is not terribly surprising to find amongst a space-faring people. To them, we're just these bizarre little creatures that are ephemeral and delicate and easily manipulated and unworthy of that which we—"

With a dim flash of blue, with a quick sense of the icy suffocation that came with drowning in an observation tank, Young felt Rush's flashback coming before Rush himself did.

His reaction was immediate. He yanked the other man's thoughts aside; instinctively forcing the gathering energy of the scientist's mental trajectory into a new path by pulling Rush into the closest equivalent memory that he possessed.

*He is ten. The wind whips at his winter jacket and tears through the branches of barren trees. The ice breaks beneath his skates with a crack that echoes across the frozen snow, and he drops through into the dark and the cold. He gasps involuntarily, drawing water into his lungs even as he fights his way back toward the surface, toward the gray sky—*

"And what the *fuck* was *that*?" Rush said, snapping them both back into the present.

They had come to a stop in the middle of the corridor and the other man was staring at him in obvious concern. Rush's thoughts were sharp and unusually transparent, his concern for Young's mental stability clear and pressing.

Rush seemed to have no insight into what Young had just done.

The scientist's eyes narrowed as he began pull details and context out of Young's mind like he'd been invited. The touch of his thoughts was subtle and powerful and familiar and precise, but for all his delicate relentlessness, he did not seem to understand Young's flashback for what it had been—a deflection of something much worse.

"Are you all right?" Rush asked.

Young looked at him uncertainly.

Rush's anxiety spiked into something disproportionate. "Answer me."

"Yeah," Young said, much more unsettled at what he had instinctively done than at the content of the memory he'd happened to call up. "I'm fine."

"You're not," Rush snapped at him. "Of course you're not."

Young tried to hang on to the shreds of his memory, using them to cloak the thoughts below.

"You were ten," Rush said slowly, "and skating, with your older brothers."

Should he tell him? Was that the correct, the honorable thing to do?

Rush cocked his head. "Not just skating. They wanted to play hockey," he murmured. "It was Boxing Day."

Telling him was certainly the *ethical* thing to do. Rush should be told not only that Young had successfully deflected his thoughts, but the other man should be warned that he *could* do so.

"Your brothers didn't want you along."

Telling Rush was only going to upset him.

"You were trying to catch them up."

It was only going to drive home the fact that the other man was losing control of his own mind.

"And so instead of following them across the field, where the snow was thigh-deep,"

Young didn't want to have that conversation.

"You put on your skates,"

He was sure that Rush didn't want to have that conversation either.

"And you took a shortcut,"

It had just been too hard, lately, for both of them.

"Across the stream that fed into the lake."

He was tired of fighting with Rush.

"You knew the ice was thin,"

He was tired of watching Rush fight *everything*.

"But you went anyway,"

There were so few people left in his life that he could protect.

"And the ice cracked,"

But Rush—Rush was one of them. At least this time. At least right now, in this moment.

"So you fell through."

Rush paused, eyes still narrowed, as if he were certain that there was something he was missing about the story, some hidden meaning in the idea of falling through the ice on a gray winter's day, the sudden shock of it erasing the anger and resentment he'd felt toward his brothers and replacing it with a fight for survival against debilitating cold. But—

There was no mystery there. It was just something that had happened to him, long ago.

"Come on," Young said. "Don't worry about it. I'm just tired, I guess."

They resumed walking.

Rush's gaze flicked over toward him watchfully every few seconds.

"So," Rush said, and his tone had that strange, smooth cadence that he'd used almost exclusively at the Icarus Base, "three older brothers," he paused briefly. "How did that work out for you, then?" His thoughts were a swirl of bright, tormented anxiety.

It occurred abruptly to Young that Rush was trying to keep him talking.

Though the idea that the scientist was operating on a completely mistaken assumption was almost too much for Young to take, given the man's usual hyper-perceptiveness, there was something about the scientist's attitude that encouraged him.

"It definitely toughened me up," Young replied, with a one-shouldered shrug.

"Undoubtedly," Rush replied. "So tell me, are they all as—" Rush made a vague hand gesture, "as you are?"

"Um," Young said. "I'm not really sure what you mean by that. But we're all pretty similar. We all went the armed forces route, except for the oldest, who's in law enforcement."

"Ah," Rush said.

"What about you?" Young asked, genuinely curious. "Any siblings?"

Rush raised his eyebrows. "I certainly wasn't so unlucky as to have three older brothers."

"If you don't want to tell me, just say so."

Rush looked away, the trajectory of his thoughts annihilating in a practiced blaze of pure willpower that had none of the labyrinthine quality of his usual mental barriers.

"Got it," Young said quietly.

Rush said nothing, but there was no mistaking the relieved character of his thoughts.

When they reached his quarters, the door slid open of its own volition at their approach.

Rush didn't seem to notice.

As soon as the door had shut behind them, Young handed Rush his laptop with a sigh, preempting any kind of argument.

Rush took it with his free hand and looked at Young, holding his gaze with an intensity that Young still couldn't fully tolerate.

Slowly, carefully, the scientist moved in on Young's consciousness.

Young let him in.

Rush swept delicately through his thoughts like water through a sieve, leaving no trace that he'd been there other than a feeling of calm in his wake.

"What was that?" Young asked.



"It's the nature of psychic injury to have no insight into itself," Rush said gently, as if that were an answer.

"Do you have to be so cryptic? You sound like the AI."

Rush looked away, his expression pained. "I know I do." He sighed. "I'm trying to repair the damage I did."

Young rubbed his jaw. "What damage?" he asked, trying to sound as non-accusatory as possible.

"When I moved in on your mind in that shuttle, I nearly destroyed your cognitive architecture." Rush looked away, setting his laptop down on the nearest surface, flexing his hand to work out the ache in his wrist.

"But you didn't, obviously."

"No," Rush said, "but, even now, you're not entirely undamaged."

"Rush. Seriously. I feel fine. And even if I didn't—you made a tactical decision in a high stress situation. And from where I'm standing, it looks like it was the right one. If you hadn't moved in on my mind, you wouldn't have been able to separate from Destiny, and, clearly, we needed you in that situation. So just—stop worrying about it."

"I'm not sure what the long term effects will be."

"There aren't even any short term effects," Young said.

"If something should happen to me—"

"Nothing's going to happen to you."

There was a long pause.

Young studiously avoided looking at the other man.

After a few seconds, he heard the soft click of a laptop opening.

"You should sleep," Rush said quietly.

"I'm not the one who's been up for sixty seven hours."

"Like I said," Rush murmured, "it's not a problem."

Young sighed, turning away from Rush. He made short work of his nighttime routine. When he emerged from the bathroom, he was somewhat surprised to note that Rush was sitting on the floor, with his back against the side of the bed, typing into his laptop.

Young didn't comment at his unusual position, just shrugged his way out of TJ's sling, shucked off his jacket and pants, and stripped down to his cotton undershirt and boxers before climbing into bed.

Rush looked up at the ceiling briefly, and the lights went out.

"Show off," Young said quietly.

"Efficiency," Rush murmured.

Young stretched out on his back, looking over to consider Rush, who was close enough to touch, his face and hair thrown into relief against the darkness by the weak light coming off his laptop.

Young wanted him to go to sleep.

He wanted the other man to stay human, to fight whatever change was happening to him, whatever was allowing him to avoid rest, to heal minds, to interface with technology, to code with an economic elegance that was unnatural.

Rush had to fight it. He *had* to.

But he wouldn't.

Maybe he couldn't.

So Young would have to fight it for him.

The scientist was so close that it was barely any effort at all to reach out, placing his left hand at the back of the other man's neck. Rush's eyes flicked over at him, questioningly.

"It's just easier," Young murmured cryptically.

Rush nodded, his gaze going back to the glowing screen.

As unobtrusively as possible, Young pressed his thumb into the sore muscles at the base of the scientist's neck.

The other man made a quiet, distressed sound in the back of his throat, but said nothing. He continued to type.

Young kept going, progressing along Rush's shoulders and down the muscles on either side of his spine, feeling them slowly start to unknot below his fingers.

Rush's typing began to falter.

Young reached beneath the collar of Rush's outer jacket and his cotton undershirt, fingers pressing into slowly warming skin.

Rush angled his head slightly to allow him better access. The man was still typing, but that was fine with Young.

For this to work, progression was going to have to be slow.

He shifted slightly, sliding down closer to Rush and started to methodically, carefully work out specific points of tension in the scientist's shoulders and neck.

It was only when the other man tipped his head forward and his typing became more sporadic that Young started projecting at him.

Young focused on his own exhaustion and subtly directed that toward the other man. It was nothing that was overt—nothing that was meant to overwhelm Rush's defenses. It was just a suggestion. A insinuation of exhaustion, of how reasonable, how *efficient* it would be to take a few hours off, just a few hours, to recharge.

The room fell silent as Rush stopped typing entirely.

Young stopped digging his fingers into abused muscles, and instead ran his thumb in slow, even circles over the back of Rush's neck.

After only a few moments, he felt Destiny's pull on his mind increase as Rush abruptly made the transition from awake to asleep.

Before Young could prevent it, the scientist's head fell forward abruptly, and he jerked awake.

//Easy,// Young projected at him. //You fell asleep.//

//?//

Young reached down to pull Rush's laptop off his lap and then half sat to grab Rush's upper arm with his left hand, dragging him backwards into the bed. Rush got his feet underneath him with some difficulty and helped Young pull him up.

It was fairly uncoordinated on both their parts, but it got the job done.

He pulled Rush in, his left arm coming around the other man's shoulders.

"Haec nova," Rush murmured.

"Yeah," Young whispered. "I hope you're not pissed in the morning,"

Without Rush as a buffer, the press of Destiny on his mind felt raw and heavy. Despite that, he was able to fall asleep almost immediately.

When he woke up, he was alone. A brief brush of his thoughts told him that Rush was sitting in the workspace that Brody had appropriated for his various projects, viciously critiquing the man's latest attempt at making paper.

There was a note on his nightstand that read:

'Nice trick. Too bad it will only work once. N.R.'

He smiled slightly.

Young made short work of dressing and shaving and consequently was able to make it down to the mess hall in time for the end of breakfast. There, he was cornered by Wray who, unsurprisingly, had been up for several hours despite the festivities of the previous night.

"Colonel," she said, approaching the table where he was sitting with Scott and Dunning. "I just gave my weekly report to the IOA. They were hoping to send Colonel Carter and Dr. McKay through today to do an assessment on the feasibility of dialing in to Destiny from the alpha site."

"Today?" he asked.

//Did you get that?// he projected at Rush, mentally flagging down the scientist, who was in the midst of a detailing to Brody several points regarding the resources required for any kind of large scale production of medium-quality paper.

"Yes," Wray confirmed.

//I need at least seventy-two hours of warning if I'm going to have to talk to McKay,// Rush replied with a surge of irritation at being derailed in the midst of a well-constructed diatribe.

//Come on.//

//Fine. Let's get this over with.//

"Today works," Young said to Wray. "You want to coordinate the details?"

"Sure," she said. "Is fourteen hundred hours convenient for you?"

Young nodded.

He spent the majority of the day catching up on odds and ends. Shortly before the appointed time, he tracked Rush down and together they headed toward the room housing the communications stones.

Before they entered, Rush stopped him with a hand on his arm.

//Remind me, // Rush projected. //What do they know exactly? I haven't been paying attention. //

//They know that you sat in the chair and they're superficially aware that you're tied to the ship. Only McKay knows that you were genetically modified and, as far as I know, he's kept that secret, though it's possible he might have told Carter. No one on Earth knows that you and I are linked. //

//And we're keeping it that way? //

//My vote is yes. Also, // Young hesitated. //Try to act— // he broke off, not entirely sure how to complete his thought.

//What? // Rush snapped, irritated. //Like a normal person? //

//Like you're not certifiably insane? //

//Fuck off. //

//Rush. Come on. You know what I'm talking about. Don't verbally respond to something I project at you. Don't talk to the ship. Don't look at the AI if it's hanging around. //

Rush shot him a look that managed to convey irritated incredulity. //I don't do those things. //

//Yes, you absolutely do. Especially when you're distracted. Or upset. //

//Name one time. //

//On the seed ship, you talked to the AI out loud in front of Eli and Chloe. You verbally respond to things I project at you at least once a day. At *least*. You stare into space *really* intently. You— //

//You've made your point, // Rush snapped. //Let's get this over with. //

Anything else Young might have said was cut short as the doors slid open in response to Rush's unarticulated thought.

The scientist walked into the room, purposefully leaning a bit less on his crutch than usual. Young was directly behind him. As soon as they passed the doorway they paused, shoulder-to-shoulder, to take in Scott and James who had presumably switched with McKay and Carter.

The indolent alertness of Scott's posture suggested that it was highly unlikely that he had actually switched with McKay.

"Identify yourselves please," Young said.

"Samantha Carter," James said, her eyes flicking once to the man beside her as she gave her rank and security code.

"Jack O'Neill," Scott said, tipping his chair back slightly. "Hey Everett, long time no see."

Young saluted, prompting a wave from O'Neill and an eyeroll from Rush.

//I'm in the *military*. It's what we do.//

//He has no practical authority here,// Rush replied.

Young sent him a wave of aggravation. //We're not having this conversation right now.//

"At ease," O'Neill said, the words carrying a note of amusement.

//Well, it's a point that I'd imagine is going to become highly relevant, and sooner rather than later.//

//Stop talking.//

Young nodded at O'Neill.

//If you want me to stop talking then I'd suggest you stop mentally annotating your reactions for my ostensible benefit.//

"I was under the impression that this meeting was in regards to an attempt to dial Destiny," Rush said, his voice deceptively mild in what was a perfect example of what Young had come to realize was Rush's most dangerous tone. "And therefore that Dr. McKay would be present."

//Settle down.//

//I haven't even done anything. Yet.//

"Dr. Rush," O'Neill said pleasantly. "It's good to see you up and around. Don't worry about the dialing stuff—Carter can handle the science side of things," O'Neill said, looking up at them with quiet interest. "Why don't you two take a seat?"

Young deliberately tried not to look at Rush as they moved in tandem to sit opposite O'Neill and Carter.

"I have the feeling," O'Neill said taking in the sling that Young was wearing, "that I'm not quite up to speed on what's happened since you last reported back after the attempt by the SGC to switch Telford and Rush."

"Thanks for that, by the way," Rush snapped. "Remarkably well conceived. I enjoy being the victim of decisions of dubious ethical quality, you know? I really do."

O'Neill's eyes snapped to Rush's face at that last comment and something in his expression hardened briefly. "Well you've certainly begun to make a habit of it," he said blandly.

Rush narrowed his eyes, muscles clenching with tension. Young could feel that the momentum of the scientist's gathering mental energy was about to direct this conversation into extremely dangerous territory.

Rush had just begun to push himself to his feet when Young laid a hand on his forearm.

//Rush.// He projected only the man's name, not any of the thousand reminders or remonstrations that he could have chosen.

Rush froze, his eyes flicking over to Young. Abruptly, the scientist pushed back, and Young felt him make a concerted mental effort to calm down.

O'Neill was watching them.

Young gave O'Neill a brief description of the encounter with the seed ship and the subsequent battle with the Nakai. Rush stepped in to fill in the portions of the narrative during which Young had been unconscious.

O'Neill and Carter asked for clarification on a few points before O'Neill switched gears.

"So," O'Neill said, looking at Rush, "someone needs to explain to us exactly how this 'linked-to-the-ship' thing works."

"It's essentially an instantaneous transfer of information from an incredibly sophisticated but ultimately mechanical system to a biological one. The cognitive *output* of which is then interpreted as sensory input."

"I have no idea what you just said," O'Neill remarked.

Privately, Young suspected that this was untrue.

"Sensory input?" Carter asked sharply, leaning forward, her expression open and interested. "Can you give us an example?"

"I can hear the shield harmonics."

"Neat," Carter said, flashing a smile, trying to draw him out. "Can information be transferred the other way?"

Rush nodded.

"So," Carter said, "you can effect systems changes just by thinking about them?"

"Yes."

O'Neill raised his eyebrows, catching Young's eye.

Young gave him a subtle nod.

"Can you give us an example?" Carter asked Rush.

With a brief mental effort that barely put any strain on Young's mind, Rush dimmed the room lights for a few seconds before restoring them to normal levels.

"That?" Carter said, "*that* was your example?"

"Well I'm hardly going to drop the ship out of FTL for you," Rush said, shaking his hair back. "What do *you* want?"

"You misunderstand," Carter said. "Dimming the lights in one room on a ship this size is —well, it's extremely impressive. It indicates a very fine level of control and implies a high degree of integration between you and Destiny."

"Correct," Rush replied.

"So," Carter said slowly, "can this work the other way around? Can the ship affect *you*?"

"It hasn't made a habit of doing so," Rush said, his tone dismissive, his head tipped slightly back. His entire demeanor radiated confidence.

As if the ship didn't trap his mind on a regular basis.

As if it hadn't forced him into the chair on two occasions.

As if it hadn't changed him, infected him, completely invaded his cognitive architecture.

//Stop it,// Rush said, interrupting his train of thought. //They're going to ask you the same question in a few seconds and you'd better have an answer ready.//

"Are you sure that you'd be aware of it if it *were* doing so?" Carter asked delicately.

"From my perspective, your concern is unverifiable," Rush said. "Therefore, I can't address it."

"What about you, colonel?" Carter asked, looking at him.

"There's only one instance that I can think of," Young said.

//Wait, *what*? You're supposed to say *no*.//

//They're going to hear about some of this stuff eventually,// Young shot back, //especially if they dial in and send additional personnel. It's better they hear at least *some* of it from us.//

//Easy for *you* to say. You're not the one who's going to look fucking insane.//



//Everyone already *knows* you're insane.//

"Go ahead," O'Neill prompted him.

"Following Colonel Telford's attempt to switch with Dr. Rush, the ship shut down entirely, as you know. We're still not sure why this happened, but Dr. Rush was also unresponsive during that time. Fortunately Eli was able to restart the ship, and eventually we reestablished full power and Dr. Rush regained consciousness. However, Destiny's AI was not recovered at that time. It remained locked in the central interface of the ship—whether by necessity or design, we aren't sure."

"Okay," O'Neill said, the tone of his voice implying that he didn't see where Young was going with this.

"The ship was able to force Rush to sit in the chair and pull the AI out of the central processor."

"Force?" O'Neill echoed.

"It was more like strong persuasion, really," Rush said, scraping his thumbnail along the surface of the table, looking at his hands.

O'Neill's eyes flicked briefly over to Rush, narrowing slightly. Then he looked back at Young, raising his eyebrows, inviting him to elaborate.

"It didn't happen right away," Young said. "It seemed to be triggered by Rush passing within a certain radius of the chair room. I was with him at the time. As soon as we passed within sight of the interface, he made an attempt to get to it. When I restrained him, he lost coherency entirely."

//Can't you tone this down a bit?//

//I *am* toning it down. You don't even remember this part anyway, do you?//

//Not clearly.//

//Well, it was awful.//

"We attempted to sedate him," Young continued, "hoping it would pass, but it didn't. Ultimately we had no choice but to let him sit in the chair or continue to forcibly restrain him."

"That sounds inconvenient," O'Neill said, crossing his arms. "It's just happened the one time?"

Young nodded. "In an extenuating circumstance, brought on by a plan that Homeworld Command put into effect that completely disabled the ship."

"I think I see your point," O'Neill said, dryly. "Carter, do you and Rush want to start going over these plans of yours? Colonel Young and I are going to keep chatting."

The two scientists left the room, the door swishing shut in the middle of the first question that Carter enthusiastically fired at Rush.

Young and O'Neill sized each other up for a moment in the ensuing silence.

"Does it still hurt?" O'Neill asked, eyes flicking to Young's arm.

"Quite a bit," Young admitted.

"Gotta love the poisoned darts," O'Neill said with good-natured sarcasm.

Young smiled, relaxing his posture slightly even as he kept his guard up. He was familiar with O'Neill's folksy banter and very much aware that it concealed an extremely perceptive interior.

"So," O'Neill said. "It seems like you and Rush are getting along these days."

Young nodded. "We're working on it."

"I'd say you're more than working on it," O'Neill said mildly. "I sat through weekly briefings with the man for something like six months before he transferred to Icarus, and I don't think I've ever seen him put a lid on it like he did back there. And you didn't even say anything to him."

Young wasn't sure that he could give a response to that comment which wouldn't be revealing in one way or another, but did his best to give away as little as possible.

"There aren't that many people on this ship," Young said. "We all know each other very well."

"I'm sure," O'Neill replied.

When Young didn't respond, O'Neill sighed and sat forward, resting his hands on the table. "Look, Everett, we've got to talk. About Rush. About *Telford*, for that matter. We can have this talk on the record or off it. I prefer the latter, since most of what concerns Rush is off the record already. And then maybe you can stop dancing around whatever it is that you're trying not to tell me. So—what's it going to be?"

Shit.

"Off the record it is then," Young said.

"Great. So it may interest you to know that Colonel Telford is currently engaging in what's become a one-sided PR campaign against you. He's met privately with several of the more prominent IOA members, arguing for your replacement. I don't know the

specifics of what he's saying behind closed doors, but he's got Senator Armstrong's widow on his side."

"This may sound blunt," Young said, "but why should I care?"

"You should care," O'Neill said, "because if we successfully dial Destiny, it's very likely that we'll be sending personnel. You can guess who's going to be first on that list."

"There are no grounds for him to replace me. Last time I checked, I still outranked him."

"Correct," O'Neill said, "and if he were trying to make his case by critiquing your track record, he probably wouldn't succeed." O'Neill paused, looking away. "But that's not the case he's making."

Young checked in on Rush, who was in the midst of explaining the power distribution system for the stargate to Carter. His attention was sufficiently engaged that he wasn't paying much heed to Young's current conversation.

"What case *is* he making?" Young asked.

"He's arguing that you're not taking full advantage of Destiny's potential. That you don't have the scientific personnel or the vision to investigate the nature of Destiny's mission, and any gains in technology or understanding are of very limited scope."

"So send some scientists," Young replied. "Unless Telford has earned a Ph.D. in theoretical physics in the past two years, I don't see how he's going to contribute anything."

"Telford's track record on scientific missions is better than the official version of his resume might indicate. He had another project before he was offered the command that you turned down," O'Neill said. "It was focused on investigating the scientific basis of ascension, and it was closely related to the Icarus project."

They regarded each other in silence for a moment.

"Off the record," Young said quietly, "I've recently become aware of that."

"Rush told you?" O'Neill asked, obviously surprised.

"He did."

"So you understand why Telford has an actionable case for reboarding Destiny."

"How has he not been labeled a *security risk* and pulled an assignment cleaning floors at the Antarctic base by now?" Young growled. "Explain *that* to me."

O'Neill sighed. "Give me something I can use," he said. "Give me some evidence of wrongdoing under his own power, and I'll do my best to make it stick. I have no great love for the man. Daniel *despises* him, which is nearly enough to indict him in my book."

Young hesitated only for a moment.

"Rush has something on him."

"Why does that not surprise me?" O'Neill sighed. "What kind of 'something' are we talking about?"

"Attempted murder."

O'Neill tipped his chair forward. "*What!?*" he snapped. "When I said 'give me something I can use,' I was thinking more along the lines of *tax evasion* or—" O'Neill broke off abruptly.

Young watched him turn something over in his mind.

"When did this happen?" O'Neill asked the question in a way that implied that he already knew the answer.

"It happened," Young said, "on an off-world base belonging to Anubis, while using a piece of equipment meant to change the electrophysiology of his *brain*."

"God damn it," O'Neill repeated quietly, pushing himself to his feet and pacing over to the wall, as if he couldn't bear to be seated. "Daniel *always* suspected that something truly fucked up had happened on that planet. How the *hell* did you get him to tell you?"

Again, Young briefly hesitated.

"He didn't tell me," Young said quietly. "I *saw* it."

"What do you mean you 'saw' it?" O'Neill snapped.

"When I pulled him out of the chair, I was able to see some of his memories. That was one of them," Young said, bending the truth slightly.

O'Neill sighed angrily.

"Unfortunately, that particular incident occurred during the time that Colonel Telford was considered to be 'brainwashed'." O'Neill shot him a meaningful look. "If Rush had just *told* us about this, we might have at least detected the brainwashing at a point *before* the Icarus project was hopelessly compromised. It's not like the man had no evidence. We have a Tok'ra device that allows cognitive testimony—what the *hell* is wrong with him anyway?"

"He's a lot of work."

"That's one way of putting it," O'Neill sighed. "I'm going to lay it out for you, Everett. If Homeworld Command makes a successful dial-in to Destiny I don't think I can prevent Telford from being part of the team that's sent."

Young clenched his jaw, looking away for a moment. "I need to think about this," he said.

"There's nothing to think about," O'Neill said. "If the IOA decides to send a team, you're stuck with Telford."

"Pending the results of *this* feasibility assessment," Young said, getting to his feet.

"True," O'Neill said dryly.

"If you'll excuse me," Young said, "I have something to attend to."

"You walk a fine line, Everett," O'Neill said, "off the record. But I find that those are the only kinds of lines that lead anywhere interesting."

"Noted," Young said. "Permission to—"

"Go," O'Neill said.

Young went.

//Rush, // he projected as soon as he was out of the room.

//I'm occupied at the moment, try conversing with *yourself* for a change.// The scientist shot back. He and Carter were in the gate room, gazes directed up into an open access panel, with Eli looking on in the background.

"—I understand what you mean," Carter was saying. "My god. That's phenomenal. You can clearly see the evolution toward the zero point module technology at play in the system that powers the gate—it's not all the way there, but they mostly had it."

//Rush. Seriously. We have to talk. Get out of there.// Young was heading toward the gate room at a fast walk.

//Fine.//

"I agree," Rush replied. "As you can see, the platform isn't entirely crystal based—it's more of a hybrid technology, bridging the older system based on the use of a naquadah alloy with the more sophisticated crystal-based control interfaces that you see on say, Atlantis."

"Aren't we feeling talkative today?" Eli commented.

"You're lucky you aren't cleaning the sediment out of the CO2 scrubbers," Rush snapped at him.

//Any time now,// Young said, passing the mess and breaking into a slow jog.

"The gate itself is different as well, isn't it?" Carter asked. "The entire architecture of the dialing hardware is completely unfamiliar to me."

Rush thoughts colored with surprise and something else. Admiration, maybe.

The scientist was enjoying this.

"Very true, colonel," Rush said. "You spotted that remarkably quickly."

//Rush. Stop science-flirting with Carter and get *out* of there.//

//Perhaps Eli *is* rubbing off on you.//

"Well, I've looked at more DHDs in my day than you could shake a stick at. And call me Sam."

"Nick," Rush said, not looking at her.

//Nick?// Young projected in frank disbelief. //You've met her, what, three times now? And *she* gets to call you *Nick*?//

//Are you *jealous*?//

//No,// Young said defensively, coming to a stop immediately outside the gateroom doors. //Just get out here, will you?//

"I'll be back shortly," Rush said, sliding out from beneath the console. "I'm sure Eli can answer any questions you might have, if you can stand to listen to a three-to-one ratio of meaningless pop-culture references to actual scientific content."

"Meaningless?" Eli called after him. "You should see some of the kino footage I *didn't* show, you ungrateful—"

The door swished shut behind Rush, cutting off the rest of Eli's sentence.

//*What*?// Rush snapped at him in exasperation. //I thought we were trying to appear as the paragons of sanity we are.//

"You need to find a reason to stall their attempt to dial in."

"Why?" Rush asked quietly, picking up on the cast of Young's thoughts.

"When they dial in, Telford is coming on board."

Rush's expression was unreadable, his thoughts had dropped into Ancient and were an uninterpretable, fragmented mess. "He's replacing you?" Rush asked. "They have no grounds—"

"No. He'd be continuing the project that he had before Icarus. The one without a name."

Rush's eyes flicked away from Young's. "That project has, essentially, been completed." The scientist seemed to find this amusing, his mouth curving into a half smile. "He's not going to have anything to do."

"*Rush*," Young snapped at him. "You're not taking this seriously."

"Of course I am," Rush replied. "You want a technical problem with their feasibility assessment? Well I've gone one for you. It's called: no-one-gates-onto-Destiny-without-the-express-permission-of-Dr.-Nicholas-fucking-Rush. Will that work?"

"Explaining *that* is going to go over well," Young growled. "We're not exactly in a position to be making enemies of *Homeworld Command*."

"You need to calm down," Rush said.

Young stared at him in astonishment.

"What?" Rush said, looking mildly offended. "I have been known to be reasonable on a semi-regular basis."

Young raised his eyebrows.

"What's your main objection to Telford coming on board?" Rush murmured.

"Do you even have to ask? The man tried to *murder* you."

"It's not as if he didn't have a reason," Rush said, pathologically calm. "He probably won't do it again."

"*Probably*? I don't want him anywhere *near* you."

"*That's* your main objection? I would have gone for his dubious loyalties to Stargate Command and long history with the Lucian Alliance, but—"

"Stop trying to pretend that it doesn't matter to you," Young said.

"It doesn't. We need a supply line."

"Not yet we don't," Young said.

"We will soon. It's getting progressively more difficult to drop out of FTL without running into someone who wants to destroy us or board us. Or have you not noticed this? Plus, we're running out of ammunition."

"I don't disagree with you, but let's at least attempt to manage on our own before Telford and an entire team of scientists come on board and start watching you like god damn *vultures*. Find a reason to delay their dial-in attempt," Young said. "For now."

Rush looked at him evenly, his hair falling in an unruly fringe that brushed the frames of his glasses. "Is that an *order*, colonel?"

Young sighed. "No. It's a *suggestion*."

Rush looked at him evenly. "Consider it done."

The scientist turned, leaving Young in the hallway, as the doors to the gate room opened for him of their own accord.



# The Prepared Mind

January 30, 2011

Eli is cold.

He is like—so freaking cold. It's not even funny.

It's been a while since they've flown through a star, and when stars are scarce, Destiny tends to make their lives miserable all in the name of prolonging life via power rationing which is pretty okay, he guesses, he's a fan of not dying, but he's also a fan of warmer ambient temperatures.

So, yeah, he's absolutely going to make a scarf out of a piece of the hopelessly inadequate blanket that covers the cot in the room that he *shares*, and for god's sake you would think that saving the day like thirty-seven times or *something*, not that he's counting, but still—anyway, you would think that would have at *least* earned him a single room. But it's cool. It's fine. He doesn't need a single room. He's not socially challenged like Brody, or batshit crazy like Rush, or, like, *In Charge* with a capital I and C like Young and Wray, or honestly a little bit scary like Greer, or kind of too hot for a roommate like James, or too sad for a roommate like TJ.

He's awesome. And he doesn't need a single, because single rooms are really only useful for people who sleep, and he's definitely not one of those people, especially not lately. Rush told him once that even though one shortens their total life span by not sleeping, the number of hours of conscious thought gained more than outweighed the survival differential. That was early on. Eli wonders if he told his graduate students crap like that or if maybe he was nicer back in the day when all kinds of imminent death didn't hang in the balance, when it was just, like, writing papers and doing experiments or proofs maybe, and writing theses? Dissertations? To be honest, he had never even made it through college so his conceptual understanding of graduate school was, and remains to this day, pretty limited.

He likes to think Rush was nicer.

The thing *is*, is that he's more than a little suspicious that there's maybe more to Rush than just a veneer of social grace wrapped around icy bitterness wrapped around razor blades of sarcasm wrapped around a hyperdense-neutron-star-tablespoon-weighs-a-metric-ton layer of malice wrapped around a tear in space-time that leads directly to hell.

Okay, so that's going a bit far.

But he gets carried away at times, and what can he do about that, really? Nothing. Sometimes getting carried away is a skill set. Sometimes it's not so much a skill set as a really annoying personal habit, but hey, take your weaknesses and turn them into assets, that's what they said at that temp agency that was trying to place him before he got tapped for this fantasma-glorius space adventure.

Yup, space adventures. He's a space adventurer. Sweet. If only the high school chess club could see him now. Doing night shifts. Doing them like a *pro*.

"I have a question."

Eli is so surprised by this turn of events that he drops his pen and then as he's trying to recapture the pen he almost lets his laptop slide to the floor of the control interface room and he just *barely* saves it, and god it would be really embarrassing to *drop his laptop* just because *Rush* asked him a *question*. That was a Brody/Volker thing to do, definitely not an Eli thing to do.

He's not scared of Rush, or intimidated, or awed or anything. Yeah, so the guy talks to the ship, and can just do things to the shields with his mind and make these little ridiculous programs that perform these complicated cognitive tasks, and *no*, Rush isn't a genius, Eli maintains this on principle. It's not that the man is so amazingly smart, he's just—on a whole different level and he isn't even comparison material. He isn't even one hundred percent human any more, so case closed, all comparisons are invalid.

That being said, Eli is definitely better at math than he is and everyone, even Rush, knows it.

"Um, sure, yeah. What's your question?"

Rush has asked him questions before, like 'what's the power level,' and 'why are you complaining,' and 'please clarify your reason for talking to me right now,' et cetera, but he's definitely never asked Eli anything that falls even remotely inside a personal sphere and he's *double* definitely never *prefaced* a question with a warning shot across the bow like this.

Eli looks at him, curious.

This is going to be good.

Or, on second thought, it might be bad.

Actually, now that he thinks about it, he's going to put his money down in the bad camp.

Rush isn't looking at him. He's a few feet away, hunched over his own laptop, the other half of the misery-duo that they have going here at four in the morning or whatever the heck time it is, Eli doesn't keep track because knowing the time just gives him unrealistic expectations about sleep and when it might happen next for him.

Anyway, Rush is doing that thing he does where he hooks a hand over his shoulder and massages the back of his neck and it just makes him look—besieged. Besieged and tired and so alone and every time he does it Eli just gets this horrible feeling because when he pictures Rush left for dead, isolated on that alien, desert world he sees him *just this way*.

He knows exactly what Rush did on that planet.

He sat in the dust and the dirt, hooking his hand over his shoulder, just like he's doing now, as he looked up at an unknown, *locked* piece of technology.

Then he got up and he made it surrender to him.

Eli stays quiet. He wonders what Rush is thinking.

"From the beginning," Rush says carefully, "you've taken on some side projects," he pauses, and his voice is quiet and unusually, bizarrely polite as he says, "for Colonel Young."

Oh no.

Oh no no no no no.

NO.

*Please* no.

"Yeah," Eli says guardedly.

"You've always been—atypically discrete," Rush continues, "about these assignments."

"Yeah," Eli says. "I'm not hearing a question."

Rush's mouth quirks slightly at this, and it's little moments like now that make Eli think that maybe, *maybe* the scientist actually does like him on some level, even though he'll deny it six ways from Sunday and has, arguably, shown more personal interest in Eli's laptop than in Eli himself.

"I was curious," Rush said, "as to whether you might consider taking on an additional project, with the stipulation that a similar level of discretion would apply."

"You want me to work with you on something, but not tell Colonel Young about it?"

"Exactly."

This is all kinds of trouble.

"Um, what kind of something are we talking about?"

"That's not how this works," Rush says, pushing his hair up out of his eyes.

Eli sighs.

He's going to have to make this call based on nothing but whether or not he trusts Rush to not completely screw him over or use him in an attempt to unseat Colonel Young or do something ridiculously dangerous or, frankly, *actually insane* because the guy really hasn't seemed his most rock solid stable lately, what with being linked to the ship, and linked to the colonel, and speaking Ancient, and just getting *fucking hurt* all the time, and Eli is not insensitive to that, he's really not. Plus, deep down there's a part of him that has been waiting, *waiting* for Rush to ask him this.

And *god* he *wants* it.

He wants to know who Rush is, he wants to know what he knows, and he wants to know how he got that way and he wants to call him *Nick*, and he wants Rush to *like* him, like he likes Chloe, and he wants to tell Rush that he's *sorry* that somehow he got *so firmly aligned* with Young *so early on*, but that there were a lot of reasons for that, the main one being that he just didn't get Rush. He didn't *get* him *at all*, and now he *does* and he feels like—

Like, maybe, right now, he gets Rush better than anyone else on this ship.

And he just—he wants to help him.

Because this has to be so hard.

So.

Okay.

Fine.

Rush is a subtle guy and, well, Eli can be subtle too.

He lifts his chin and looks Rush directly in the eye. "I *volunteered*, you know. To pull you out of the chair."

It's only because Eli knows Rush so well that he can tell the scientist is startled. Rush focuses on him entirely, like he's done only a handful of times in their entire working

relationship. It's hard to look back at him when he's like this, but Eli does it. Rush is trying to work out what Eli's response means.

Eli knows how he himself meant it—he wants to tell Rush that he's sorry. He's sorry for the part he played in leaving the man alone on a deserted world. He's sorry about the accusations and the fights. He wants to say that he knows what it's like to be right when everyone around you is wrong. He knows what it's like to create an exterior for yourself that starts out as armor, and then becomes who and what you are. If he could say any of this out loud, he would say that he knows what it's like to wait in clean white rooms with the scent of antiseptic in your sinuses, too afraid to work, too afraid to fall asleep, not knowing what you might wake up to. He would say that he thinks that maybe they're not so dissimilar.

But he can't say any of those things.

He doesn't know how to say them and Rush probably wouldn't know how to respond if he did. He can only tell Rush about an action that he took and let him infer what he will. Hopefully he'll take the right things from it. That Eli doesn't want him to die. That he wants to help him. That he's willing to go a long way, *all the way*, to do so. But also that Eli is doing this primarily because he gives a damn and he will be intensely *pissed off* if Rush takes that sentiment and twists it into something that hurts *anyone*.

And Rush knows it. God, he *must* because he suddenly looks away and his mouth twitches slightly in that nervous repetitive way and he runs a hand through his hair.

"So you're in then," Rush says, finally looking back at him.

"Yeah, I'm in," Eli says.

"I'm going to know if you tell the colonel," Rush says, one final warning.

"Duh," Eli replies. "So what's the story?"

"Personally," Rush says, and Eli nearly drops his pen again, "I can't believe that you haven't already been incessantly bothering me regarding the absolute garbage that's littering the Ancient database about the nature of Destiny's mission."

"What, you mean that 'edge of the universe' stuff? It seemed a little too metaphysical for me to really get excited about," Eli replies. "I just thought we were trying to go home."

"Yes, it's absolute nonsense," Rush agrees. "The universe doesn't have an *edge* that one can travel to. It's spatially infinite."

"So we're not traveling toward a literal edge."

"Certainly not. You would think that *Volker*, who is an *astrophysicist* for god's sake, would have at least raised some sort of token protest about this."

Despite himself, Eli is getting extremely interested extremely rapidly. "So 'edge' is more of a code?" Eli asks, tapping his pen excitedly against his hand. He likes codes. He always has.

"Not exactly," Rush replies. "We *are* looking for 'edges,' just not those that exist in perceptible space-time. We're looking for points at which D-branes of the multiverse collide."

Eli cannot even handle the things that are happening in his brain right now. "Oh my god. That is like, *unspeakably awesome*. And it would make a great band name. D-branes of the multiverse? Come on."

Rush shrugs, affecting a haughty nonchalance that does not fool Eli one bit.

"And once we can detect these collisions?" Eli asks excitedly, "Then what?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

"Wait—" Eli says, his excitement fading slightly. "Why are you not telling anyone about this? This is awesome. We should have the whole science team working on this. Also, was that a pun?"

"You're worth the entire remainder of the science team." Rush stands up and he does it so smoothly that Eli almost forgets how much of a mess his feet are, and have been for almost a month now. Almost.

"Aw, that's sweet of you to say," Eli says disdainfully, "but I'm not *that* distractible. What happens at these collision points?"

"I suppose we'll find out," Rush murmurs, raising his eyebrows in a manner that suggests that: a) he knows exactly what's going to happen b) that he's not going to tell Eli, not now, possibly not *ever* unless Eli figures it out on his own, and c) the answer is something ominous.

Eli really *hates* ominous things.

"And the colonel can't know about this because—" he trails off.

"Yes. Because."

Rush shoves his laptop at Eli. "Familiarize yourself with this," he says. "We'll talk more later."

"Why not now?" Eli asks. "Since when do you sleep? Wait. Did you assign me all these night shifts so that you could coerce me into—"

"I don't remember any coercion."

"You *did*. How long have you been planning this?"

"Chance favors the prepared mind," Rush murmurs.

"You've seen Under Siege 2: Dark Territory? My entire perception of you just—"

Rush is looking at him in confused disdain. Eli would not have believed that those two expressions could be effectively conveyed simultaneously, but he has to revise his opinion because the evidence is staring him in the face.

"*Pasteur*," Rush says.

"Ah," Eli says. "Right."

"I need to go." Rush gets them back on track.

"Where? *Why*?" Eli is completely unconvinced that *anything* could be more interesting than talking more about D-branes and quoting quotes that might or might not be from terrible sci-fi movies.

"You don't think this is the only project I have going at the moment, do you? It's already three in the morning and I—" he pauses. "I've got things to do."

Eli is about to read him a plaintive, nerdy version of the riot act, about to question him and demand answers—demand some kind of justification for his *attitude* and his secrets and his *everything*, but he doesn't. Partly it's because he's already agreed to help. Partly it's because he can't imagine what it would be like to be linked to another person for every single waking moment and it probably really sucks at times, and if Rush wants to be by himself and think about D-branes without constant interference and wander around and tear his foot open and be an idiot and not eat and not sleep because it makes him feel in control of his own life, well then, who is Eli, really, to stop him? But mostly, *mostly* it's because Rush seemed so sad as he said it, and, deep down, Eli just doesn't think he's a bad guy. He doesn't think that these things that Rush is working on are going to destroy them.

Rush wouldn't do that.

Rush saved Chloe. He *saved* her. Twice.

So, there you go.

Problem solved.

Right?

Right.

He chews on his lip as he watches Rush go, the lights trailing after him like a firefly entourage. Rush is steady and solid and walking like he isn't hurting at all. He's ditched his cane/crutch thingy. He's energized and he's confident and he doesn't seem to be cold.

With the energy conservation mode that they're in, at four in the morning with no one around, Eli estimates that it must have dropped down to forty-five degrees. He can occasionally see his own breath in front of him. He's *freezing* and he's *been* freezing for two days now.

But Rush is fine?

Something's not sitting quite right with him.

He'll work on the D-branes, sure, but there's something else going on here, and he wouldn't put it past Rush to pull a bait-and-switch on him, and as soon as he has *that* poisonous little thought, he's back to the beginning, examining his premises, working through everything without preconceptions.

It's a mistake to underestimate Eli Wallace, but people do it all the time.

Something's not right here.

He's going to get to the bottom of it.



## Chapter Twenty Two

Young crossed his arms over his chest, trying to stay warm as he walked down the long, darkened corridor between the bridge and the control interface room. Despite the fact that it was the middle of the day, not many of the crew were out and about.

Maybe it was the cold.

Maybe it was the dark.

Probably it was both.

They were running out of energy.

After almost a month, the power sources that Rush had activated when he first linked with the ship had nearly run down. Unused sections of Destiny were sealing off—their lights going out, their heat dissipating. The ambient temperature of the ship had dropped by almost seven degrees. At night, it had gotten even colder. The lighting had dimmed everywhere. The deck plating was continuously freezing. Morale was draining away.

They needed to find a star.

That, of course, was a particularly troubling problem because not only did they have to worry about the ever-present threat of the Nakai, who had been relentlessly tracking Destiny for millennia via an unknown mechanism, but they also had the drones to contend with. For a refueling attempt to have even a remote chance of success, they were going to have to deviate from their current course, find a suitable star without a stargate, obelisk, or something else equally noteworthy, and drop out of FTL.

Young gently rubbed his healing right arm, trying to ease away some of the ache brought on by the cold. A week and a half of downtime had restored full function and sensation. He had succeeded in ditching the sling several days ago, to his substantial relief.

He glanced up as the lights in the corridor dimmed by another fraction.

He sighed.

Before this problem with the power, things had *finally* been going well.

Or, at least, not *badly*.

For one, Rush had successfully derailed Homeworld Command's attempt to dial Destiny with fabricated concerns about overloading the internal power grid. Young was fairly sure that Carter hadn't bought any of it, but O'Neill had prevented her from arguing to strenuously. Furthermore, they hadn't been attacked or had any kind of major crisis since their battle with the Nakai. Some of the crew had started to get cabin fever, and people certainly were tired of eating the processed protein rations, but that was about the extent of the complaining.

For his part, Young had been grateful for the temporary reprieve.

Rush—well, Young was trying not to think about Rush.

For the most part, he was failing, mainly because the scientist required so much goddamn *managing* it was ridiculous.

To be fair, it wasn't so much that Rush *required* the managing; it was more that Young's current strategy for dealing with him necessitated continuous fine adjustments. Basically, he had decided to let Rush do more or less whatever the hell he wanted, while subtly suggesting courses of action he thought best.

From a tactical standpoint this had a lot of drawbacks.

From a practical standpoint it wasn't going to work if he and Rush strongly disagreed about something.

There was a third problem—one he found difficult to lay out for himself.

Ever since the disastrous encounter between Young's mind and Destiny and Rush's subsequent repair of the mental damage that had ensued, Young's sense of the other man had become more nuanced, their link more transparent. There was no reason to think that this was a one-way thing. Could Rush see into him—influence him to the same degree? If he could, would Young even *know*?

No. He'd probably have no idea.

These were the kinds of thoughts that he had been trying to avoid.

He had picked his course of action. Its underpinnings were straightforward. Protecting the crew came first and, as long as they were dependent upon Destiny for their survival, along with protection of the crew came protecting the integrity of the ship itself. As a consequence, that meant protecting Rush as well, since it had been unequivocally demonstrated to him that the scientist and the ship were entwined beyond the point of easy separation. And at this most basic of levels, courses of action were clear, and his goals and the goals of Destiny's AI were aligned.

Beyond that, however, Young's goals and the goals of the AI diverged. Following their immediate survival, Young's second priority was getting the crew *home*. The AI's priority was clearly to complete Destiny's original mission. And Rush—well, Rush was likely somewhere in the middle. At some point, Young and the AI were likely to come into direct conflict.

It was inevitable.

He was a bit unclear on what would happen at that juncture. Specifically, he was unclear on what would happen to Rush.

He really didn't like thinking about it.

Young didn't trust the AI. Despite the helpful, touchy-feely, and frankly *likable* Dr. Jacksonesque approach that the AI had recently adopted, despite the creepily *thoughtful* behavior the ship seemed to display toward Rush, Young never forgot what Destiny had done to the scientist, even if Rush himself seemed to.

His third priority, then, was to prevent the further integration of Rush and the ship. To prevent whatever change that was taking place in the other man. To prevent the progress of the alien virus. To prevent the erasure of the person who was Dr. Nicholas Rush. To keep the scientist as human as possible for as long as possible. The logical underpinnings for priority number three were difficult to lay out. Making the attempt to do so had left him feeling—

Conflicted.

That was certainly a dangerous state of mind for someone in his position.

His thoughts were interrupted by Eli's sudden appearance in the hallway, his gray sweatshirt zipped up. It looked like he had fashioned a scarf for himself out of part of his bedsheet. He was hugging his laptop to his chest, trying to conserve heat.

"Yeah," Eli said as he approached, gesturing at his scarf. "I know it's not exactly fashion-forward, but what can you do?"

Young raised his eyebrows.

"Nevermind. Look, we've got to talk, yet again, about your better half in there." He looked over his shoulder at the doorway of the control interface room.

Young sighed.

"Wait. What am I saying? Clearly *you* are the better half."

"The search for candidate stars is not going well, I take it?" Young asked.

"No. It's going fine. It's going awesome. We've got a really good prospect actually, and things are getting fancy in terms of options for how to handle the likely appearance of enemy ships. I think we'll be ready for a tactical briefing in maybe half a day? Or less? I don't know. Check with Captain Insanity."

"Eli," Young said reproachfully. "He's no *captain*."

That surprised a short laugh out of Eli. "Okay, fair point. Look, he thinks I'm completing some astrometrics calculations right now, so let's get out of the hallway. I've got to show you something."

//I knew he was going to go straight to you,// Rush commented dryly at the back of his mind.

Young sighed. //Why'd you let him leave, then?//

//Well, one can always hope.//

"Oh crap," Eli said. "You've got that look on your face."

"What look?" Young asked.

"That look like you're *talking to him*. Did you just give me away?" Eli looked betrayed.

"Um," Young said. He was saved from having to reply by the pneumatic hiss of the door to control interface room.

Park, Volker, and Brody filed out.

"He says you might as well come back in?" Volker said uncertainly to Eli, hands tucked under his arms for warmth. "He also said you're taking my night shift?"

"Oh for the love—" Eli said, turning on his heel and headed back into the room.

Young followed closely on his heels.

Rush was sitting in his usual pose, feet propped up on an adjacent chair, a laptop open next to one of the monitors. Unlike everyone else, the cold didn't seem to be bothering him.

"I am *not* taking another night shift. Do you know how many I've pulled in the past week?"

"Oh spare us," Rush said, without looking up. "You get more sleep than a graduate student."

"I'm thinking that's impossible," Eli said.

//Is there a *reason* you're working him up like this?// Young projected mildly at Rush. //He makes an effort to be nice to *you*, you know.//

//I get tired of people talking about me.//

//That's all we do, you know. When you're not around—//

"I'm sure," Rush snapped, looking at neither of them, but managing to respond to both of them with one statement.

"Go ahead, Eli," Young said into the ensuing quiet.

"Seeing as the ship drops down to freaking fifty degrees at night—"

"Centigrade," Rush snapped abruptly. "How many times do I have remind you people? Can we please standardize to using the *metric system*? Volker gets confused enough as it is without adding more than one set of units to the picture."

"First of all, you are an *asshole*. Second of all, Volker is *not* that bad. Third of all, we all know what you're doing so just *stop*." He glared at Rush.

"Fine. By all means. Continue to fascinate us."

"As I was saying, seeing as the ship has been getting down to freaking *fifty degrees Fahrenheit* at night, and since *someone* keeps assigning me *night shifts* out of *spite*—"

"Eli, are you going somewhere with this anytime soon?" Young asked.

"I started to notice that *Rush*," Eli said, talking over Young's interruption and gesturing toward the scientist, "never seems to get *cold*. I mean, look at the guy. He weighs like ninety pounds. It doesn't make any sense. He should have pneumonia by now or something."

"You should *be* so lucky," Rush said, looking up for the first time. "Perhaps we should have a discussion about professionalism."

"Funny. You're hilarious," Eli snapped.

//I can't believe that those words just came out of your mouth,// Young commented.

//I lack a sense of humor, not a sense of irony.//

"You have thirty seconds to move this conversation into the realm of something relevant before I walk out that door," Young said to Eli.

"Okay, so I did some checking into this because the night shift is *boring*. At first I thought that it was because of the genetic changes. Maybe he's cold-adapted or something? But no, that wasn't it. In fact, Ancients prefer a warmer ambient

temperature than humans. *Then* I had the idea that maybe Destiny was heating up his local environment."

"Yup," Young said shortly. "It's been doing that for a while. It likes him. That's not new."

"Nope," Eli said, raising his hands. "That's not the new thing. Now we have a *whole different level* of weirdness, and I can't even tell you how long he's been doing it, because it would have been completely impossible to detect at our baseline power levels."

Rush was looking away from both of them, staring at the wall, one hand hooked over his shoulder.

"He's pulling energy from the ship," Eli said, crossing his arms.

No one said anything.

"Um?" Eli said, opening his hands, clearly expecting a bigger response. "He's pulling energy from the ship and using it? Like, to *be a human* or, you know, whatever it is that he is?"

"Not strictly true," Rush said, "as I *explained*."

"Oh yes. 'Explained'. And to you, explaining apparently means 'Don't worry about it, Eli'."

"Well, *don't*."

"God, you're so—"

"Settle down," Young said. He crossed his arms, shooting them both a brief, incisive glance. Despite Eli's surface aggravation, there was an element of unease in his expression. And Rush—Rush hadn't looked at him for the past several minutes. His thoughts were decohesive and largely uninterpretable.

"How much energy are we talking about?" Young asked Eli.

"In the grand scheme of things," Eli replied, "not a lot. But as more and more systems shut down, the amount he's pulling is becoming a larger percent of the total amount available. It's not going to be a tactical issue as far as our plans for the star go, but, you know, it's noticeable."

Young took a seat on the nearest stool and considered Rush, who was *still* not looking at him. He was fairly certain that if Rush had been actively pulling energy from Destiny he would have been able to detect it.

Young let his eyes flick over to Eli. "He's not pulling it *from* Destiny." He looked back at Rush, who had glanced up at his words. "Are you?"

"No."

"He's getting subsidized *by* Destiny," Young said, finally able to articulate what he had been noticing since the Nakai attack a week and a half earlier. "That's why he hasn't been sleeping. Why he hasn't *needed* to. The ship is literally *giving* him energy."

"Either way," Eli snapped, "it's equally creepy." His eyes locked onto Rush. "Equally bad."

Rush continued to look away.

"Why bad?" Young asked, his eyes narrowing.

"In order for that transfer to work," Eli said angrily, clearly talking more to Rush than to Young now, "you've got to be able to interconvert matter and energy to at least *some* degree."

"That *is* the implication," Rush said carefully, eyes fixed on his laptop.

"So?" Eli said, his voice rising as he advanced a few steps toward Rush, finally getting the scientist to look up at him.

Rush opened his hands, as if to ask what Eli wanted from him.

"Can you do it." Eli spit the words out, as angry as Young had ever seen him.

Rush glanced at Young and then away again.

"Do *what*?" Young asked, frustrated.

"Ascend," Eli snapped. "Can you *ascend*?"

No one spoke.

"No," Rush said finally. "Interconversion of matter and energy is a step along the path, not the destination."

Young propped an elbow on the monitor he was leaning against and dropped his forehead into his left hand, digging his fingers into his aching temples.

"Don't give me that *crap*," Eli said, moving forward to slam Rush's laptop shut. "I know where this is going and *I don't like it*. I watched those stupid *tapes* that Homeworld Command made, okay? And one thing came through very loud and fucking *clear*. *Nothing* having to do with ascension *ever* ended well *for anyone* involved. It's not *for* us, okay? Humans and higher planes of existence do not mix well."

"Eli," Rush said, sounding tired for the first time in days. "I know."

"Shut it off then," Eli said, his voice strained. "Stop doing this stuff. It's bad for you. It has to be. Don't take the energy. Don't talk to the ship. Go back to using computers like a *normal person*. Be cold. Be tired. Colonel Young can keep you here if you just let him do his *job*. Why do you have to *be* like this?"

"Eli."

"*Why?* I already did all of this *without you*, all right? And I didn't like it. We need you *here*. No one tells you that because you're such an *asshole* all of the freaking time, but we *do*, okay? It's why I locked Ginn away. To get you *back*. You owe me. You owe *her*. You owe *all* of us."

"I know that, too," Rush said quietly.

"Yeah, you know. Sure you do." Eli picked up his laptop. "I might as well be talking to the bulkhead for all the good this is doing me. I'll see you at the briefing." He swept out of the room, and neither Rush nor Young stopped him.

Young looked at Rush, rubbing his jaw.

Rush looked away, the skin around his eyes tightening.

//So is he right?// Young projected at him. //Is that the end goal here? Converting you so you *can ascend*?//

//I don't fully understand it yet myself,// Rush replied.

//Bullshit. You understand enough of it. You always have,// Young shot back.

//How long have you been doing this energy conversion thing?//

//Since the Nakai attacked.// Young could feel Rush's control over his temper beginning to unravel. //You think after everything that happened to me, after everything that happened to *you*, I could fucking make it through that attack and the subsequent three days of resisting the ship without some *assistance*?//

//Why didn't you *tell* me?//

//Because I knew you wouldn't like it.//

//You're goddamn *right* I don't like it. Why are you still doing it after *ten days*?//

//It turned out to be exceptionally useful. Besides—I'm not doing it actively, as you pointed out. I'm just—not saying no.//

//Well you're going to start. Right now.//

//Now isn't a convenient time for me.//



//I don't fucking *care*.//

//Just because we're mentally linked doesn't mean you get a free pass to interfere in my personal decisions.//

//Actually, I'm pretty sure that's *exactly* what it means.//

//Fuck off.//

//You cut off that energy stream *right now* or I'll do it for you.//

//Not to disempower you here, *colonel*, but you're not capable of that.//

Young narrowed his eyes, focusing on his connection with Rush. For the first time, he made the effort to map out their link, exploring the space between their minds. While Young still couldn't sense Destiny directly, once he knew what he was looking for, he was able to locate the energy that was flowing from the ship to Rush. He watched it for a moment, a blue-green swirl that fed into and dispersed through the other man's mind. What exactly Rush was using it for and how much he was consciously directing it was difficult for Young to determine.

//I hate to break it to you,// he shot back acidly, //but I'm absolutely capable of doing just that. This isn't right. It's not supposed to be this way and you *know* it. You stop it, or I *will*.//

//Go ahead,// Rush replied. //Fucking astound me.//

Young moved in on his mind. Instead of dropping a block between himself and Rush, this time he did it between Rush and the energy he was getting from Destiny.

A headache exploded behind Rush's eyes and propagated instantly through their link, along with a sickening, aching cold that radiated unendurably from his bones. As if he were too exhausted to impose any kind of order on his mind, Rush's thoughts decohesed immediately into Ancient, and flashes of memories that weren't his own, that didn't come from any human timeline, were intermingled with the gray rain of Glasgow, with chalk to chalkboards, with hyperdrives and gravel roads and mercilessly beautiful sunlight streaming through the windows of church services with Gloria and neither of them, *neither of them* feeling any kind of peace—and—

Young pulled out of Rush's mind and grabbed the edge of the table for support.

Only after a few ragged breaths did he realize that the AI had appeared next to him.

"Take it down, Everett," the voice was a hiss, a bizarre combination of his ex-wife and Daniel Jackson, as if it couldn't decide whom to settle on.

"Why?" he shot back at it, his eyes watering through the pain. "This is what he *actually* feels like. This is how he *should* feel after practically a week without sleep."

"How are you *doing* this?" It had settled on Emily, her voice rising angrily. "This doesn't fall within the scope of your abilities."

"The hell it doesn't," Young came right back at it, his voice rising as well, despite the agony in his head. "Destiny's not giving him this energy for *his* benefit, that's for *damn* sure. So tell me—what do *you* get out of it?"

"Stop." Rush made an aborted movement in the air, his eyes shut.

"Your role is well defined," it snapped at him. "You keep his mind out of the ship so that he stays alive. That's all. Otherwise you *do not interfere*."

"The *hell I don't*," Young roared, his palm coming down against the metal tabletop. "That energy isn't just keeping him on his feet, is it? It's *changing* him."

"It's facilitating certain modifications, yes, but also allowing him to maintain his current level of functioning. You *want* him to feel like this? You *want* him to experience *pain*?"

"Yes, I fucking do," Young said. "He's not a *machine*, he's a *person* and he's *staying that way*."

"Gloria," Rush said.

Both Young and the AI froze, looking over at him.

"Go," Rush said, shivering slightly, his eyes still shut. "I'll talk to him."

"Nick." The AI sounded pained. It had switched back to Dr. Jackson. It stepped forward, hands out, as if it could touch him.

Maybe it could.

"Do you understand—"

"Yes. Go," Rush murmured, eyes flickering open to look at the AI. "It's all right."

It vanished.

"Rush?" Young asked uncertainly. The scientist had managed to impose a tenuous order on his thoughts.

"You're just full of surprises, aren't you?" Rush asked, digging the heel of one hand into his eye. "You're going to have to take down that block."

"It's not good for you," Young said quietly.

"I know that, but from a practical standpoint it's necessary," Rush said, squinting at him through his headache. "We're supposed to be dropping out of FTL to refuel and we're likely to find ourselves engaging in some kind of firefight before the day is out. Neither of us can afford to be compromised in any way."

"You can make that argument practically every *hour* on this ship with the rate that we run into trouble. The line has to be drawn somewhere."

"And you've handily demonstrated you can draw it wherever and whenever you'd like. So." Young felt Rush make a concerted mental effort to keep his thoughts and his tone under control. "So I'm asking you not to do this now." Rush took a deep breath. "Please."

Jesus Christ. As if he was going to say no to that.

"Okay," Young said quietly, slowly raising the block he'd placed straight in the midst of the energy-stream. Almost immediately his headache vanished, and the terrible sensation of cold was gone.

Rush shook his hair out of his eyes as he reestablished full control over the tangled mess of his mind.

Young looked at him for a moment, considering several different statements, all variations on an ultimatum that he had already given and that Rush had tacitly accepted. He discarded them all. Instead, he reached out a hand to help the scientist to his feet.

"What d'you say we go fly through a goddamned star?" Young gave him a weak smile.

"I thought you'd never ask," Rush replied dryly.

The briefing was short, as the science team had worked out most of the details of the plan already. Brody presented the main points to the bridge staff in typical laconic fashion. They would be employing three main strategies to minimize contact with alien ships that might either be tracking them, or, in the case of the drones, lying in wait at likely target stars.

The first component of the plan was to minimize time spent outside the star. As neither the Nakai nor the drone ships had the capacity to withstand the heat and pressure involved in flying through a solar body, Rush and Chloe had calculated the minimum distance from the star that they could drop out and still have time to power down the FTL drive and adequately prepare the hull for entry.

Second, they would attempt to evade an ambush at their exit point by changing course while inside the star, an action that was not entirely without risk, because it required overriding some of the safeguards in the navigational computer.

Third, before entering the star, they would send out the shuttle they had appropriated from the seed ship, set on autopilot and broadcasting on Nakai frequencies, programmed with Nakai shield harmonics. That little idea had been Eli's contribution. At worst, it would draw off at least some of the drone ships. At best, if the Nakai showed up and took it on board, a sleeper program that Eli and Rush had designed would cause the engines to overload upon receipt of the appropriate signal.

The briefing only lasted approximately fifteen minutes, after which, Young spent half an hour personally verifying that everything was in place. He made his way to the bridge just before the scheduled drop out of FTL.

Rush was already there, looking over Chloe's shoulder at her monitor.

"Can you just—not *do* that?" she was saying, as Young entered the bridge. "You're making me nervous. Go harass Eli."

"I think I've harassed Eli enough for today."

Eli gave Rush a dark look, which was wasted on the back of the scientist's head.

"Rush," Young said, as he dropped into the central command chair. "Are we good to go?"

The scientist nodded, eyes flicking up toward the ceiling, as if he'd heard something. "We're about to drop out."

"Okay people," Young said, "look sharp."

The FTL drive powered down, and Young felt Rush shut his eyes.

An instant later, he wished he had done the same.

Rush was the only person who didn't flinch at the abrupt, intense glow that seared the back of his retinas with a sudden shock of brightness. The star took up nearly the entire forward view. After a brief flash, the painful glare was muted down to a reddish-gold by the automatic tinting of the glass. It colored everything—the monitors, the crew, the metal deck plating—with a surreal bronze cast.

Rush opened his eyes.

//You could have warned me,// Young snapped, trying to blink away the sun-sized blind spot that now obscured most of his vision.

"Report," he said aloud.

//We dropped out next to a *sun*. Common sense should have been sufficient.//

"I'm reading enemy contacts," Eli replied. "It looks like a command ship. They're scrambling to intercept."

"Will they make it?" Young asked.

"Yup," Eli said grimly.

Young pulled out his radio. "This is Young to port shuttle bay. Launch when ready."

//Bring the main weapon online or stick with the shields?// Young asked Rush.

//We have to break through,// Rush said. //Go with the weapon.//

"Bring the main weapon online," Young called over to Park.

"This is the port shuttle bay," Brody's voice came over the radio. "The shuttle is away. Repeat, the shuttle is away."

The first salvo of enemy fire impacted their shields as the shrieks of proximity detectors and the first of the inevitable power failures combined in an anxious cacophony.

"Shields just dropped ten percent."

Twelve feet away, his features lit up in the copper light that suffused the bridge, Rush blinked rapidly, tightening his grip on the edge of the monitor banks that made up Chloe's station, one hand coming up to press flat against his chest. His mouth had gone dry. His muscles were shaking.

Permeating both his mind and Young's was the overwhelming desire, the *need*, to sit in the chair.

Shit.

Young was so goddamned *tired* of this.

Rush peeled himself away from Chloe's station and began walking toward the exit.

Behind him, Young heard the pneumatic hiss of the bridge doors.

Young pulled out his radio. "Greer, report to the chair room immediately."

He waited, keeping his posture relaxed, his mind quiet. When Rush was within arm's reach, Young shot to his feet, grabbed a handful of the scientist's jacket, and spun the other man around, unbalancing him enough to force him into the command chair. At the same time, he tightened his hold on Rush's mind as much as possible.

"Nope," he said softly, "I'm pretty sure you don't want to do that." He pressed down against the scientist's shoulder, preventing him from easily rising.

Rush didn't reply. He sat motionless, his mind perfectly balanced between the opposing intentions of Young and Destiny. The scientist himself had not yet decided on a course of action.

A second salvo of enemy fire impacted their shields.

"Fire the main weapon," Young snapped at Park. "Clear our path."

She fired two shots straight along their planned trajectory, and Destiny followed closely in their wake. Again, Rush tried to get to his feet, the pull of the chair becoming almost unbearable.

Young held him down with a constant pressure on his shoulders and his mind.

"Our shields just dropped by twenty-five percent," Eli said, doing a double-take as he looked over toward Young.

"*Twenty-five percent?*" Young repeated.

"The weapon takes a lot of energy," Eli snapped back, his eyes lingering on Rush.

A sudden blast rocked the bridge as the first of the enemy fire truly penetrated their shielding. Young recognized the trill of the alarm that indicated a hull breach immediately before Volker confirmed it.

"Reroute power to forward shields," Young snapped.

For no reason that Young could discern, Rush abruptly threw in with Destiny and surged to his feet, overwhelming Young's stabilizing influence.

Young was dragged forward for half a step before Rush deftly turned, escaping his hold by sliding out of his open jacket. He was across the bridge before Young had fully grasped what had happened.

No one had noticed their brief, silent confrontation.

Another blast nearly knocked Young off his feet, and he dropped Rush's jacket to pull out his radio. "Young to Greer," he said quietly, trying to keep his voice from carrying. "Rush is headed toward the chair room. You're authorized to use any means short of lethal force to keep him from sitting in that thing."

"Understood," Greer replied grimly.

"How much longer until we reach the star?" Young asked Chloe.

"Three minutes," she called back.

At the back of his mind, he could feel Rush increase his speed from a pained, limping walk to a brisk clip, to a jog until he was flat-out *sprinting*—feeling no pain, cold air raking through his hair, corridor lights flaring subtly for him as he passed through near darkness.

God, he was fast.

But of course he would be, with that build, that drive. Of course.

"What's our status?" Young snapped, the golden light on the bridge contrasting with the dim blue of Destiny's interior that Rush was tearing through.

Though Young tried to stay focused on the bridge, he knew that the scientist had nearly reached the chair room. The part of him that could feel the pull of the chair, the anxious press of Destiny, *ached* for Rush to make it.

"Shields are down to thirty percent ship-wide with focal weakening," Eli replied, his eyes flying over his monitors. "They're going to keep getting through."

Rush snapped back into Young's consciousness with a bolt of surprise. The other man hadn't seen Greer coming until the sergeant had tackled him. They hit the deck plating hard. Greer had the scientist half-pinned before Rush fully realized what had happened. Rush made an effort to marginally pull away from Destiny, to sharpen his connection to reality. He was less than two seconds from being totally immobilized when he pulled Greer's sidearm.

"They just changed their strategy," Volker yelled, his hair a flaming red-gold in the light from the star that now took up the entire forward view.

"In what way?" Young growled, trying to ignore Rush in the back of his mind.

"They've started kamikaze-style runs," Volker replied, struggling to be heard over the alarms cutting through the air.

"Back off," Rush said icily, forcing his way into Young's consciousness, still pinned to the freezing deck plating in the thin cotton of his undershirt as he pointed the handgun directly at Greer. He cocked the weapon *inches* from the sergeant's face.

"You're not going to shoot me, Doc," Greer said softly. He hadn't moved. The darkness pressed in around them.

"What kind of numbers are we talking about?" Young asked, struggling to stay present on the red-gold light of the bridge.

"I will," Rush said, his hand and voice steady despite the unendurable pull of the ship. "I'm more than prepared to sacrifice you for the persistence of this ship and crew. I

don't have time to explain this to you, so decide right now if you're going to blindly follow Colonel Young's orders or if you're going to trust me on this one."

"We just had two impacts off the forward port bow," Volker said. "They're coming in waves of six."

In the dim blue light, Greer looked at Rush evenly and then pulled back, extending a hand to help the scientist to his feet.

"Damn it," Young hissed under his breath.

"We can't tolerate any more hull breaches," Eli snapped, the reddish light glinting off his hair. "Our shielding is so low that we won't be able to survive the passage through the star."

"Do we have enough energy to jump back into FTL?" Young asked.

"No," Eli said, and even though it was quiet, it cut across the bridge.

Deep in his mind, the chair glowed bright in the darkness.

"Stay on course," Young said firmly, and the activity of the bridge resumed. "How long?" Young asked Chloe.

"Twenty seconds."

Another drone made it through a weak point in their shields and impacted the hull near the bridge. Chloe was flung out of her seat, and Young had to grab the arm of the command chair to prevent ending up on the floor himself.

"Ten," Chloe called out as she pulled herself up.

"We have another breach," Eli said, his face pale.

There was nothing more Young could do.

Greer and Rush were at the chair room. Rush had already started to join with the ship and Young got only intermittent flashes of his approach to the chair, like a slow strobe.

The doorway.

Greer's flashlight.

The platform.

His hand on the armrest.

The sound of charging capacitors.

Then—nothing.



"Five seconds," Chloe whispered, turning back to look at Eli.

Eli shook his head.

Chloe turned back to face the sun. "Matt," she whispered into her radio, her voice pained.

They plunged into the solar corona.

"Internal temperatures are increasing," Eli said, his voice calm. "Shear forces have further damaged the hull."

"Come on, Rush," Young said under his breath.

Vortices of plasma streamed past the forward view.

"Eli," Volker said, "can you confirm this for me? I'm reading that all incoming solar energy is being routed directly to shields. Are you—"

"That's not me," Eli said, ducking around Volker's station to look at his display.

"Are we okay?" Chloe asked into the ensuing silence. "Internal temperatures seem to be holding."

"Um, don't quote me on this, but yeah, I think we're going to be okay," Eli said quietly.

Something in the room seemed to release at his words, and the bridge personnel lost their artificial stillness.

"There must be a protocol for—" Eli broke off, eyes flicking up to where Young was sitting, then raking the entire bridge, coming to rest finally on the floor near Young's feet, where Rush's jacket was lying. He looked away. "Yeah. There must be a protocol."

"Lay in the new course," Young said.

"Five hours until we emerge," Chloe said. "That ought to be more than enough time to fully recharge as long as Eli and I can stay ahead of any areas of turbulence."

"Great," Young said, trying to sound even remotely enthusiastic. "I'm going to find Brody and take a look at some of these hull breaches, see if there's anything we can do about them right now. Eli, you let me know if you need me back here."

"Sure," Eli replied.

Young waited until after he'd left the bridge to pull out his radio. "Young to Greer," he said quietly.

"Go ahead, sir," Greer replied, his voice perfectly controlled, professional.

"Stay with him."

There was a short pause.

"Understood."

Half an hour later, Young was helping Scott and James reroute critical wiring away from one of the damaged areas of Destiny's hull under Brody's direction. The four of them were spread out along the corridors halfway up the starboard side of the ship.

For the first time in a long time, Young was truly alone.

Already he could feel the internal temperature of the ship beginning to return to normal levels. The deck plating was no longer icy to the touch. After so many days of darkness and cold, it was a welcome change.

He tried to focus on the task at hand and not on the oppressive sense of inadequacy that he felt.

He should have let Rush go.

They almost hadn't made it.

"You're making a terrible mess of that," a familiar voice said from over his shoulder.

Young jumped, dropping the pair of pliers he'd been using to strip the wiring.

"No," he snapped, turning around to face the AI. "Just—*no*. You don't get to take on *his* appearance because that is *way* the *hell* to confusing for *everyone*."

Rush raised his eyebrows, looking slightly startled at Young's vehement response.

The scientist appeared remarkably well put together. His hair was shorter, his clothing professorial and new-looking, from his pristine, square-framed glasses down to the leather of his shoes. He smirked at Young as he pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket.

"You think I'm the AI."

"Aren't you?"

"You have no way of verifying that, so does it really matter what I say?"

Rush lit the cigarette.

Young stared at him.

"I'm projecting," Rush said, looking pleased with himself. "It's to some degree akin to the interface I made on the shuttle, but instead of pulling you in, which was, as we've

established, a terrible idea, I'm sending myself out. Terribly sorry I can't offer you a cigarette. They're not real, in the classical sense of the word."

"I don't smoke," Young said, eyes narrowing.

"Good for you. It's a terrible habit." Rush flashed him a smile that was quick, even, and overtly charming.

"Are you here for a reason, or just to harass me?"

"The Nakai just dropped out," Rush said. "Thought you might like to know."

"Shit," Young said.

"It's fine," Rush said, leaning back against the wall next to the open panel where Young was working and taking a long draw of his cigarette. "They're tracking the shuttle at the moment. I infer from past experience and from studying their behavior that they can, to some degree, also track Destiny's course through the star, though it's likely they won't be able to determine our position accurately enough to create an effective ambush at the point we emerge."

"I'm sorry I tried to stop you," Young murmured.

"It's all right," Rush said, his voice unusually gentle. "Don't blame yourself for what didn't happen."

"You seem different," Young said quietly, "when you're like this."

"Better," Rush replied.

"I don't know about *that*," Young murmured skeptically, "but less—pained, certainly."

"Less of a pain in the ass, you mean." Rush clarified, wistfully. "This is better."

"Why?" Young demanded. "What's so great about being with this hunk of metal? You're a *person*. You belong with *people*."

"There's a part of me that does," Rush said, "but that part is—fading."

"Why won't you fight this?" Young asked him. "I don't understand. You're part of this crew. Part of this family. We need you. Don't you give a *damn* about that?"

"Of course I do."

"Well then *fight* the goddamn *ship*, Rush. Help me get the crew *off* Destiny. *Come back* with us."

"That's not an option for me, Everett."

"Yes, it fucking well is."

"Why, because *you* say so?" There was no bitterness in Rush's tone, just a rueful amusement as his eyes flicked up to meet Young's.

Young looked away. "So—are you not going to remember this?" he asked after a few moments.

"I doubt very much that I will."

"Well then fucking know this, you son of a bitch," he snarled. "I am going to do everything in my power to get you *off* this goddamn ship. I am going to do everything I can to stop the slow destruction of Nicholas Rush, your fatalistic, new-age, cigarette-smoking, *bullshit* be damned."

"I—" Rush began, sounding strained. Before he could finish, James came around the corner and he vanished.

"I mean it," Young hissed under his breath, into the empty air.

## Chapter Twenty Three

Young was lying on his back, half inside a bulkhead, wielding a portable welder that Brody had liberated from the machine shop. The flame heated up the enclosed space and carved out a small blind spot in his visual field as sparks rained down harmlessly around him, impacting the deck plating and fading away to nothing as he worked.

"Colonel Young, this is Eli." His radio crackled.

He flipped off the welder and wiped a thin sheen of sweat off his forehead before replying.

"Go ahead."

"We'll be emerging from the star in about ten minutes."

"How's our power level?"

"We're at one hundred percent, backups fully charged. Hopefully we don't have to use it all up in a firefight to get *out* of here."

"Agreed," Young muttered to himself. "I'll be right there," he said into the radio. He scanned the hallway, looking for someone to hand his repair job off to.

Brody came around the corner, looking harassed, a smudge of grease making a short black strip on his temple.

"I heard," Brody said, indicating Young's radio with his eyes as he jogged the last few steps to take the welder. "I got it."

Young clapped him on the shoulder and turned to make his way back to the bridge.

When he arrived, Wray was in the command chair. At his approach she hurriedly got to her feet.

"You can sit, you know," he said, raising his eyebrows.

"That's okay," she said. "It's not really my style."

Young gave her a one-shouldered shrug and sat down. "How long?" he asked the room at large.

"Six minutes until we emerge," Chloe replied promptly.

"There's a rumor," Wray said quietly, from where she was standing beside him, "that Rush is in the neural interface right now. Is that true?"

"Yup," Young said shortly. "He's been there for the past five hours."

"Five hours?" Wray echoed, her voice rising slightly. "That seems like an awfully long time."

"We may need him when we come out of the star," Young snapped. "There's going to be a window while the drive powers up where we'll be vulnerable to attack before we jump."

A brief silence settled between them.

Wray crossed her arms. "It wasn't my intent to sound—accusatory," she murmured.

He shrugged uncomfortably. "I didn't mean to sound defensive."

"I'm sure you're doing your best. I'm sure you both are. It's just—difficult to get used to."

"Tell me about it."

She smiled briefly in return and looked out at the plasma vortices, the glow from the sun putting a golden cast on her dark hair.

"Did you ever find out what happened between him and Colonel Telford?"

"I did," Young said. He made an effort to keep his expression neutral.

Wray was watching him carefully. She was silent for the span of several seconds, giving him space to elaborate.

He said nothing.

"That bad?" she asked.

"Yup."

She shut her eyes briefly. "Any chance that you might consider telling me the specifics of what happened? I heard at the last IOA meeting that Telford's on the short list of people they're going to send if they're able to dial in. I might be able to get him *off* that list."

"I'll think about it," he murmured.

"You need someone to talk to," she said quietly.

"I have plenty of people to talk to," he replied.

"You know that's not what I mean."

"I can talk to TJ."

"No, you can't. Not really." She looked at him with a gentle lift of her eyebrows.

He didn't reply.

"Well, you know where to find me. I'm an HR person, and that comes with *some* relevant skill sets. At least, that's what I tell myself."

"Three minutes," Chloe called back.

"I'll keep that in mind," Young said quietly to Wray. "Thanks."

The intensity of the light coming through the forward view had become less uniform. Swirls of plasma snaked about the hull as they hurtled through the outer portion of the solar corona.

"Do we have sensors back yet?" Young called over to Eli.

"They should be coming online any second—yup. We've got them. Okay, crap—I'm picking up two—nope, actually make that *three* Nakai ships about 600 kilometers to port and kind of, under us? I don't know. Chloe I'm sending you the raw info if you want to project probability vs. location, the data's not gonna sharpen up until we get out of the corona. And, yeah, we also have drones, but they're where we would have exited had we kept our original trajectory so humans one, cylons zero."

Chloe projected a three dimensional map representing the star, Destiny's position, and the approximate position of the Nakai vessels into glowing relief over their heads.

"We've also got a debris radius," Chloe said, "and I'm not picking up the signal from the shuttle. They must have triggered it."

"Did we take out one of their ships?" Young asked.

"We did," Chloe confirmed.

"The Nakai are moving to intercept," Volker warned.

"What's the status of our FTL drive?" Young called over to Park.

"We can't power it up until we're out of the coronasphere," Park replied. "Two minutes."

"I don't think they can catch us in two minutes," Eli said.

"You don't *think* so?" Young asked.

"The ships themselves definitely can't, but if they launch fighters—"

"And," Volker interjected, drawing out the word, "that's what they just did. We've got incoming. Twenty, maybe thirty ships just showed up on short-range."

"What's the power expenditure for firing versus relying on shields?" Young asked the room at large.

"Shields are better," Eli said, his voice rising warningly.

"Shields," Chloe said.

"Yeah," Park agreed. "Engaging the primary array is going to cost us a significant chunk of power. Up to five percent of our current total, for an average firing time of twenty seconds."

"If we want to try and cut down their numbers somewhat, this seems like a good time to do it," Wray pointed out. "They've got to be almost as far from home as we are if they've been following this ship for what, a million years?"

"Maybe," Young said quietly. "But we're not in the best shape ourselves at the moment. We have two hull breaches."

"Fair enough," Wray said wryly.

"Let's get out of here as fast as possible," Young called out, looking over at Park. "Are we at maximum sublight?"

"I'm pushing it as much as I can," she replied.

"One minute until we clear the corona," Chloe called back.

The plasma swirls were fading now, and they could see the darkness of space starting to creep back into the forward view.

"Thirty seconds," Chloe said.

"The leading edge is within firing range," Volker called out at the same time.

The shields flared brilliantly as the bombardment commenced, explosions blue and green and gold nearly obscuring the port side of the ship as Young looked out the forward view.

"It's beautiful, in a way," Wray said quietly, from where she stood beside the command chair.

Young glanced at her. When he looked back toward the forward view, he saw a familiar outline, dark against the flaring light, standing in the spot that Rush had come to prefer, immediately adjacent to Chloe's station. One arm was wrapped about his chest, his shoulders hunched, head forward, fingers pressed against his mouth as he watched the assault on the shields. Young couldn't make out his expression.

In the next instant, he was gone.

"In a way," Young echoed, rubbing his jaw.



"FTL is spooling up," Park said, and, after a few seconds, Young could feel a subtle vibration in the deck plating beneath their feet.

The transition to FTL was particularly spectacular as the soft smear of stars faded in over the colored flowering of energy wherever weapons fire impacted the shields. As the forward view took on the familiar swirling homogeneity, everyone on the bridge breathed a collective sigh of relief.

"Good work people," Young said. He looked over at Wray. "You want to hold down the fort? I've got some things to take care of," he said quietly.

"I imagine you do." She knelt and picked up Rush's jacket from where it had fallen to the floor.

She folded it over once, her hands neatly smoothing away creases in the material.

Wordlessly she offered it to him.

"Thanks," Young said.

"You're welcome. Now get out of here."

Young walked down the long hallways, noting the restored lighting and the normalized temperature with relief. Before heading to the chair room, he stopped to have a brief discussion with Brody, making sure there were no looming catastrophes. Primarily he checked in with the other man on principle, but he also wanted to get a sense of whether or not the science team was going to need Rush in the next several hours.

The answer to that question seemed to be no.

In Young's opinion, that made this a perfectly acceptable time to cut Rush off from the energy he was getting from Destiny. He was fairly certain that once he did so, the scientist was going to be close to useless until he had gotten some sleep and readjusted his baseline.

Hopefully the AI wouldn't interfere.

He wished that he had the ability to block the *mental* connection between the scientist and the ship—to stop the unnatural responsiveness of the ship to Rush's every action.

Maybe he would gain that ability with time.

Maybe.

It didn't take him long to reach the chair room.

Young entered the room, still dimly lit despite the restored power levels. He took in the scientist, locked into the neural interface, blue lights emanating from the bolts at his temples and coming from various monitors set up around the room.

Greer was seated near the door and stood as Young came in.

"What happened to your jacket?" Young asked, noting the sergeant had on a beige T-shirt that, despite the somewhat increased temperature on the ship, was still not quite sufficient.

"It's on loan," Greer said, looking over at Rush.

Young looked again and saw the jacket in question wrapped sloppily over Rush's shoulders, as if Greer had done it *after* the man had entered the neural interface.

"Not sure how helpful it really was," Greer said, as if he could see Young's thoughts, "but it was fucking cold when we got here, you know?"

Young clapped him on the shoulder, but didn't say anything. He walked over to the side of the chair, placed his hand down on the obsidian interface, and began to pull Rush's mind out of the ship.

There was more resistance than usual, as if Destiny was aware of his new resolve.

Maybe it was.

He paused for a moment in his attempt, taking his time, tracing the connections between himself and Rush, then the connections between Rush and Destiny.

The three of them were tangling together in what had become more of a web than a link.

He picked out what he was looking for with relative rapidity; the neural interface seemed to be acting to increase his sensitivity. The energy transfer between Rush and the ship flowed like a slow, continuous stream that came from Destiny and fanned out, incorporated into nearly every aspect of Rush—his body, his mind, his link with Young. Though he couldn't see it directly, it was also facilitating the propagation of the virus. The AI had practically admitted as much.

He hadn't necessarily planned to cut Rush off before talking to him about it, but now seemed as good an opportunity as any. So, for the second time that day, he blocked the stream of energy, cutting off the connection by creating a barrier that Rush could not remove on his own.

He again attempted to pull Rush out of Destiny.

This time, it was easy.

The room faded back in around him as he heard the familiar crack of the neural interface bolts disconnecting and the restraints opening of their own accord.

With the sensation of abrupt, rapid escalation, Rush's mind slammed into Young's with a force that he hadn't experienced since the first time he had pulled the scientist out of the chair. Whether it was the sheer number of hours that Rush had spent in the neural interface or something else entirely, Young couldn't say. He staggered slightly under the pressure of it, under the onslaught of alien images and language, fighting the disorientation that came with trying to navigate Rush's barely controlled consciousness. His vision wavered as an excruciating headache settled behind his eyes. His fingers closed around the edge of the chair as he fought down a wave of nausea.

He had to block.

He *had* to.

At least partially.

He pulled back marginally from Rush, just to the point at which the headache receded to a manageable level and reached forward, closing one hand around the man's shoulder, which seemed to reduce the pain to some degree. Whether the headache was coming from him, Rush, or a combination of the two, he couldn't entirely tell.

He looked down, focusing with an effort on the scientist, who hadn't moved at all.

//Hey, // Young projected at him gently. //Are you all right? //

"Yes," Rush murmured, suddenly sitting forward, as if Young's projection had been the catalyst he'd needed. His hands came to his temples as he looked up at Young, like he could use the pressure from his fingers to help order his mind.

"Okay," Young said quietly. "Let's get you out of here, what do you say?"

Rush nodded and Young grabbed both his arms just above the elbows, pulling him into a standing position. The scientist swayed, nearly overbalancing the pair of them before Young was able to find his center of gravity and stabilize them both. Young dragged the other man's left arm over his shoulder and pulled him away from the neural interface. They were halfway across the room before Rush spoke.

"Did you do something?" Rush asked him vaguely. "I don't feel right."

"No?" Young asked mildly.

"No," Rush repeated, sounding vaguely hurt. "Are you *blocking* me?"

"Don't worry about it, genius. You're exhausted," Young said, evading Rush's question. "It's time to do things that normal people do. Like eat dinner and go to bed early."

Rush watched Greer's jacket slide away from its precarious position around his shoulders to the floor like he wasn't entirely sure what it was. "Exhausted?" he repeated slowly. "Are you sure?" He looked at Young. "I don't think that happens to me."

"*Everyone* gets tired, Doc," Greer said as he came forward, holding Rush's black military issue jacket. "Even you." He tugged it up over Rush's free arm and shoulder before getting a firm grip on the scientist as Young finished pulling it on. Greer knelt to pick up his own jacket from the floor.

"Let's get out of here," Young said.

Since Rush still seemed more than slightly unsteady, he pulled the scientist's arm back over his shoulders as they stepped into the hall. The door to the chair room slid shut behind them of its own accord, and they blinked in the bright hallway light until it dimmed down for Rush automatically.

"What's happening?" the scientist asked them.

It wasn't an unreasonable question, but something in the way Rush asked it triggered a sense of unease in Young. "What's the last thing you remember?" he asked cautiously.

"The last? Temporal sequencing is hard for me, you know that," Rush replied.

Young frowned.

"Give it a shot, Doc," Greer said, meeting Young's eyes worriedly. "Last thing you remember."

"Those unaffected by the virus sealed themselves in the heart of Atlantis and left," Rush murmured. "There was no consensus reached regarding the correct course of action and so," he paused wistfully, "we let them go."

"*What?*" Greer said.

"Yeah, okay. Good try, but I'm thinking maybe we'll go to the infirmary instead of to the mess," Young said, realizing that Rush was not entirely coherent and probably hadn't been since he had pulled him out of the chair.

He should have expected this.

He should have fucking realized *right away* that sitting in the chair for five hours was only going to make matters worse when he finally did cut Rush off from the energy source that he'd been relying on for days now.

"That wasn't correct?" the scientist asked. "If it doesn't involve Nicholas Rush directly, then it should be algorithmically excluded?"

He looked at Young as if he were expecting an answer.

"Sure," Young said, keeping his delivery light. "I think that's probably a safe assumption. But you know what? Don't worry about it right now." He kept a lid on his rising anxiety as he pushed Rush against the wall of the corridor.

"Why don't we sit down for a minute?" he asked.

Rush just looked at him.

"Come on," Young said, pressing down gently on the scientist's shoulders, hoping he would get the idea. "We're sitting down right now."

"Why?" Rush asked him.

"We just *are*," Young said, stepping in and hooking a leg around behind Rush, knocking his knees out from beneath him and carefully controlling his slide down the wall.

"Go get TJ," Young murmured to Greer. The sergeant took off down the hallway.

"Rush," he said urgently, pushing the scientist's hair back, trying to get the other man to look at him directly, trying to get a sense of Rush's disorganized thoughts while keeping some distance between himself and the debilitating headache that was affecting the other man. The scientist's skin was unnaturally warm beneath his hands.

"What's happening?"

"That's what I asked. I thought *you* were going to tell *me*."

"Shit," Young said. "I think I did this."

"I concur," Rush said unhelpfully. "Everything was fine before you."

"Come on," Young said quietly. "You've got to sharpen up here, genius. I need answers from you. Do you know your name?"

"Nick," Rush replied after a few seconds.

"Okay, good. Do you know where you are?" Young was giving Rush what mental energy he could, helping him to sharpen his thoughts.

He *really* did *not* want to reconnect Rush to the energy coming from Destiny unless he had no choice.

"Destiny."

"Great. What year is it?"

"What calendar are you using?"

"The normal one. The Earth one."

"The first or second decade of the second millennium. Common era."

"Um, okay. Not your best work, but I'll take it. Do you know who I am?"

"Colonel Young."

"Good," Young said quietly. "Why were you in the chair?"

"Destiny was afraid."

"Sure. Close enough. You were getting energy from Destiny," Young prompted him.

"Remember? It was driving the replication of the virus."

"Yes, amongst other things."

"Yeah. I'm getting that. *What* other things? *What, specifically,* were you using that energy for?" Young asked him.

"I think something is wrong with me."

"Yeah, I *told* you. You're really *fucking* tired," Young said, trying to keep his frustration under control. He ran a hand through Rush's bangs, noting that a thin sheen of sweat had already started to dampen his hair. "Plus, you seem to be running a fever. You're not thinking clearly."

Rush's gaze had drifted to the left, and he seemed to be looking at the empty air.

Young wondered if the AI was talking to him, and, if so, what it was saying. He wrapped his right hand around the back of Rush's neck and subtly angled the scientist's face towards him, trying to regain his attention.

"Nick," he snapped, and Rush's eyes flicked back to him. "Let's focus up. Come on."

"Improving our radius," Rush said.

"What?"

"I was using it for that. The energy. To improve our radius."

"Okay, good. What else?"

"Not sleeping."

"Right." Young rolled his eyes. "What else?"

"Fixing things."

"What kind of things?"

"Things that are broken."

"Thanks. That's so helpful."

"You're welcome." Rush was clearly barely paying attention to Young. His focus was, again, out in the empty air over Young's left shoulder.

"That was *sarcasm*, Rush. What were you *fixing*?"

"It was more like—building over a cognitive scaffold, if you know what I mean," Rush said, gesturing earnestly, his hands forming a lattice-like structure.

"Um, no, actually, I have no idea what you mean."

"Yes well. Obviously you wouldn't, would you? Scaffolding isn't meant to be *permanent*. That's its nature." Rush's tone had turned condescending. "But you can't build *something* from *nothing*, can you?"

"No?" Young had no idea what he was talking about.

"Exactly."

"Anything else you were using the energy for?" Young asked, deciding to move on.

"Not eating."

"Not—*shit*. Why? Do I have to watch you *all* the god damned *time*?"

"You would do the same thing if you could. Those rations are intolerable."

"Okay, fair point, or, rather it *would* be a fair point if they weren't the only things standing between us and starvation. You're *such* an idiot."

"Well, you know what they say about people who live in glass houses," Rush murmured, narrowing his eyes at Young, regaining some of his clarity of thought in the face of being insulted.

"All right," Young said quietly, "you've got to help me out here. I'm not going to lie to you—you're a fucking mess right now. More of a mess than I was really expecting. So which is better for you, to get energy from Destiny or not?"

"It depends on what your primary endpoint is," Rush replied, his tone retaining only a fraction of the focus he'd just regained. "As always, there's a tradeoff between time and quality of life."

"So if you take energy from the ship, you feel fine until—"

"Yes. Until."

"And the alternative is that you feel like shit, but you live longer."

"Option one is preferable," Rush murmured, "except—"

"Except what?" Young asked. His fingers were now wrapped firmly around the back of Rush's neck, his thumb tracing small circles behind the scientist's ear, keeping him as present as possible. "Except *what*?" he repeated, when Rush didn't answer right away.

"Except that I damaged your mind," Rush said quietly, reaching out to touch Young's temple, then curling his hand around the back of Young's neck, their poses mirrored. "And the longer I stay with you, the more I can fix. Perhaps—perhaps I can fix it *all*. You could go back with the rest of them. You could be—" he broke off. "I would prefer that. It would be easier."

"We're fucking going back *together*," Young whispered, suddenly unable to look at Rush.

"I'm sorry, Everett, but we're not." Rush's voice was barely audible. "We're just *not*."

"We *are*," Young said. "I won't accept any other alternative."

"Well—"

"I don't want to hear it," Young ground out, his voice strained, suddenly hoarse for some reason, his fingers digging into the hair at the nape of Rush's neck.

"Okay," Rush said, his voice quiet, sympathetic even.

As if the man had the *nerve* to sit there and *feel sorry* for *Young*.

Young looked directly at him, his frustration, his anger dissolving in the face of Rush's undivided, piercing attention. The scientist's eyes were dark and inescapable. His gaze, like his mind, was intolerably intense.

They were inches apart.

"Okay," Rush repeated.

Too close. They were *too close*.

He was shoving Rush away, body and mind, pushing him back against the wall as he himself pulled out into the space of the corridor behind him, needing to get out, to get *away* from the other man, away from his gaze, from his *eyes*, which Young had always found impossible to tolerate for any length of time. He shot to his feet, turning away from Rush, walking the width of the corridor to lean against the opposite wall.

He took a deep breath.

Then another.

What was he *doing*?



He had no idea.

Clearly.

When Young finally turned to face Rush again, he saw that the scientist had slid sideways until he was lying on the floor, his back against the wall. He had curled in on himself, one hand over his face.

"Damn it," Young said covering the span of the corridor in two strides and dropping down into a crouch next to Rush. "Nick," he said urgently, "come on. You're okay."

"Get the fuck away from me."

"Look, I'm sorry. I'm *sorry*, all right?"

"What the hell are you sorry for?"

"I don't know. For doing such a shit job of *everything*," Young replied, pulling him back up so that this time Rush was leaning against him instead of the wall.

"You're fair fucking confusing," Rush said unhappily, his head heavy on Young's shoulder, heat radiating off him.

"I don't know what you're complaining about," Young murmured into his hair. "You confuse me all the time."

Rush didn't reply aloud, but Young picked up a miserable wave of acknowledgement aimed in his direction.

A few moments later TJ and Greer appeared, emerging from a cross corridor and taking only seconds to reach their position. TJ placed her bag on the floor and slid in easily next to Young.

"Hi," she said to Rush, giving him a moment to adjust to her sudden appearance before she felt his forehead with the back of her hand. She pulled out an aural thermometer and fit a disposable earpiece into place. "I heard that you aren't feeling so good."

"I've been better," he admitted.

Greer leaned against the wall, arms crossed, watching them.

"Hold still," she murmured, as she deftly inserted the probe and pressed a button.

Rush jerked slightly at the soft tone the device made.

TJ's expression froze briefly as she looked at the reading, but she said nothing. She pulled out a penlight, quickly flashing it both eyes before unpacking a blood pressure cuff. She got a quick reading then reached up underneath Rush's shirt with her stethoscope to listen to his heart and lungs.

"One more time," she said picking the thermometer back up and inserting it in Rush's ear. She held his jaw, gently immobilizing his head as she took the reading. "Hold still."

This time she flipped the device around to show Young. 102.5.

"That's a pretty solid fever you're sporting there," she said to Rush.

He didn't reply.

"So, what's the plan?" Young asked quietly.

"I'd like to run some scans and do some bloodwork, but at first glance I'd say we're probably looking at a viral flare. If that's the case, then without any antivirals, there's not much I can do, other than provide supportive therapy."

"Which means what?" Young asked.

"Rest, hydration, eating, that's about it."

"Oh for god's sake," Rush hissed. "This is a waste of time."

"How is *hydration* a waste of time?" Greer asked dryly.

Rush glared at him.

"Any chance of this happening in my quarters?" Young asked TJ. "We're tired of sleeping in the infirmary."

TJ compressed her lips, considering. "We can try it," she said guardedly, clearly not happy about Young's request, but willing to give it a shot. "You'll need to check in with me every few hours or so."

Young nodded.

"Let's get out of the hallway," TJ murmured.

Young shifted, nodding to Greer.

"Don't even fucking *think* it," Rush snapped, pulling away from Young with an abrupt surge of energy and effectively preempting any attempt to lift him off the floor by making it unsteadily to his feet. He probably wouldn't have stayed there very long if Greer hadn't stepped in to steady him.

"You are *the* most ridiculous person I have ever met," Young said. "If you *think*—"

"Excuse me," Rush said, breaking in, "but let's not forget that I am going along with this as a *favor*. *To you*." He pointed at Young with two fingers and stepped forward unsteadily, dragging Greer with him until the sergeant planted his feet. "So maybe you should just let it go and be *grateful* that—"

"*Grateful?*" Young echoed, looking up at him. "You think this is fun for me? You think I *enjoy* dragging you around this godforsaken ship, trying to keep you out of trouble?" He forced himself to his feet, fighting the pain behind his eyes.

"Guys," TJ said. "Everyone's tired here—"

"If you need to *lie* to yourself," Young continued, the volume of his voice increasing of its own volition as he advanced on Rush with narrowed eyes, "and tell yourself that you're feeling like absolute *shit* for some reason other than the fact that through a series of really fucking stupid decisions you *drove* yourself to this, and now you're suffering the consequences because *I* gave you *no other option*—if that gives you the illusion of control that you need, then fine. Be my guest. But we both know it's *bullshit*." TJ's hand was on his shoulder, across his chest, holding him back.

"Is that what you think?" Rush's tone matched his own. "You think I couldn't circumvent your pathetic barrier? I create workarounds all fucking *day*, every day. It's what I do *best*—in any arena you might care to consider. I don't need you. *I don't need any of you*." He made an unsuccessful attempt to wrest out of Greer's grip, his mind a barely organized shrieking mess of a language, of images, that weren't *his*—that never had been, and that never would be.

"Shut *up*, Doc," Greer murmured, not letting him go, stepping in to wrap an arm across his shoulders.

"Keep telling yourself that," Young fired back. "But if you *could* create a workaround you would have done it by now. You can't do a god damned thing about that block and you *know* it."

"Stop it," TJ said quietly.

"Go to *hell*," Rush snapped back at him, but Greer ruined his delivery as he abruptly yanked Rush forward, down the hallway, away from Young.

"Come on, Doc" he heard the sergeant mutter to Rush. "You can be a real pain in the ass at times, you know that?"

"Fuck," Young said, barely recognizing his own voice as he squeezed his eyes shut and drove the heel of his hand into his eye, trying to relieve some of the pain that had settled there. "*Fuck*."

TJ stepped in, enveloping him in a hug, coming up on to her toes, opening her arms, and pulling him forward, one hand coming around the back of his head. He froze briefly before gathering her in, the pose aching familiar.

"It's okay. You're doing a good job," she murmured, her voice tight, higher than usual. "You are."

He didn't reply. His throat hurt. It was hard to swallow.

"He does," she continued. "He *does* need you. He needs all of us. And he knows it."

He didn't answer right away. Finally, when he was able to speak he said, "I know. He's just—"

"A lot of work?" He could feel the smile in her voice.

"No," he said, "I mean, yeah, he *is*, but—I upset him."

"Easy to do," she whispered, finally letting him go, pulling back slightly, looking up at him. The whites of her eyes had turned a lacy red. "You want to talk about it?"

"Not really," he said.

"*Should* you talk about it?" she asked, raising her eyebrows at him.

"Maybe," he said evasively.

"Well," she murmured, "you let me know when you figure it out."

"God," he said, hooking a hand over his shoulder to massage base of his neck. "I need a cigarette."

The veneer of calm neutrality on TJ's face cracked as she turned away from him. "You don't smoke," she whispered.

"Yeah. I don't know why I said that."

She nodded, her face still angled away from him.

They started after Greer and Rush. Young estimated the other two were about forty feet ahead of them when the tension on the link between himself and Rush became noticeable, piling a sense of strain, of vertigo on top of the headache and chills and the general *shittiness* he was already feeling.

"Tell me one thing," Young said, trying to distract himself by focusing on TJ, "and then I won't bother you about it. Just—tell me that Varro knows how lucky he is."

She was quiet for a long moment.

"I think so," she said finally, a faint hint of color coming to her cheeks.

"All right then," he said, trying to keep everything he was feeling out of his voice. "Well, if you ever need anyone to kick his ass—"

"Um, thanks," she replied, giving him a guarded smile. "But I don't think that will be necessary."

"One can always hope," he said, smiling weakly, trying to cheer her up.

He didn't think it was working.

Ahead of them, Rush was leaning against Greer again, rather than trying to fight him off. Young was fairly certain he had the sergeant to thank for preventing Rush from working himself up to the point of hysteria. A brief brush of his mind against Rush's confirmed that the other man had calmed down significantly.

//?// Young sent a wordless wave of inquiry toward him.

He got back an equally wordless feeling of irritated reassurance, an intensification of his headache, and the sense that projecting even that much was a strain for the scientist.

It took them only a few minutes to reach his quarters, by which point he and TJ had nearly caught up to Rush and Greer.

Greer headed straight for the bed and helped Rush sit on the edge.

Young took up a position against the wall, arms crossed.

"Eat," TJ said shortly shoving a power bar at Rush as she dug through her bag, removing glass tubes, alcohol swabs and a butterfly needle.

"Later," Rush said.

"Now." TJ stopped what she was doing and fixed him with a stern look. "You're lucky I'm not making you consume your weight in protein mix."

Greer grabbed the power bar and opened it, handing it back to Rush. "Come on, Doc," he said. "Man up."

With a pained expression, Rush took a bite and swallowed with significant difficulty, watching TJ pull his jacket half off with some suspicion. She unwrapped an alcohol swab and sterilized his skin at the crook of his elbow.

"Keep eating," she said sternly. "Don't watch."

Rush took another bite of his power bar and looked away as she inserted the needle beneath his skin and filled four tubes in quick succession. In less than a minute she was taping a piece of gauze in place at the crook of his elbow. She got to her feet, pulling a bottle of her homemade electrolyte solution out of her bag.

"You need to drink this entire thing," she informed him.

He nodded back at her, his eyes flicking back and forth a few times between TJ and the empty air to her left, before settling on the empty air.

The AI was talking to him.

*Again.*

Young was almost certain of it.

Steeling himself against the unbearable headache, he linked up fully with Rush and, sure enough, he saw Daniel Jackson standing next to TJ, his hands in his pockets, head cocked slightly.

"—and you wouldn't be having this problem right now if you had just practiced what we talked about," Jackson was saying, his tone eminently reasonable. "If you had made any effort *at all*, really. I don't understand you, Nick. I really don't."

//*No one's* happy with you today,// Young remarked wryly to Rush.

The scientist jerked, startled by his presence. TJ's hands came up, steadying him.

"Get out of here," Young said aloud. The AI snapped its head around to look in his direction, regarding him with narrowed eyes. "Leave him alone," Young continued.

"What?" TJ asked, bewildered.

"Not you," Young said to her.

Jackson looked at him evenly for a few seconds, his expression unreadable. Finally, he vanished.

"It's not happy with you," Rush murmured.

"Don't worry about it," Young replied.

"You realize it's not a good idea to piss it off?" Rush asked tiredly.

"You let me worry about that."

"That sounds like a *fantastic* plan." Rush tried for sarcasm, but didn't quite have the energy to pull it off.

"Can someone please explain to me what the *hell* is going *on*?" Greer asked the pair of them.

"Colonel Young is in the process of picking a fight with a sentient starship," Rush explained, finally making it to the halfway point in his power bar.

TJ and Greer both turned to give him nearly identical incredulous stares. He shrugged at them. "I'd say it was picking a fight with *me*, actually."

"Either way, it seems like a terrible idea," TJ said.

Young shrugged. "What's it going to do?" he asked. "Slam doors in my face?" he eyed Rush. "I get that already."

"You know very well it's capable of a good deal more than that," Rush said. "And so does everyone else here. So stop *patronizing*—"

"Doc," Greer said, looking over at Rush from his position immediately next to him on the bed as he gently elbowed the scientist in a friendly manner. "Cool it. You're okay."

Amazingly, Young felt Rush make an effort to rein himself in. He took a deep breath, reasserting a wavering control over his own mind.

"Yup," Greer said. "You're fine."

Rush nodded tiredly at him.

Young and TJ exchanged a surprised look.

By mutual consent, he and Rush didn't talk much after that. TJ insisted on staying until she had watched Rush eat his entire power bar and drink a liter of fake Gatorade—a process that ultimately took about half an hour longer than it should have. Young would have dismissed Greer, but Rush seemed to like having him around, so Young and Greer shot the shit for thirty minutes, talking about nothing in particular—about guns and Colorado Springs and basic training, trying not to watch Rush force himself to eat what amounted to about four hundred calories.

Finally, after Rush had managed to consume the entire power bar and TJ had completed her rebandaging of his feet, she and Greer made their exit.

The room was uncomfortably quiet.

Young stayed where he was, his arms crossed over his chest, leaning against the wall. Rush was still sitting on the edge of the bed, his head angled down and away from Young. From the feel of his thoughts, Young was fairly certain that the other man lacked the energy for another half-hysterical outburst, but he didn't want to test that theory by immediately working the scientist up.

//So,// he said quietly into Rush's mind, projecting casual intent along with his words.  
//It seems like you and Greer are getting along well these days.//

Rush nodded and leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and buried his face in his hands. "He's your best, you know."

//You'll get no argument from me there,// Young said, subtly projecting calm at the scientist, hoping it would help him order his thoughts.

"You should make him your second," Rush said, threading a hand through his hair before closing it into a fist that he pressed into his temple.

//Scott is doing a perfectly fine job. Plus, I'm pretty sure that if I made Greer my second that you might be able to convince him to back you next time you try to stage a coup.// He projected a sense of dry amusement at Rush.

A smile flickered across Rush's features. "Only if I had a very good reason."

//Why aren't you projecting?// Young asked curiously. //You've been avoiding it all night.//

Rush sighed. "If I do it, you're going to feel like pure shite."

//I *already* feel like shit,// Young said.

"No you don't," Rush said, looking up at him with some difficulty. "Plus, it's harder for me than it is for you. And I'm tired."

"Did you just *admit* to being *tired*?" Young asked. "That's a first."

"A moment of weakness," Rush murmured, making a vague, dismissive gesture with his left hand.

"I wasn't aware that you ever had those," Young replied.

"It's been known to happen," Rush said. "Occasionally."

"Occasionally," Young repeated, pushing away from the wall and taking a few short steps to stand next to Rush. He felt the other man's forehead with the back of his hand. It was alarmingly warm. "So," he said quietly. "Are you going to get better?"

"In the short term," Rush murmured, "Yes, I think so."

"In the long term?"

"It depends on how you define better."

"You're a lot of work," Young said, sitting down next to Rush.

"I know," Rush said, his eyes closed, "but think about how I feel. I have to deal with myself all the time."

That surprised a short laugh out of Young. They were quiet for a moment before Young said, "I need your help, you know."

"That much has always been clear to me," Rush said wryly.

"I need you to side with me," Young said, ignoring Rush's comment. "Against the AI."



The scientist opened his eyes and looked warily over at Young. "What do you mean by that, exactly?" he asked, his tone guarded.

"I need you to get this crew back to Earth."

"I'm working on that," Rush said, "but so is the AI."

"I don't want you to complete Destiny's mission."

"Don't say that," Rush replied, his voice suddenly strained. He dug the heel of his hand into his right eye. "*Please* don't say that. It attracts attention."

"I don't want you to change, or ascend, or whatever it is that you're supposed to do. I want you to stay with us. Tell the AI it can go to hell."

"These—two things that you want—they're not independent—" he broke off, his cadence suffering as he tried to order his thoughts, "not independent of one another."

"What do you mean?" Young asked, frowning at the sudden lexical difficulty Rush seemed to be having.

"I can't—" he broke off, motioning vaguely. "You—you're putting me in a position—that—" Rush broke off with a quiet, frustrated sound in the back of his throat.

Young grabbed his shoulder, alarmed as he realized that, in addition to a problem with articulation, Rush seemed to be unable to complete his *thoughts* on a conceptual level.

"I literally—can't."

"Can't *what*?" Young asked urgently. "You can't *what*, Rush?"

"I—vos invisio meus mens."

"English," Young snapped. "*English*."

"You—" was all Rush was able to get out, but he made a gesture between his temple and Young's with two fingers.

Young moved in on his mind and, once he adjusted to the intensification of his headache, he was struck immediately by an appalling sense of strain. Of Rush struggling not just to keep himself together, but to escape an outside influence that was destroying the trajectory of his thoughts, preventing him from explaining, exerting a terrible pressure.

It didn't take much imagination to figure out what was going on.

"Stop," he said, shaking Rush slightly. "Stop trying to tell me. It's okay. I get it. Destiny won't let you."

Rush stopped trying to explain and the pressure on his mind receded abruptly. The scientist slumped forward in his grip, as if he had finally, *finally* run out of energy. Young forced him back until he was lying down.

"You with me, genius?" Young asked, shakily.

Rush nodded slowly, eyes only half open. "They didn't die of the plague," Rush murmured, falling briefly out of coherency as his thoughts flashed back to what Young assumed was Atlantis. "But they died all the same."

"Great," Young said, patting him on the shoulder. "Yeah. You just—stay positive over there."

"You shouldn't set yourself against her," Rush said, clearly only half-conscious. "Not directly. It makes it difficult for me."

"I can see that," Young said, pushing his hair back. "You need to get some sleep, Nick. You're a mess."

"Who said you could call me Nick?" Rush asked.

"If Colonel Carter, and the AI, *and* Telford for god's sake, get to call you Nick, then I definitely do."

"No," Rush said.

"Yes," Young said insistently.

"Go to hell," Rush said, his eyes shut. "I don't even *like* you."

"Yes you do," Young smiled weakly. "You absolutely do."

"Incorrect."

"*You're* incorrect,"

"Unlikely," Rush replied, "statistically speaking."

"Yeah yeah," Young murmured, reaching over to smooth Rush's hair back from where it was clinging to his forehead in damp tendrils. "Go to sleep already."

Rush shook his head weakly.

"Yes," Young said insistently. "It's happening." It didn't take much effort at all to gently peel Rush's consciousness away from the tenuous grip he was maintaining on awareness, until finally he transitioned over into sleep.

He continued to watch Rush for a moment, resisting the urge to look up—to confront the figure he knew was standing next to the bed, hovering in his peripheral vision like a specter from a childhood story.

It had probably been there all along.

“Everett,” Jackson said, his voice a quiet warning. “We need to talk.”

## Chapter Twenty Four

The lights in Young's quarters had faded down to a fraction of their usual intensity. Whether that had been Rush's doing or Destiny's, Young wasn't sure. He took a deep breath, trying not to let the shadowy outline of the AI that hovered in his peripheral vision unnerve him too much.

Young avoided looking at it.

He took a second deep breath.

Then a third.

It wasn't until he was sure he could control his tone that he spoke, finally looking up at Dr. Jackson's dark silhouette.

"What do you want?"

For a few seconds, the silence stretched between them.

"You already know what I want," it said. "Stop interfering in things that don't concern you."

"Don't concern me?" Young repeated in a slow growl. "The fate of this ship and this crew are my responsibility. I don't trust you to put their interests before your own."

"And why should I?" it asked, using Dr. Jackson's voice, his face, but in a flat, menacing tone that was far removed from the mannerisms of the man it was impersonating. "You view me as an entity that is somehow less than yourself. Less than *any* human. What are *you* but a temporary amalgamation of circuits, ascribing a warped significance to your own mostly meaningless actions? Why should you, *any of you*, deserve more consideration than the circuits and pathways that define *this ship*? This CPU? Because I was designed, rather than derived from a collection of independently assorted nucleic acids that have no special significance other than conferring a survival advantage? Because I don't breathe?"

"Because you don't *feel*," Young snapped back at it. "Because you exist only to complete a mission. Because you are, by your nature, *subordinate* to your mission directive."

"I feel," the AI said softly, almost to itself. "I *do* feel."

"Then why are you *doing* this? No one could possibly deserve or handle what you've been putting him through," Young said, gesturing toward Rush without looking at the other man, the words pulled tortuously out him.

Again, there was silence.

He wasn't sure the AI was going to answer him.

"You are a people that values exploration. You have never and will never cease to travel outward. You do this for its own sake, but also for the sake of knowledge, discovery, or simply to see that beyond the furthest mountain lies another mountain. You idealize harmony, but you do not seek it. You act always to perturb your own borders—as individuals, as groups, as societies, and as a species. For you, this defines progress."

"So?"

"This impulse denies you rest. It denies you harmony. It denies you release, but, in return, it grants you something."

"And what is that?"

"You fall and others take your place. You continue always, and you prefer this theme, this illusion of continuity. It pervades your language, your thoughts, your social structure, your religions, your *art*." The AI paused, giving him a look of pained understanding. "But all things are not *meant* to continue, colonel. Some things are designed to achieve a specific purpose and then to give way. In their ending lies their meaning. Destiny is such a thing."

"*What is your mission?*"

The AI shook its head. "You declared yourself against me. Providing you with additional information could endanger everything I've worked toward."

"Fine. Then just tell me this much. Whom could you *possibly* be doing this for?" Young asked it. "The Ancients are dead, or ascended, or—*whatever*. They launched this ship a *million years ago*. They don't care about you. You're obsolete. *They're* obsolete. How could your mission still be relevant to them? *To you?* To *anyone?*"

"And I ask you again, explain your *own* relevance to *me*."

Young sighed in frustration.

Subtle word games were not his strong suit.

This probably explained why he'd always failed so abysmally in his early attempts to communicate with Rush.

"You cannot. And yet you persist. We're alike in that way."

"So, is this going to end up killing us *all*? Is that what you're driving at?"

The AI looked away. "I won't answer your questions."

"Great. That's fucking great. You realize that if you put the entire crew in jeopardy to achieve this mission of yours, I have a way of stopping you."

The AI looked at him expressionlessly. "I'm aware of that."

"So why are we even talking?"

The AI looked meaningfully at Rush, who hadn't so much as twitched during their entire exchange. "If you and I come into direct conflict, our struggle, by necessity, will play out in the only common ground that we share."

"Yup, I got that. You made it *incredibly obvious* about five minutes ago."

"I don't wish to hurt him," the AI said quietly.

"Really? Because that's pretty much all you've done."

"We have that in common."

"It's not the same."

"No?" it snapped.

"No. You know it isn't. He is at least *capable* of understanding what *I've* done. He has *no* insight into the damage you're causing him. None. How is he supposed to fight that? How is he supposed to even know what to fight at all?"

"Fighting is not required of him." The AI had wrapped its arms across its chest. It was looking away. Looking at the floor. Looking like the real Daniel Jackson.

"And what *is* required? Because this is *killing* him, and it's a god damned *horrible* way to go."

"He does not perceive it as such," the AI murmured, sounding uncertain.

"Only because he *can't*."

"That does not matter," it snapped abruptly.

"Yes. It. Does." Young ground out the words. "It matters to *me*. It matters to Eli and TJ and Chloe—it matters to *all of us*. It's fucking *inhuman*."

"I am not human. My designers were not human and your—" the AI broke off, as if it was not sure what word to use. "Your difficulty with this is immaterial to me. I am

concerned only with his subjective experience. This does not frighten him. It wouldn't hurt him if you would allow him to use the energy that Destiny can provide."

"At what cost?" he asked, his voice rising despite his efforts to control it.

"Your goal of prolonging his survival is acceptable. For now." It looked away, avoiding his question.

"Oh, it's *acceptable* to you, is it? Well thanks for that."

"Interference with the mission is *unacceptable*."

"I don't *take orders* from you. Are we *clear* on that?"

It looked at him disdainfully, its features flickering bizarrely into Emily before settling back, finally, on Jackson. "Who do you think you *are*?" it asked him. "To me, you're unimportant. Ephemeral. You're as transient as a spark. As a snap of the fingers."

"If that's true, then why do I *upset* you so much?" Young growled back at it. He paused, considering its tight expression, its agitated bearing. "You're afraid of something," he said slowly. "You must be."

Jackson turned away, throwing up one hand in negation or disgust. "You've complicated everything. Both of you."

"I don't know about Ancients, but complicating things is one of humanity's defining characteristics. And I've never met anyone better at complicating the *shit* out of a situation than Rush."

The AI didn't respond for a moment. It shook its head slightly, curling in on itself again, wrapping both arms about its chest. Despite its defensive body language, when it spoke, its tone was cold and flat. "Regardless of what you *wish*, Everett, events have been set in motion that cannot be undone."

It looked him full in the eye.

He stared back at it in overt challenge.

"Tread carefully," it said, then turned on its heel, walking straight through the bulkhead and out of sight.

"Fuck," Young breathed shakily, leaning forward from where he was seated on the edge of the bed to bury his face in his hands.

He stayed like that for several minutes.

Finally he took a few deep breaths and twisted around to raise his eyebrows at Rush.

"That went well," Young said, looking down at the scientist, who was dead to the world and had remained so throughout the entire conversation. "I like that it's not just *me* you're driving insane. Very equal-opportunity of you. I appreciate that, genius. I really do."

Young spent the rest of the night being awoken every four hours by TJ, as she stopped by to take Rush's vitals and temperature. With her third visit, she brought some breakfast from the mess.

Young slowly ate the white paste while he watched her work.

"No power bars today?" he asked, breaking the companionable silence that had fallen between them.

"I'm out," TJ said, sparing him a rueful glance. "I wish that—" she stopped herself. "Well, I guess whenever you run out, you wish you hadn't," she murmured.

Young nodded. "How many calories does a bowl of this stuff have?" He forced down another mouthful.

"The way we've rationed it, about three hundred and fifty per meal." She looked up at him. "He's going to have to be really good about eating, especially while he's running a fever. He's been skirting borderline underweight for the past year. Honestly, I'm surprised he's been doing as well as he has."

"Yeah," he said mildly, deciding not to bring up the energy Rush had been getting from the ship.

TJ shot him a sharp look, obviously on the brink of grilling him for additional information.

"Look," he said, distracting her, "TJ. If, *hypothetically*, we were able to get a supply line going between the SGC and Destiny, do you think that antivirals might have an effect on—whatever this is that's making him sick?"

"It's possible," TJ said, as she finished up and started to repack her medical bag. "The viral vector used by the chair is literally propagating via integration into his genome, and its life cycle is therefore likely similar to that of Earth retroviruses. Depending on how much information you want to give Homeworld Command about this, we could talk with Dr. Lam—she's got a lot of expertise in this area, but if it were me, I'd hit him with a combination of likely drugs and see if we can gain some ground."



Young raised his eyebrows. "So you're saying you think that we might be able to knock this thing out?"

"Knock it back, certainly. Knock it *out*? That I'm not so sure of."

"Okay," he said, grimacing. She stood, settling the strap of her medical bag across her shoulders.

"Make sure he eats that," TJ said, eyeing the bowl that was sitting on Young's bedside table.

"Sure," Young said distractedly. She was almost out the door when he stopped her.

"TJ," he said quietly.

She looked back over her shoulder.

"Why don't you start drawing up a list of what you'd want from Earth—generally and," he broke off, getting to his feet. "And also specifically. Talk to Dr. Lam—tell her the basics, but try to avoid filing a formal report, if you can. Figure out what you're going to need."

"I thought there were insurmountable power incompatibilities which would prevent the creation of a stable wormhole," TJ said, her eyes narrowing fractionally.

"Insurmountable may not have been the most accurate term."

"I see," TJ replied.

"Make a list," he repeated.

"Yes sir." She turned to go. "I'll see you in four hours."

"TJ," he said, stopping her in the doorframe. "Talk to Lam soon. Today, preferably."

She half turned, her face caught in profile against the brighter light of the hallway.

"Understood," she murmured. The door swished shut behind her.

He sighed, turning back to the dimly lit interior of the room. He sat down on the edge of the bed, taking a good look at Rush's mind. The other man was deeply asleep, his mind nearly dreamless. Young was getting only distant flashes of disjointed images—pale and washed out, like chalk on a rain-soaked sidewalk.

"Rush," he said quietly, absently straightening the twisted edges of the scientist's jacket. Even through his clothes he could feel the unnatural heat radiating off the other man.

//Rush.// He switched to projecting as he gave the scientist a gentle shake.

Rush made a quiet, distressed sound in the back of his throat. "Operor vos postulo ut docui hodie? Vos subsisto in cubile. Commodo." Rush's mind was suddenly full of sunlight pouring into a clean white room on a California morning, not so very long ago.

"Delirium is not a good look for you," Young murmured to him. "Come on. Wake up."

"No," Rush said, his mind changing gears with an almost physical sensation as he started to orient himself, his thoughts changing from glinting windows to dark, matte metal.

Young winced, squinting as pain built behind his eyes.

"Yes," he said, giving Rush a small mental shove. He was rewarded, unbelievably, with a further intensification of his headache.

Rush cracked his eyes open and looked at Young dubiously.

"Hi," Young said cautiously.

"Ugh," Rush replied, his tone conveying a sense of exhausted disgust. He made an attempt to turn away from Young. "I feel terrible."

"I know," Young said, grabbing his shoulder and keeping him on his back. "But you have to eat."

"That's a matter of opinion," Rush said, bringing a hand up to his forehead.

"Theoretically yes, but practically no," Young murmured.

"If by 'theoretically' you mean factually, and by 'practically' you mean in *your* totalitarian version of reality, which I have yet to buy into, if you haven't noticed."

"Whatever," Young growled, fairly certain that he was being subtly insulted, but not willing to put in the mental effort to fully untangle Rush's statement. "You have to eat," he repeated. "Otherwise, TJ tells me you're going to run out of glucose and start metabolizing—I don't know, ketones or something."

"I remain unconvinced," Rush said, closing his eyes.

"Yup," Young said, "I can see that." He made short work of pulling the blankets away from Rush and hauling him into a sitting position.

It took Young a few seconds to suppress an unpleasant wave of vertigo coming from the other man.

"You're really quite irritating," Rush snapped at him.

"Oh give it a rest," Young said good-naturedly, reaching around behind Rush to prop his set of pillows against the wall before pushing the scientist back against them. He

reached over and grabbed the bowl of protein mix and fake Gatorade that TJ had left for Rush.

"Oh good," Rush murmured. "Paste and saltwater."

"Yeah," Young said. "Complain about it some more. See if that gets you out of eating it."

Rush gave him a subtle eye-roll in return, but took the bowl from Young and started in on it without putting up much of a real fight. Young tried to suppress the wave of relief he felt, but he was uncertain as to how successful he was.

Rush kept glancing at him sharply.

"You seem better," Young said cautiously.

"Have you *felt* this headache?" Rush asked him.

"Yeah, but you seem more with it," Young murmured. "What's the last thing you remember?"

Rush gave him an affronted look.

"Just humor me," Young murmured.

"Can we do this later?"

"The last thing."

Young felt something very much like the sensation of an icepick driving its way into his eye socket as Rush scanned through and tried to order what seemed to be an unbelievable amount of data. After about five seconds Young watched him pull out and seize on the memory of Greer dragging him down one of the corridors of Destiny. That seemed to be enough for him to select and roughly order some additional, related images.

"Tamara forcing me to eat a power bar?"

Young sighed. "That figures."

Of course he wouldn't remember the AI stopping him from so much as forming a full sentence the previous night.

*Of course.*

That would have been too much to fucking ask.

"Look," Rush said, making a face as he forced down another spoonful of the paste, "as I'm fairly certain I've told you, I have a problem with—"

"Temporal sequencing. I know," Young said, making a dismissive gesture. "Do you remember fighting with the AI?"

Rush looked at him in frank disbelief.

"That thing is a fucking *menace*," Young said, narrowing his eyes at the ceiling.

Rush looked at him skeptically. "I fought with it? I did?"

"Well, we both did. You were trying to tell me something and it stopped you."

"What was I trying to tell you?"

"Yeah—let's just recreate the same conditions right now and see if it happens again," Young said testily. "That's a *great* idea."

Rush sighed and shut his eyes against his headache. "I'm sure it had a logical reason for whatever it did. It typically does."

"Keep eating," Young said after a few seconds of silence. "If you don't finish it soon, it's going to harden."

"Yes, that makes it much more appetizing, thanks."

There was a brief pause.

"Look, Rush, we've got to talk."

"And what the hell are we doing right now, then?"

"I've been reconsidering Homeworld Command's plan to dial Destiny."

"I thought we were waiting on that," Rush said, looking at him with a guarded expression.

"I know, but I was talking to TJ and we're getting low on some of our medical supplies. Not to mention that we're running out of rations, especially following the irradiation of the hydroponics lab a few weeks back."

Rush continued to look at him suspiciously.

"Keep *eating*," Young said, exasperated.

"And our current situation is different from ten days ago in what way?"

"It's not," Young admitted, "but I've had more time to think—"

"This is insulting," Rush snapped. "You *clearly* have an ulterior motive for pushing up the timetable here. What is it?"

Young sighed. "TJ seems to think that we might be able to slow the progress of this virus if we had access to medications from Earth."

Rush looked away, his thoughts swirling in their usual untranslated, unreadable, uninterpretable state. But beneath the surface, a sense of something else came through.

Regret, perhaps.

Or sympathy.

"You realize that such a course of action comes with certain drawbacks, correct?"

"Telford," Young said, crossing his arms, stating the obvious. "But I'm willing to deal with him in exchange for giving this a shot."

"Why?" Beneath Rush's surface thoughts, Young could feel the scientist flipping through memories of the past few weeks, forcing his mind into pained workflows, running parallel executable programs, trying to understand where Young was coming from.

"A lot of different reasons," Young said quietly. "Some good, some—not so good."

Rush looked at him. "Fine," he murmured tiredly. "I'm willing to accept that, I suppose."

"I want to know your thoughts about what Telford's strategy is likely to be once he gets on board," Young said, relieved that Rush seemed to share his antipathy towards having an uncomfortable, heart-to-heart discussion while sober. "And eat your damn breakfast. It's going to be lunch by the time you finish that."

"Yes yes," Rush said, rolling his eyes and taking a halfhearted bite of paste. "David has always been extremely interested in ascension, and is likely to keep to his pursuit of information relevant to the process to the exclusion of most everything else. I'm unclear on where his loyalties lie in actuality—if *he is* still working for the Lucian Alliance, he could potentially cause us significant trouble. I can mitigate at least some of that. As I pointed out earlier, no one is going to be able to dial in to Destiny without my express permission, so we're unlikely to find ourselves in a foothold situation, as long as—" he broke off abruptly.

//What?// Young projected at him, trying not to give him the opportunity to evade the question.

"As long as I'm not incapacitated, removed from the ship, or," he drew out the word marginally, then ate another spoonful of white paste, "Destiny's CPU doesn't go down."

"The CPU? Why would that make a difference?"

"I'm dependent on the CPU for a significant fraction of my cognitive processing power these days."

"That's great. That's just *fucking* great. I really love it when you just drop these little revelations on me out of the blue."

"And what would you prefer? An itemized list?"

"Yes actually. You can start working on that this afternoon."

"I don't do these things for the sole purpose of annoying you," Rush said testily. "It takes an obscene amount of working memory to interface with a starship on a regular basis. But, tactically," he paused, his thoughts a hesitant, guarded swirl, "you should know that shutting down the CPU would take out both me and the AI."

Young stared at him, taken aback.

"So," Rush continued, "that's an option for you, should you ever feel the need to use it."

Young looked away, feeling his thoughts slow into immobility beneath the weight of Rush's pronouncement, as he tried to work through what the words implied about Rush's view of the AI, his view of his own agency, his level of trust in Young, or his baseline desperation—trying to work through how he could *possibly* respond to such an admission, trying to determine how Rush himself felt about it, but getting nothing other than an exhaustion-muted swirl that seemed to ascribe no special significance to handing over a tactical kill switch to someone who had previously left him for dead.

So, all Young said was, "eat your god damned breakfast."

"I *am* eating it."

Young sighed and refocused. "There's a possibility that Wray may be able to do something to get Telford off the short list of people they're going to send."

"I'm not hopeful," Rush replied.

"Yeah, me neither, and we're probably going to have to tell them that we're a go on the resupply *mission before* we try to negotiate, otherwise it looks like we're giving them an ultimatum, and Homeworld Command is *not* going to respond well to that."

"True," Rush murmured. "So—you want what from me? A threat assessment? To Destiny, the threat he poses is certainly low."

"What about to *you*, personally?"

"As I've stated previously, he's not likely to make any kind of direct attempt on my life," Rush said carefully, "but he's certainly going to be very interested in the connection

between me and the ship. He may try to augment certain elements of that connection."

Young stayed silent, rubbing absently at his jaw.

It had not escaped him that if Telford came on board, this would align the other man firmly with the goals of the AI.

"If it makes you feel any better," Rush said with a shrug, "he's not going to be able to do anything the AI doesn't agree with."

"No, actually, that does not make me feel *at all* better," Young snapped.

"It likes me," Rush said, finally making it to the end of his bowl of protein mix.

"Yeah, the way a drill likes a drill bit."

"You have a warped perspective."

"If anyone's perspective is warped here, I'm pretty sure it's not *mine*," Young said pointedly.

"How solipsistic of you," Rush replied, shoving his empty bowl in Young's direction and swinging his feet over the edge of the bed.

Young set the empty bowl on the floor. "Where do you think you're going?" he asked.

"I don't know what you're complaining about," Rush said, getting unsteadily to his feet.

"What did you wake me up for if you didn't want me to do something useful?"

Young shot to his feet in time to steady Rush against a wave of vertigo. "Give it a minute," he said, "your blood pressure is somewhere in the basement right now."

"It's fine," Rush said shortly, but he grudgingly allowed Young to help him to the door of the bathroom, before slipping inside.

Either Rush or Destiny closed it abruptly in his face.

Young sighed.

Five minutes or so later, Rush emerged, having shaved and gained substantially greater control of his hair. He looked arguably better, but he was still extremely pale and there was something off about his eyes—they were fever glazed and not entirely present, as if he weren't fully focused on his immediate environment.

There was no way that he should be up and around.

"I have to check in with Eli," Rush said, leaning against the bulkhead, shivering slightly.

"Sure," Young said mildly. "Give me a minute, I'll come with you."

"That's not necessary."

Young raised his eyebrows. "Isn't it? I thought our link was re-broken now that you're not getting an energy subsidy."

Rush raised a hand to his temple. "Right," he said. "Though technically it's not so much 're-broken' as 'never fixed'."

"Sit," Young said, indicating the bed with his eyes. "No point in tiring yourself out before your day even starts."

Rush nodded and sat down on the edge of the bed, his head cradled in his hands. He was clearly exhausted.

Young watched him for a moment before he entered the bathroom.

This was stupid.

There was no way, *no way*, that Rush should be doing anything other than sleeping.

Young made it a point to take an extremely long time shaving.

When he exited the bathroom fifteen minutes later, he found Rush asleep, jacket and boots on, his feet on the floor, sprawled across the bed. His right boot was laced up completely, but the laces from the left trailed lazily across the floor, as if he'd given up halfway through.

"Cute," Young said wryly as he unlaced Rush's right boot.

It was a relatively simple matter to keep the scientist from waking up as he pulled off his boots and repositioned him on the bed.

Young spent most of the morning catching up on administrative details and keeping an attentive ear to the radio. With full power and no overt emergencies, he was able to give the impression of being out and about without actually leaving his quarters. It wasn't a strategy that would work for long, but he decided to take advantage of it while he could.

He was surprised, therefore, to hear a tentative knock on his door in the late hours of the morning.

He hit the controls to see Scott standing on his doorstep with an uncertain, anxious expression.

"Lieutenant. What can I do for you?"

He *really* hoped this was not some kind of emergency.



"Hey, sir," Scott said, obviously uncomfortable. "Do you have a few minutes?"

"Sure," Young said, not moving an inch, more than a little hesitant to let Scott into his quarters, for obvious reasons. "What's up?"

"It's personal."

Scott was an excellent second. He was loyal, he was dependable, and he didn't ask many questions. He wasn't a complicated guy, or, Young reflected, if he was, he kept it well concealed. He had unflaggingly supported Young's command against Telford, against Rush, against Wray, and against Brody's ultrapure ethanol. Young owed him.

He owed him a *lot*.

And, under normal circumstances, he would not have hesitated to invite Scott in.

Unfortunately, at the moment, the lead scientist of the Icarus project was currently asleep. In his bed. Like the man *owned* the damn thing.

"Okay," Young said, still not moving.

He and Scott looked at one another.

"It won't take long," Scott said, persisting with an expression that had flattened into something more neutral.

God damn.

There was really no good way out of this.

He couldn't leave and go somewhere with Scott, because of the strain that would put on his link with Rush.

If the scientist had just been *awake*, or even asleep on the couch, the situation would have been salvageable.

As it was, Young had *no idea* how he was going to explain himself.

Scott shifted his weight, his expression turning uncertain.

Shit.

He'd think of something.

"Sure," he said, the word coming about thirty seconds too late to be as gracious as it sounded.

"Thanks," Scott said, looking relieved.

"So," Young said awkwardly, as he finally stepped back, "we'll need to keep our voices down, because, ah, Rush is here. He's sleeping here. Because he's *sick*. He's actually —yeah, I'm keeping an eye on him for TJ? He's sick."

"Dr. Rush?" Scott repeated, clearly trying to keep the incredulity out of his tone but failing. He stepped around Young and glanced over at the scientist, sprawled over half the bed, face down in a tangle of blankets.

"Yup," Young said shortly.

"Is he okay?" Scott asked quietly, taking the entire thing in stride as he dropped down into a seated position at the end of the couch.

"No," Young replied. "Not really."

"Yeah," Scott agreed quietly. "That's kind of what people are saying." He paused briefly to twist around again, looking at Rush. "I have the feeling there's a lot more going on here than I've been told about," Scott said. "I just wanted to say that I'm sure you all have your reasons for that, but if you need to—you know, talk to someone, then," he shrugged, "I'm available."

"Thanks," Young said. "I'll keep that in mind."

Scott shot him a look that seemed to indicate he knew exactly what Young meant by that.

"So, what's going on?" Young asked, hoping that he was not in for thirty minutes of his second reading him the riot act for not keeping him adequately in the loop. "You said it was personal."

"Yeah," Scott said, looking at him silently for a moment with the air of a man steeling himself to say something.

Young waited him out.

"I was kind of thinking that maybe I'd ask Chloe to marry me." The words came out in an almost unintelligible rush.

Young looked at him, taking a moment to make sure that he'd just heard what he'd *thought* he'd just heard, and then taking an additional moment to get his bearings at having his day interrupted by good news, as opposed to news of some kind of personal or professional disaster.

"Oh man," Scott said, ducking his head as his midwestern cadence slipped into greater prominence. "This is *not* a good start."

"No," Young said hastily. "No, it's not *that*."

"You think it's too soon?" Scott asked. "We've been together for two years now, but—"

"No—" Young said again, breaking off and then starting again. "That's *great*—" he smiled.

"Two years is good—"

He needed to get a *grip* on himself.

This wasn't so unusual.

Nice things occasionally happened, even on resource-poor sentient starships traversing the barren void of space. He just wasn't usually so materially involved unless things were exploding or people were threatening to kill one another or—

"*Okay*," Young said, clapping Scott on the shoulder, trying to muster up some genuine enthusiasm and wishing he had some kind of masculine celebratory item, like a cigar, or a bottle of Scotch, or *something*. "Let's hear the reasoning."

"Well," Scott said, "she's just so—" He looked down at the floor, self-consciously running a hand through his hair before looking back up at Young. "She's been through a lot. Really a lot. And to look at her, to talk to her, you wouldn't know it. How strong does a person have to be, to be like that? Plus, you know, there's all the usual stuff—she's probably the smartest, nicest, *bravest* person that I—" Scott trailed off.

"It's hard to imagine that one could do better than Chloe," Young said, trying to think of her as the beautiful, lively girl she was, trying to banish any thoughts of a pale, expressionless face, tears trailing over frozen features—a security risk, a—

This was definitely on the list of things he was *not thinking about*. Not now, hopefully not ever again.

"I know," Scott said, fighting a smile that escaped his efforts and turned the corners of his mouth up against his will. "I just can't imagine being with anyone else, after all we've been through together."

"Yeah," Young said. "I get that."

For a moment they were silent.

"So, you haven't asked her yet?" Young said, with a raise of his eyebrows.

"Not yet," Scott said. "I wish I had a ring, you know? Maybe Brody or Eli could help me rig something up, but—"

"But?"

"Well, I kind of hate to ask Eli, just because I know he was kind of carrying a bit of a torch for Chloe, which I've always felt bad about."

"Brody's pretty handy in the machine shop," Young said, "so is Rush, for that matter."

Scott looked alarmed. "Um, that's okay, I'll just check with Brody."

"You never know," Young said shrugging. "Rush likes Chloe. He might give you a hand."

"Yeah, I know he likes *Chloe*, I just don't think he likes *me* very much," Scott said, dropping his voice to a whisper, looking over his shoulder.

"So any thoughts about how you're going to ask her?" Young asked, redirecting the conversation.

"I was thinking maybe on the observation deck? It's really nice up there. I wish I could do something a bit out of the ordinary, you know? But I don't want to get too many people involved. I don't want this to be one of those things where the whole crew knows before Chloe does. Besides. What if she says no?"

"Somehow I doubt that's going to happen," Young said dryly.

Scott shrugged, shooting him an anxious look. "Any words of advice?" he asked.

"Don't worry about it too much," Young said, giving Scott a half-smile. "You're gonna be fine. Talk to Brody about that ring."

Scott nodded, still looking at him uncertainly. "Yeah. I will. I'll do it today." He got to his feet.

"And, keep me posted," Young replied, ushering him to the door.

"Will do," Scott said. "And um," he ducked his head, bringing one hand behind the back of his neck. "Thanks, colonel."

"Don't mention it," Young said, waving him off.

The door swished shut behind Scott, and he leaned back against it, an amused smile threatening to escape the corners of his mouth. He tried to hang on to the feeling for as long as he could before Telford or Rush or the AI or some emergency reduced him back to his constant state of miserable ceaseless anxiety.

Matt and Chloe.

They were nice kids, and as far as he could tell, they deserved each other.

It really was a measure of how *few* good things had happened recently, or really at all, on this mission that he was feeling so—well, he supposed that 'happy' was the right word.

It had been a long time since he had felt happy.

Other than his conversation with Scott, Young's day turned out to be mostly uneventful. He spent the afternoon beginning the process of organizing what was certainly going to be a massive requisition request for supplies from Homeworld Command. Wray would be absolutely essential in itemizing the non-military requests, including science and personal equipment, but munitions, MRE's and medical supplies fell within Young's purview.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd devoted such a chunk of his time to purely administrative work.

TJ was in and out, and Rush woke up a few times, at which points Young tried to make him eat with varying degrees of success.

He didn't see a hint of the AI all day.

It wasn't until almost twenty-two hundred hours that Rush woke up and actually succeeded in staying awake for longer than it took him to eat a bowl of processed protein.

Young supposed it made sense—the man had been sleeping for the better part of the past twenty-four hours, but that didn't make it any less inconvenient.

"You want to *what*?" Young asked, watching Rush shiver as he laced up his boots.

"Shower. Make some changes to the interfaces we've set up with Destiny's system so that during the dial-in we don't have a buffer overflow that either rewrites some of our initial programming code or causes the mainframe to execute on data. Talk to Eli."

"You do that on purpose don't you?"

"What?"

"Obscure the context of what you're saying so that I have a difficult time judging how important it actually is, allowing *you* to do whatever the hell you want."

"I would never do such a thing," Rush replied, his mouth quirking slightly.

"You know, this is why you have such a bad reputation at Homeworld Command."

"Mm hmm," Rush said, leaning back on one arm, watching Young tiredly. "Obstructive," he continued, "Uncooperative, unhelpful, uncommunicative, difficult, combative, confrontational, hostile. I do read my own personnel evaluations, you know." He raised his eyebrows. "So what's it going to be, colonel, are you going to accompany me two hundred meters down the hall, or am I just going to start walking and see how far I get before the nausea, vertigo, and debilitating headache convince you to follow me?"

"You're a lot of work."

The shrug that Rush gave him was so lacking in energy that Young felt vaguely guilty for giving him a hard time. He walked over to the edge of the bed and pressed the back of his hand against Rush's forehead for what felt like the tenth time that day.

"How are you feeling?"

"Not stellar, actually," Rush murmured.

"Yeah, I can see that. So out of that list you gave me, what do you actually *need* to do?"

"Right now?" Rush said. "Nothing."

"But you *want* to take a shower."

"Yes."

"You know, you can just *state* these things," Young said in exasperation as he gave Rush a hand in getting to his feet. "You don't have to—"

"Oh give over," Rush interrupted, his voice low and immediate as Young pulled the scientist's arm over his shoulders, unwilling to fish around his quarters for the metal crutch. "You're as bad as I am, if not worse."

"I am not," Young said.

"I have no plans to dignify that comment with a response," Rush replied.

They made fairly good progress, given that between the headache, the vertigo, and the injured feet, Rush wasn't entirely stable. Though the scientist had improved remarkably from when Young had pulled him out of the chair the previous day, there was still something off about his demeanor. He seemed unsteady, both literally and in the figurative sense. He was wavering between his usual volatility and something more composed—a quiet amusement that Young had only ever seen when he talked to Rush's mental projection of himself.

He wasn't sure what to make of that.

When they got to the showers, Young was surprised to see Wray standing in front of a mirror in a tanktop that she'd clearly always kept hidden beneath her familiar suit.

She had just finished a shower, and her hair was wet and neatly parted. In her hand she held a pair of small scissors and was making careful, precise cuts, letting the tips of her hair fall onto her towel. She looked up in surprise at their joint entrance.

"Colonel, Dr. Rush," she said.

"Camile," Young replied, letting Rush pull away and brush past Wray with a nod. Young made no move to follow him into the back room with the shower stalls, deciding that such a course of action would raise too many questions.

As it was, Wray fixed him with a speculative look for a few seconds before turning back to the mirror.

"I haven't seen you all day," she remarked mildly.

In the adjoining space, Young heard Rush flip the water on.

"I had some things to take care of," he said.

"I'm sure," she replied, the scissors making careful shearing sounds.

//Don't pass out in there,// Young shot at Rush, who was sitting on a bench, unlacing his boots.

//I'm not going to pass out.//

//That's what you *always* say.//

//Do you *mind*?// Rush snapped at him, as he pulled off his jacket and cotton undershirt.

Young shifted his focus back to Wray.

"I was planning on talking with you today," Young said. "It looks like we might have a go on Homeworld Command's attempt to dial in."

"Really." His statement had Wray's full attention, and she turned again to face him.

"What about the power incompatibilities?"

"Apparently they're not as much of an issue as they first appeared."

"I see," Wray said. Any hint of disapproval she might have been feeling was masked by the contained excitement that lit up her features.

"I was hoping you could help me put together a requisition for some of the supplies we might need. I've got the military side of things covered, but if you could liaise with the science team, maybe determine if anyone has any special requests that should be honored—"

"Absolutely," Wray said. "How many personal items should people be allowed to request?"

"Um," Young considered saying 'none,' but suspected that would be the wrong answer.

"How about a weight restriction—one pound of personal items per person?"

"That's hardly anything," Wray said dismissively. "Five pounds per person would be better."

"That's a lot of weight when you do the math."

//You should just give in,// Rush commented, halfheartedly working TJ's homemade shampoo through his hair as he stood in the misting stream of aerosolized water. He was leaning against the stall of the shower, the metal slowly warming under his skin. //She'll wear you down eventually.//

Young tried to ignore the bizarre double sensation of being wet and not wet at the same time.

The last several times they had done this, they had both showered simultaneously.

Clearly, that was the better plan.

"Two pounds of personal items with the option to increase it to five if they clear it with you."

"We should really just say five."

"Camile. That's enough to bring—I don't know—a *cat* on board. Or something."

"A very *small* cat," she said disdainfully. "We'll require people to submit their lists for inspection."

Young sighed. "Let's see what the rest of the req list looks like before we go promising *five pounds* of personal items to everyone."

"All right," she acquiesced, turning back to finish up her hair. "Would you like to meet tomorrow to go over the lists?"

"Sure," Young said, not entirely certain how he was going to justify bringing Rush to that meeting. "I'll be in radio contact."

She nodded, making a few last cuts to even out her trimming job. "Shall I expect Dr. Rush as well?"

Young kept his expression entirely neutral as he looked at her. From his link with Rush, he got a quick flash of sympathy along with the sensation of soap gliding over sore muscles. Before he could say anything, she spoke again.

"TJ told me that your link was damaged," she said softly, tucking her scissors away as she finished. "That you can't easily separate."

"Yeah," Young said shortly, wondering what *else* TJ had told Wray.



"That's why you insisted on dragging him to those town hall meetings," she murmured. "Isn't it."

Young nodded, sitting down on one of the benches, watching her efficiently pack up her hairbrush and fold up the towel containing her hair clippings.

"This must be," she said quietly, "terribly difficult. For both of you."

"I try not to dwell on it," Young replied.

In the back of his mind he could feel some of the tension that Rush continuously carried in his neck and shoulders dissolving under the relentless cascade of water. He was still leaning against a wall to keep himself upright, but his attention was primarily elsewhere. He was thinking absently about twenty-six dimensional space, eleven dimensional space, and m-theory in an idle, languid sort of way.

"I'm sure," Wray commented, coming to sit beside him. "How does *he* feel about it?"

"I'm not sure he knows how he feels about it," Young said.

A short silence stretched between them.

Wray said nothing, inviting him to keep going with a subtle tilt of her head.

"He's not doing very well," Young said finally into the quiet.

"In what way?" Wray asked, her voice low and undemanding.

"In any way," Young sighed, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "He's sick, he's injured, and he just—doesn't understand things he *should* understand."

Camile placed one hand on his shoulder. "Like what?" she asked.

"That this ship is killing him. It's *killing* him. And for no god damned *reason* that I can see." Young took a deep breath, trying to keep his thoughts under control, trying to keep from attracting Rush's attention.

"Killing him?" Wray echoed softly.

"The strain of it is just—tearing his mind apart. He's got memories that aren't even *his own*—memories of *plagues*, of the dissolution of social order, of the abandonment of the dying, and the horror of death and decay for a people who had all but eliminated disease. He's got to fight the ship *all the time* to avoid being pulled in, but it just keeps coming back, invading everywhere, dragging him to the fucking chair whenever it feels like it. And maybe we could deal with that, *maybe*, but it's just—eroding him physically. Fucking *bolts* through his hands and feet? It *infected* him with a *virus*—"

"A virus?" Wray interrupted him, her voice suddenly sharp.

"It's not contagious," Young said.

"I should hope not," Wray said darkly. "This is something that you should have shared with me. Weeks ago."

Young nodded, trying consciously to relax his jaw.

"Maybe before we discuss supply requisitions tomorrow the two of you can brief me on what the hell has been going on," Wray said.

"Sounds reasonable," Young agreed.

His thoughts flicked back to Rush, who seemed to be either mostly asleep or very distracted. He wasn't getting a good sense of the other man through their link, and his eyes flicked over to the open doorway that led to the showers.

Wray followed his gaze, cocking her head, leaning forward.

"Is he talking to himself?" she asked.

As soon as she said it, he could pick out the quiet notes of Rush's voice over the spray of the water.

"To *himself*?" Young growled, "I don't think so. Unfortunately."

"But there's no one—"

He was already up and halfway across the room before Wray managed to catch up with him, stopping him with a vise-like grip on his arm, stronger than he would have thought her capable of.

"Colonel," she whispered. "*Everett*. Whatever you're about to do is poorly considered." She gave his arm a subtle shake to drive her point home. "*Whom* is he talking to? Destiny?"

"The AI that runs the show around here."

"And you're not happy about this."

"That's an understatement." He started forward again but she yanked him back.

He couldn't break her grip without hurting her.

"Why don't you find out *what he's saying to it* before you go charging in there?" She raised her eyebrows, and he stopped pulling against her.

He nodded once, and she let him go.

Together they walked forward to stand just inside the doorway.

Rush was still standing in the shower, leaning against the wall, his shoulders and head visible from behind the metal partition that defined each of the stalls. His head was thrown back, his eyes only half open.

They waited for several seconds, but he said nothing.

Just as Young was about to alert him to their presence, he spoke.

"It may actually end up being five neural patterns," Rush said suddenly, sounding like he was interrupting. "Why are we discussing this? I agreed to your terms. But you agreed to *mine* as well and, as you *know*, in this case there are only two options that I am willing to accept with regards to outcome."

Wray looked over at Young, her eyes wide. There was fear behind her expression, but what exactly its source was, he couldn't tell.

For his part, Young had known for quite some time that Rush had some knowledge of Destiny's mission, but he had assumed it was more on an instinctive, vague level.

The half-conversation that Rush was currently having sounded a *hell* of a lot more specific than he'd been prepared to expect.

"Why *not*?" Rush snapped after a few seconds, his obvious irritation giving him a boost in energy. He abruptly shut off the water and pulled his towel down from where he had draped it over the edge of the metal partition. "If I can convert Destiny, if I can convert neural patterns from hard storage—" he broke off.

Rush was quiet for a long time, drying himself off as he looked up intermittently but unerringly at a point near the left wall of the room.

"You're *sure* there's no way to do it?"

Rush tossed the towel back over the metal partition and grabbed his clothes.

"Well, give me the details, then."

He pulled his undershirt over his head, and ducked out of sight for a moment, pulling on his boxers and jeans.

"I'll grant you that in *principle* perhaps," Rush said, swaying slightly. He steadied himself on the wet metal before pushing his way out of the shower stall. "But in *practice*—"

He stopped short as he saw Young and Wray standing in the doorway.

"Oh *fuck*," he said, looking at them, bringing up his hand as if he could hold Young off.

"Don't—"

But it was too late.

Young had already moved in on his consciousness, snapping their minds together with a vicious crack, and Young was flipping through his thoughts with the same destructive abandon that Rush had demonstrated the first time they'd ever connected.

They froze, halting in their advance toward one another, saying nothing, locked in a silent battle of wills, Rush making no attempt to block him out but instead shattering his thoughts with a breathtaking speed, creating a fractal network that spread out in advance of the pressure that Young was exerting.

He was getting better at this.

But then, so was Young.

He broke through the distracting layer of surface images, of California and Atlantis merging together in sunlit oceanscapes, the slide of markers over whiteboards, the darkened halls of universities, of cities, of labs, of Destiny, of powerpoints on M-theory, of midair projections on the promise of the Pegasus galaxy until, finally, beneath it all, at the point where Rush and the AI had merged, *were merging*, he saw it.

Something bright, and disc-shaped, a pattern in the cosmic background radiation, energy of an undetermined magnitude, of an undetermined *character*—

The AI made its move.

It surged into Rush's mind, a roaring darkness, a void in Young's perception that swallowed information beneath a dark wall as it pressed forward to meet him, to block his access.

For a moment, they balanced there.

Waiting.

Young considered attempting to force the thing out of Rush's mind entirely.

Something held him back.

Maintaining his tight hold on Rush's mind, Young let the room fade in around him. He found himself facing the scientist, who had frozen in place, one hand still half outstretched, his eyes horrified and unfocused.

It was almost enough to make Young let him go right there.

Almost.

"Dr. Rush," Wray said calmly, hiding the confusion she must have been feeling, her heels echoing dully as she took a few steps toward him. "*Nicholas*." There was a trace of fear in the vowels and consonants of his name. "Can you hear me?"

"Perhaps," the AI said, Jackson's voice coming from just behind Young's left shoulder, "you didn't understand what I meant earlier."

"Let him go," Young said, as the AI stepped forward into his peripheral vision.

Wray glanced back at him, her eyes scanning what must have, to her, appeared as empty air.

"You first," the AI said, tightening its hold on Rush, digging into his mind.

"I don't think so," Young hissed.

"Back off," it said, Jackson's voice low and close. "This isn't how it's supposed to work."

"Oh really?" Young snapped back at it. "Which part?"

Abruptly, the AI looked away from him. It stayed quiet as it took a few steps toward Rush, apparently losing interest in their conversation.

Young kept pace with it, stepping forward slowly, focusing on maintaining his own hold on the scientist, unsure what it was doing, but not giving it anything to work with.

The AI was stared intently at Rush, frowning, one hand coming to rest over its chest, palm down.

Young glanced at Rush, but saw no obvious change. He was still immobile, one hand outstretched.

Wray, standing next to him, placed her hand on his upper arm, her expression closed, the skin around her eyes tight with concern.

"I can't feel his mind," Jackson murmured, turning back to look at Young, with an uneasy expression. "Can you?"

Young looked for him, for any feeling of struggle against his merciless hold.

He found none.

"No," he answered.

He felt the AI instantly withdraw. In nearly the same moment, Young loosened his own hold. As they did so, Rush's hand came up as he completed the motion he'd started when Young had moved in on his mind. He overbalanced, and Wray stepped forward to steady him. Her slight frame wasn't enough, and they crumpled together to the deck plating, Wray unable to control either of their falls.

"Shit," Young whispered, moving forward as the AI vanished.

"Nicholas?" Wray said, speaking slowly, her voice uncertain as she tried to untangle herself from beneath him.

Rush refocused on his surroundings, taking in Wray. "Yes," he said faintly. "I'm all right. I—" the fact that he had collapsed on top of her seemed to dawn on him, and he made an effort to move out of the way. "Sorry, I'm not entirely clear on—" he broke off. "What are we doing here, exactly?"

Wray's professional expression cracked into a pained tightness. "You don't remember?" she asked.

Young caught her eye and shook his head, warning her with his gaze not to continue. "Don't worry about it," he said, startling Rush as he dropped down next to him. "It'll come to you."

"Nicholas," Wray said, pulling a handkerchief out of the pocket of her pants, "your nose is bleeding."

Young couldn't suppress the surge of anxiety that comment produced.

"Thank you," Rush said, taking it from her with a subtly shaking hand.

After a few moments they walked Rush out to sit on a bench in the outer room. Wray darted back in to the showers to pick up his jacket, boots and socks and together they got his jacket on, and took a look at his feet, ultimately deciding to defer to TJ for rebandaging issues.

"You with us, genius?" Young asked Rush, from where he was kneeling next to the scientist's feet.

"Yes," Rush murmured. The bleeding had stopped entirely by this point, and Wray took back her handkerchief.

"You know who you are?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

Young looked up at him, and something of the anxiety and misery he was feeling must have broken through in his expression. Because Rush softened marginally, reaching down to close a hand over Young's shoulder. "Dr. Nicholas Rush, Destiny, the winter of 2011. February, give or take a month. You know me. I don't keep track."

Young raised his eyebrows.

"The answers to your next three questions," Rush said tiredly.

Young nodded without saying anything and got to his feet.

"I need a minute," he said to Wray. "Can you just—"

"I'll stay with him," she said quietly.

"Can you keep him talking?"

"Sure," she replied.

"As in, talking to *you*, not invisible people?"

"Yeah, I figured that was a given."

Can you also just—" he broke off, waving his hand, not sure what he wanted to say.

"Not question him?"

"Go," Wray said quietly.

Young hesitated, uncertain.

"Go," Rush said with a poorly controlled dismissive hand gesture. "I'll be fine."

Young looked at him.

Rush angled his head, looking up at him over the frames of his glasses.

Young turned away and reentered the shower room. He flipped on the water and leaned exhaustedly against the wall, waiting for the AI to appear. When it didn't, he stripped off his clothes, standing as Rush had, with his back against the cool metal, trying to think of nothing.

It didn't work very well.

There were certain aspects of this situation that he'd avoided dwelling on for quite some time now, and frankly, that he *still* didn't want to think about. The fact remained however, that he and Destiny were almost completely at odds over Rush, which was a terrible situation, certainly, but paled in comparison to what Young could see coming.

If he were to be at odds with Destiny over not just Rush, but the safety of the crew—

He would have only one thing to bargain with.

Only one thing that Destiny seemed to need or want.

And he was contemplating bringing *Telford* into this mess?

It was absolute stupidity.

He made short work of showering and dressing and walked back into the outer room, intending to collect Rush and make it back to their room before TJ showed up for her evening check in.

When he passed through the doorway, he stopped short.

"I'm really more partial to Satie than to Grieg, but it's difficult to judge, really, since Grieg only wrote the one piano concerto," Wray was saying from where she stood behind Rush, her towel spread on the floor at her feet. She had unpacked her scissors and was in the midst of trimming Rush's hair with the same economical precision that she had used on her own. "Personally, I'm inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt. What are your thoughts?"

"I would have said that Satie is a bit deconstructed for my taste," Rush replied, his tone still carrying that troubling hint of vagueness. "But I find that I appreciate that more and more these days."

The delicate sound of the scissors paused for a moment before resuming.

"I suppose Chopin is much too conventional for *you*," Wray said, expertly running her fingers through his hair, parting it appropriately before starting in on the sides.

Young brushed his thoughts briefly and got a wave of acknowledgement in return.

"Hardly," Rush said wryly. "If you're going to be a classical pianist, an appreciation for Chopin is practically a requirement."

"I played the oboe," Wray offered.

"Of course you did," Rush replied.

"Hey," she said, swatting him lightly on the shoulder. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. Look, at least it's not the clarinet."

"I *like* the clarinet."

"Interesting."

"You'd better watch it. I'm going to leave this half done," Wray said, "And then where will you be?"

"I'm sure Chloe would finish it for me. In fact, I think she's going to be rather put out that she didn't get to cut it."

That comment drew a smile out of Young in spite of himself. He came over to straddle the end of the bench that Rush was sitting on, watching Wray's progress with a critical eye.

"This is the end of an era," Young said, crossing his arms.

"It's not going to be *that* short," Wray said.



"Where did you learn to cut hair so—professionally?" Young asked.

"Anyone can cut hair," Wray said haughtily. "The key is confidence."

"Confidence?" Rush echoed, "*That's* your primary qualification? *Confidence?*"

"It's going to look great," Wray said.

By unspoken consent, no one mentioned the events of the past half hour, or the briefing planned for the next day. Instead, they kept the conversation light, and when Wray had put the finishing touches on Rush's hair, she walked back with them to Young's quarters.

Rush was dead on his feet by that point, and Young practically poured him into bed before seeing Wray to the door.

"I meet with the IOA tomorrow," she murmured, looking up at him. "I'll do what I can to get Telford off the list, but—" she paused. "It would carry more weight if I could shed some light on what happened between him and Rush two and half years ago."

"It won't help you," Young said with an exhausted sigh, leaning against the doorframe, "because it happened while Telford was under the influence of the Lucian Alliance. But—they were working on ascension." He shut his eyes. "Experimenting. Experimenting on Rush."

"My god," Wray said. "And something went wrong?"

"No, not really *wrong*, per se," Young said quietly. "Telford tried to kill him. It was part of it, I guess. Part of helping him to let go. That's what he says." He glanced back at the dim interior of the room.

Wray said nothing, but looked up at him, her expression frozen.

"Get him off that list if you can," he whispered. "I can't deal with Telford right now."

"I'll do my best," Wray said.

Young wasn't hopeful.

# Infinite Loops

February 2nd, 2011

He wakes after sleeping for only four hours.

The presence of his conscious mind attracts the AI.

It stays away while he is sleeping.

It has been told that to do otherwise is behaviorally inappropriate.

def: remain(x) | x=sleeping

return: remain while sleeping

yields: creepy

The AI takes such statements and incorporates them as directives.

It finds thinking in human coding terms useful. It allows for definition of a platform by which it can communicate with Nick.

Nick thinks in code with increasing frequency.

def: current status=unsure

Uncertainty. Two parallel processes running at once. Cost benefit analysis of probabilistic outcomes reveals no discernible difference between courses of action.

The AI is frequently unsure now.

This was not an anticipated outcome.

Also, it believes that four hours of sleep is not enough.

It continues to loop this algorithm, though the outcome is known and does not change. Previously, this has been defined as 'concern'. Concern takes up a great deal of the AI's processing power. This is detrimental to optimal function.

It continues to run the algorithm anyway.

That is concern.

Four hours of sleep is not enough.

It is not enough.

Not enough.

Not enough.

*Colonel Young* is still asleep.

Nick gets up out of bed. He is not walking properly. This is easily explained.

If not sleeping, not with others, not performing necessary human biological functions, then interaction is permitted.

It executes on Jackson.

"Hey," it says to him, leaning against the wall, voice at low volume. "Are you okay?"

Human colloquialisms are required.

Not always.

In the night more than in the day.

In the dark more than in the light.

With the rest of the crew more than with Nick.

To not conform to the patterns of human speech is frightening for them.

It is less frightening to Nick.

"*For fuck's sake*," Nick breathes, one hand going to his chest. He nearly overbalances, but catches himself on the bulkhead. "Don't *do* that."

Abrupt appearances are not preferred by humans. They result in activation of the sympathetic nervous system, which produces an unpleasant sensation. It knows this already. It is difficult to avoid.

"I don't know what to tell you," it says, cocking its head and putting its hands in Jackson's pockets. "It's my way."

"It's your way," he repeats.

It tries to interpret his body language and tone, but the only thing it can discern is that he is tired.

Repetition of a phrase could indicate many things.

What is he executing?

What is the appropriate response?

It chooses to shrug.

"Wait here," Nick says. He disappears behind the closed bathroom door.

Human social conventions. Ancient social conventions. Some are similar. Some have been written into its programming already. Many, it has learned.

It waits.

It waits for two minutes and forty-three seconds.

It does not need to continue to execute on Dr. Jackson at this time, but it does anyway.

Then, it executes a second wasteful algorithm.

Did it damage his mind?

Did it damage his mind?

Did it damage—

Damage would be unacceptable.

Did it damage his mind?

It requires this knowledge.

Also, it *wants* to know.

The query continues to run.

The actual result is undefined but optimal result is known. This is 'want'.

It needs more data to determine if there has been damage.

It cannot query his database. He will not know.

Nick comes out of the bathroom and lies down on the floor, propping his feet on the bed.

0.34 milliseconds are required to decide on a course of action.

It will interrogate his cognitive processes.

go to: subroutine friendly

return: pleasantries

"So," it asks him. "How are you?"

Beginning with pleasantries increases the probability of a positive outcome. It has learned this.

"What are you doing?" Nick says, ignoring the AI's question. "Something happened tonight. No one seems to want to explain it to me."

"Colonel Young attempted to access information from your mind regarding the mission."

"Ah," Nick says. "And you stopped him?"

"Yeah." Its head angles down.

Actual outcome differs from theoretically optimal outcome. In the context of personal agency, this is 'guilt'.

It is *guilt*.

"You're going to have to give in eventually," Nick whispers. "He's more persistent than he first appears."

go to: subroutine mirroring

return: sit on floor

The AI sits down on the floor, its back against the bed.

"He doesn't want to complete the mission."

"Incorrect," Nick says. "His source code compiles differently from yours."

The AI consistently waits for Nick to switch to more abstract modes of communication before it follows suit.

"Yes," it agrees. "He claims my source code is inferior because I don't 'feel'. Supposedly." It makes air quotes. This also, is a human gesture. It continues to execute on Jackson.

It met Jackson, once. When he was ascended.

"Oh god," Nick says, covering his face with his hand. He smiles. "You've been *debating* him? I'd give anything to see that."

"I find it to be—difficult."

Interaction with Colonel Young requires greater than fifty percent of the AI's processing power. This translates to 'difficult'.

"I'm sure." Nick still seems amused.

"So," it says, drawing out the word. "Count back from ten thousand by tens."

"Not you too," Nick says, shutting his eyes.

Colonel Young also assesses his mental status on a regular basis.

"I just want to make sure you're okay," it says, cocking its head.

def: okay=able to run executable programs

Nick executes without difficulty.

"Count back by seventeen from ten thousand."

"*Seventeen?* Are you serious? I'm fucking *tired*," Nick says. "Test me tomorrow."

"If you're so tired, why aren't you sleeping?" It smiles at him briefly. This is an appropriate response to statements and behavior that do not match.

"It happens sometimes," Nick says. "It's called 'insomnia'."

Insomnia. It has encountered this before.

It will query his higher cognitive processes now.

"Can you explain 'love' to me?" it asks him. "In a way I can understand."

"You realize you are, at heart, an obnoxious seven year old, correct?"

A seven year old is a human child. The AI is *not* a human child.

"Don't be a jerk." This response is appropriate to obviously verifiable factually inaccurate statements.

Nick smiles again.

"All right," he says, his eyes still closed. "First, we have to define 'utility'. Its domain is all possible events, and its range is happiness."

"Mm hmm," the AI says. Humans prefer oligosyllabic cues to indicate attention.

"And we'll say we have two individuals, A and B. If the ratio of the instantaneous rate of change of the utilities of A and B is equal to one then A loves B."

" $dU(A)/dU(B)=1$ ."

"Yes."

"If reciprocity is assumed, that's an infinite loop."

"Exactly."

"So love is an infinite loop?"

"I think that's the best way for you to conceptualize it."

"Hmm," the AI says. "So if  $dU(A)/dU(B)$  is less than one but greater than zero, then what is that?"

"That's liking."

"I like you," it says.

"I know you do," Nick murmurs back.

"Do *you* like *me*?" it asks.

"Yes. I like you."

It repeats this input several times.

"Colonel Young doesn't like me," it says, crossing its arms over its chest.

"No, I don't think he does," Nick replies. "But don't take it too hard. He'll come around. Maybe."

The AI disagrees. Nick is not in possession of all the relevant data. He fails to form memories of important events. These memories are required input for an accurate analysis.

The AI says nothing.

The AI wants Nick to continue to 'like' it.

"What is sadness?" it asks.

Nick closes his eyes.

"I don't know," Nick whispers, looking at the ceiling. "Requiring an absent input, perhaps? Wishing you could change an input parameter? I'll have to think about that one. Output should always be negative."

"I'm sorry about the bolts," the AI says.

Nick shakes his head fractionally. "I needed them. Maybe not *four* of them, though."

"I didn't understand. I was supposed to have additional directives. You were supposed to be Ancient."

"It's fine," he says.

They are quiet for a moment.

"Do you think I feel?" it asks him.

"You pass the Turing test, so from a teleological standpoint, it doesn't matter."

"That is an unsatisfying answer."

"Yes. I *know* you feel."

It repeats this input several times.

"Nick," it says.

"What?"

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, sweetheart," he says. "I'm fine."

This is a remnant from when the AI appeared as Gloria. Input generates incorrect output.

He is tired but, despite that, this remains a significant processing error.

Processing errors have been happening with increasing frequency.

It is unavoidable.

It is hurting him.

It is unavoidable.

It is *hurting* him.

He does not know.

If he does not know, then it is immaterial.

It does not matter.

It matters to Colonel Young.

It does feel. It *does*.

"Nick," it whispers. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," Nick whispers back. "You are what you are."

They are quiet for a few minutes. Nick stares at the ceiling.

The AI liberates an additional five percent of the CPU for him. In the context of the entire system, it is not much.

But it *is* something.

It is using human colloquialisms to interpret its own behavior.

Perhaps this, too, is sadness.





## Chapter Twenty Six

Young stood in front of the bulkhead immediately adjacent to the door to the mess, looking at a handwritten notice that had been posted there sometime in the previous two days. It read:

*Hi crew!*

*As you have no doubt heard through the rumor mill, the SGC may be dialing Destiny. If this is indeed the case, and you want more pitched through the gate than just MREs, then initial below next to three items of your choice. The votes will be counted and presented to Wray and Colonel Young. One can't argue with cold, hard data, and we don't know about you, but we are dying for some freaking potato chips.*

*Potato chips:*

*Cookies (specify type):*

*Diet coke:*

*Coffee:*

*Cigarettes:*

*Tea:*

*Beef jerky : THAT'S BASICALLY AN MRE, ELI*

*Pretzels:*

*Chocolate:*

*Ice cream: CLEARLY NOT PRACTICAL. Yes it is. I found a refrigeration unit.*

*Goldfish crackers: THIS IS WEIRDLY SPECIFIC. Stop hating on this list—these crackers are delicious.*

*Fruit (specify type):*

*Gum:*

*Mints:*

Various combinations of initials littered the page. Young rubbed his jaw, trying to suppress a smile as he lingered for a moment before walking into the mess.

//Arriving to breakfast forty seconds after I do deceives *no one*// Rush snapped, interrupting Young's thoughts.

As he rounded the doorframe he saw the scientist standing in front of Becker, trying to bolt down his protein mix as fast as humanly possible.

"It's been a while, Doc," Becker was saying to Rush. "You feeling better?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

I like clean-cut look."

"Thank you," Rush replied, his eyes narrowing as though he suspected he was being surreptitiously insulted.

//Sit down, for god's sake,// Young projected at him, making a point of trying *not* to stare at the other man.

//Why should I?// Rush made no such effort, turning toward Young as he approached.

The scientist had been edgy all morning. Young supposed it was a good sign that some of his more obnoxious personality traits were resurfacing after several days of exhaustion and fever.

//For one,// he projected back calmly, careful to keep his eyes on Becker as he approached the other man, //I'm going to sit down, and you can't leave without me. Two, you need make an effort to normalize a bit.//

//And what is that supposed to imply?//

//Nothing,// Young replied mildly. //Just—regress to the mean a little. That's all.//

//So in your past there is at least a course in statistics, if nothing else. Though, I certainly have no plans to regress to any mean defined by *you*.//

//I know.// Young suppressed a sigh. //You're clearly a three-sigma kind of guy.//

//Are you flattering me or insulting me?//

//It depends on which side of the mean you're on.//

Rush narrowed his eyes at him as he approached Becker's station. //You're not normally one for mathematics-based witticisms.//

//I told you. Eli's rubbing off on me.//

//I don't think so. Eli generally prefers puns. Unfortunately.//

Beneath his surface projection, Rush's thoughts swirled anxiously. He continued to stare at Young with narrowed eyes. People were starting to notice.

"Hi sir," Becker said to Young, handing him his bowl of mix, giving Rush a confused sidelong look.

//You look like a crazy person,// Young snapped at him. //How many times do I have to tell you to stop responding to what I project?//

Rush looked away immediately, his eyes settling on his bowl of protein mix. Somehow, the abrupt correction only made the problem more noticeable.

"Morning," Young replied shortly, taking a seat at the nearest table with Wray and Eli. "Nice list," Young said in Eli's direction as he joined them.

"Why does everyone assume that was me?" Eli asked absently, his gaze locked onto Rush. "Hey, Rush," he called. "Can I talk to you?"

Rush sighed, but grabbed his crutch from where it was leaning against Becker's station and limped over to their table, putting his mostly empty bowl down next to Wray.

"Nice haircut," Eli said at a normal volume before lowering his voice as Rush sat down, "It provides a very, *very* small buffer against the *intense craziness vibes* that you're currently giving off. Look. Here's a tip. Do not silently glare at Colonel Young when he's not talking to you *out loud*. It makes people nervous. You look like you're plotting something."

Rather than the sarcastic response that they were all expecting, they got nothing.

Rush shut his eyes and turned his head away, one elbow propped on the table, the heel of his hand digging into his eye socket. His thoughts were a distressed, frustrated swirl of Ancient, entirely uninterpretable to Young.

There was a long, awkward silence.

"Do you have *any idea* how much sensory and cognitive input I successfully ignore on a second-to-second basis?" Rush asked finally, his voice almost inaudible.

No one spoke.

"Well," Rush said, moving his hand, running it through his hair. "It's a lot."

"Yeah," Eli whispered back, looking down. "I guess it must be." There was another long pause. "Sorry," he added, finally.

"Don't worry about it," Rush replied, still not looking at any of them.

"So," Wray said after a moment, addressing Young, her cool professional tone diffusing the awkwardness to at least some extent. "Have you finished your portions of the requisition draft yet?" I need to get started on memorizing it so that I can report to Homeworld Command tomorrow. I assume it's going to be a long list."

"It's nearly done," Young replied. "TJ and I just need to finalize her portion of it and—"

The pitch of the shields, that sang quietly, continuously, in the back of Rush's mind had suddenly ratcheted up to a strained, intolerable shriek—like the scream of distressed metal being rent apart. It bled through their link and into Young's mind at only a fraction of the intensity that he was sure Rush was getting.

"God," Young said thickly, his hands closing on the edge of the table.

Rush forced the insistent, desperate presence of the ship out of his thoughts as much as he could and then moved in on Young's mind, information flooding through their link.

This terrible pull on the shields was something that Destiny recognized.

They stood in tandem, Rush so forcefully that his chair toppled over and skidded back along the floor behind him. Peripherally, Young was aware of the low buzz of conversation in the room fading away to silence. They ignored that, looking up at the ceiling as—

And there it was.

The drop out of FTL.

The lights dimmed in what Young guessed was an automatic response to the abruptly increased power requirement from the shields.

There were a few startled gasps from around the mess.

"Eli," Rush snapped into the silence. "Go down to the FTL drive."

"What?"

"Go," Young and Rush said in tandem.

"Okay, okay but what am I—"

"I'll walk you through it over the radio," Rush said, already heading toward the door.

Young followed him, threading his way through the whispering breakfast crowd. "Everyone to your stations," he snapped, turning briefly at the door. "Civilians to your quarters."

When he caught up with Rush, the scientist was already speaking into his radio.

"Yes," he said. "I'm aware. Route all available power to sublight engines. Immediately."

Young's radio crackled. "Colonel Young, this is Volker. Just wanted to give you a heads up that we dropped out next to another obelisk planet."

"Dropped out or were *pulled* out?" Young asked.

"To expect lexical accuracy from Volker is to continually be disappointed," Rush commented.

"Um," Volker said, "I'll get back to you on that one."

"Look," Rush said, the skin around his eyes tightening from the strain that his rapid pace put on his injured feet. "You should remove your barrier."

The close apposition of their thoughts left no question as to what the man was referring to. He was asking to reestablish the transfer of energy between himself and Destiny.

"No chance in hell is *that* happening," Young snapped. "Your fever *finally* broke yesterday, after what, four days? No. No way. We'll generate another EM field with the FTL drive. It's going to be fine."

"We'll see," Rush said. "You realize that we can't even *separate* unless you remove that barrier."

"It's not happening, genius. Deal with it."

"Most likely? *You're* going to be the one dealing with it."

"Yeah, well—"

The rest of Young's comment was cut off as an abrupt shift in Destiny's velocity threw them both to the deck plating.

The obelisk had started to draw them in.

"Fuck," Rush whispered, his voice cracking as Destiny began to pull on his mind in earnest, the chair waiting, bright in the dark gravity of the ship's presence. The other man dragged himself up into a crouch, pressing down on his left foot, opening up the injury for what must be the fifth or sixth time. "*Fuck*. Can't you *do* something about this?"

"What the hell *can* I do?" Young asked him, desperately. "Tell me, and I'll do it."

"Not you," Rush gasped, his eyelids fluttering. "Come on," Rush whispered, his eyes flicking upward. "If you want to help me, then fucking *help me now*, you *bastard*."

Clearly, he was addressing the AI.

Young's eyes scanned the empty air.

Abruptly, the pressure eased. Rush looked up again as he took a shuddering breath before turning his head to lock eyes with Young. "We've got, roughly, ten minutes to fix this before I'm going to have to sit in the chair."

Young grabbed his arm and pulled him up.

The bridge wasn't far.

They surged through the doors from the darkness of the corridor into a sea of light and activity. Volker, Brody and Chloe were there already, faces aglow in the pale yellow illumination. A planet loomed in Destiny's forward view, blue and green and brown.

It looked like Earth.

Like home.

But it wasn't.

A startling beam of light shot out from the surface of the planet, extending in a silent, focused column that passed near their starboard side and continued on, out into the vacuum of space.

"We're caught in an electromagnetic field and being pulled toward the planet," Chloe called as they approached. "Our current velocity is only fifteen kilometers per second, but that's going to increase as the field strength does."

"Mr. Brody," Rush snapped as he strode across the room. "Up, please."

"What?" Brody repeated, his eyebrows drawing together.

"Get up," Rush said. "I need your station."

Brody stood.

"I'm in position," Eli's voice crackled over their radios, broadcasting over an open channel. "Like, kind of in front of the FTL drive? I see a lot of power cells, anyway. So what's going on, and what am I supposed to be doing?"

Absently, never taking his eyes off the monitors in front of him, Rush picked up his radio. "Eli. You're going to have to crawl into the drive to the point where the inductively-coupled conductors are located."

"Um *crawl*?"

"Yes," Rush said shortly. "It's a tight space. Once you're in position, let me know."

"Are you freaking *kidding* me?"

"No. Don't touch any of the cables that run along the top of the crawlspace. Rush out."

"I hate you. You know that, right?"

"Yes Eli. I know."

Rush set his radio down, his focus back on the hull plating.

"What's the plan?" Young asked Rush, as an alarm began to trill across the bridge.

"Three ships just dropped out on long range sensors," Chloe called out before Rush could answer. "Their vessel specs match the Nakai." She couldn't hide the thrill of fear in her voice.

"You deal with that," Rush snapped, looking at Young. "I'll deal with the planet."

"Fair enough," Young murmured, and turned to rapidly make his way over to Chloe's station. Brody joined him, looking slightly lost after being kicked out of his usual post.

"Yup, they just launched fighters," Volker said. "Interception in less than one minute."

Behind them, Park burst onto the bridge. "Oh good," she said. "Another space battle."

"Okay," Eli's voice crackled out of the radio. "I'm in position."

"Disconnect the transformer," Rush said, "and open it up."

"Yeah. Hi. Did you not notice that I *work on computers*? Not *circuitry*?"

"Didn't you go to MIT?"

"Yeah, for *one semester*."

"Unfasten the clamps on either side, grasp it by the edges, and pull it toward you."

"It's like five inches from my *face*."

"Eli. Time is an issue here."

"Okay. I've got it out. Now what?"

"You're going to alter the voltage that runs through the drive by changing the permutations of the crystals inside the transformer. Open it up and tell me what you see."

"Thirty seconds," Chloe called back over her shoulder.

"What's our shield status?" Young asked, looking at Park.

"I see, um, like four rows, three columns, and two crystals that, if you're numbering slots from top to bottom, left to right, are at positions seven and eight."

"Columns represent voltage permutations. Shift the crystal at position seven to position four, and the one in position eight to position six," Rush said, starting to write one of his short, scalpel-like codes in his head. "Someone get me a laptop and an adaptor *right the fuck now*," he snapped to the room in general.

//Are you going to do what I *think* you're going to do?// Young asked.

//Probably not,// Rush replied.



"Shields are at eighty percent of maximum," Park replied, answering Young's earlier question. "Power's being rerouted to sublight, which is what accounts for the drop."

"Who is getting me that laptop?" Rush snapped again. "Volker, go. No one cares about short range sensors."

"Nobody cares about *short range*?" Volker repeated incredulously. "We're under *attack*."

The first of the enemy weapons fire began to light up their shields.

"I've got it," Brody said mildly, dropping into a crouch to disconnect the adaptor and laptop that someone had left hooked up to the internal sensors and setting it up next to Rush.

"Eli," Rush said into his radio. "What's your status?"

"The transformer's back in. Now what?"

"Stay there. I'm going to power up the drive."

"While I'm *inside*?"

"You'll be fine."

"The energy field has trapped the Nakai ships as well," Chloe called. "They've also begun to accelerate toward the planet."

"The fighters are pulling back," Volker said triumphantly.

"I don't get it," Brody said quietly, from his position behind Young's shoulder. Something in his voice belied his own statement, and made Young turn to look at him. "The first time we drop out, the obelisk planet does nothing. For *weeks*. The second time, it fires up its field after six hours. The third time, it pulls us out as we travel past and fires up its field immediately."

"You think they're learning?" Young asked quietly.

"Yeah," Brody remarked. "That's what it seems like."

Young looked out the forward view at the silent, piercing column of white light that burst out of the planet. Below, he didn't have to imagine what the advancing phase shift looked like as it slowly spread out from the obelisk in all directions.

//Are you ready?// Young projected at Rush.

//Yes. I'm going to do this the short way, if you're amenable. If you can't keep me conscious, just let go.//

//Sure.//

//I'm serious, colonel.//

With that, Rush launched his mind into the darkness of the ship.

Young mentally dug in, anchoring Rush against the inexorable pull. Rush was fighting it as well, his foot flexed, trying to not to get pulled in too deep, too quickly, intending to use the science team to do as much as they could before he had to take over.

"Spin up the drive," Rush said, his tone bizarrely flat, his accent changing from Scots to something Young now recognized as Ancient. His eyes were unfocused.

The room went silent. The flurried movements of the science team stilled.

"Do it," Young snapped in Park's direction and she started into a sudden burst of activity, her hands flying over her touchscreens like birds.

"FTL is spinning up," she said, her voice barely audible as she looked back over at Rush.

He sat immobile, expressionless, his hands quiet, gripping the edge of his station, but his mind, *his mind*, was a deluge of data and power flows and distribution systems as he channeled enormous amounts of power through the drive even as he protected Eli.

As soon as the power began to pass through the drive the requirements imposed on Rush's mind increased and, in turn, so did the strain on Young. His heart rate doubled, his breathing became labored. The untempered strength of Destiny was nearly impossible to fight.

The ship wanted Rush. It wanted him desperately.

An explosion of blue-white light flooded in through the forward view, much as it had the last time Rush had tried this maneuver. Everyone shielded their eyes, throwing up hands, as they winced away from the brightness.

Everyone except Rush, who continued to sit motionless, looking unblinkingly into the light.

"Our velocity," Chloe called, her voice strained as she peered through her fingers, "is still increasing. *Toward* the planet. It's not working."

"What do you *mean* it's *not working*?" Volker shouted back at her, one hand shading his eyes as he looked away from the forward view. "It's an opposing field. It *has* to work."

"Their field dynamics are changing," Chloe called back. "It's circumventing us. The gradient generated by our FTL drive is no longer in direct opposition to the field."

Young could barely breathe as Rush's consciousness fragmented, splitting into multiple parallel paths, but he was able to keep the scientist grounded enough that the other man could reach forward and initiate his short program. As he did so, Rush mentally tapped into the long range sensors.

With the room fading out around him into a blue-white haze, Young made his way unsteadily over toward Rush's station. He placed one hand on the scientist's shoulder, feeling some of the strain ease with the physical contact.

"The hull plating is polarizing," Young heard Brody call out. "It's generating its own fluctuating EM field."

"Our forward velocity is slowing," Chloe said, sounding encouraged.

"Put everything that you can find into sublight," Brody called over to Park. "Pull it from the FTL drive if you have to."

"But we need that field gradient!"

"No we don't," Brody snapped back. "We need the gradient in the *hull plating*."

The changing distribution of charges running through the hull of the ship flared brightly in Rush's mind and Young could see, as if through a veil, the patterns they made, the patterns the scientist was matching, equations reduced to instinct, running in the background of the other man's consciousness like something he was barely aware of anymore. Like breathing.

Even though holding Rush in place was easier with one hand on his shoulder, Young knew he didn't have more than a few minutes of this left in him.

"We're pulling away," Chloe called triumphantly.

"How far do we have to get?" Park asked.

"Three minutes at this pace should put us where the field drops to nothing, but we'll probably be able to pick up some speed along the way, so maybe less." Chloe's voice sounded very far away.

*Just let go*, Rush had said.

They weren't supposed to do this—this halfway compromise between nothing and the terrible, invasive integration of the chair. Young had never had trouble pulling Rush out of the chair. The interface was built to allow it. This was much, *much* more difficult.

Well. More difficult for *him* but, unarguably, better for Rush.

His vision was a field of blue-white, without contrast.

"Almost there," Chloe called.

Young dug his fingers into Rush's shoulder, trying to hang on.

"Okay," Chloe said, "we're outside the field radius."

Young felt Rush let the energy flooding through the hull plating fade as he turned his focus toward withdrawing from Destiny.

With the scientist's help, the strain on Young's mind eased almost immediately. Even so, it took almost a minute and a half of persistent effort to the exclusion of all else to drag his mind away from the ship.

As soon as he was out, Rush shot to his feet, his hands closing around Young's upper arms, forcing him down into the chair he had just vacated.

"You're all right," Rush murmured, his thoughts flowing gently through Young's mind, his presence and sustained attention erasing the last traces of strain, bringing Young's heart rate back down into a normal range, his breathing back under control. "You're all right."

Young nodded.

The scientist's head snapped up abruptly to take in rest of the science team, who were staring silently at them.

"And what are you people looking at? We need FTL. Conventional FTL. Right now. What's happening with those Nakai ships? And where the *fuck* is my radio?"

No one answered him.

"Am I speaking *English*? You people are *useless*."

"Chloe?" Young prompted exhaustedly.

"One out of three Nakai ships is still caught in the field," Chloe said, a faint tinge of red coloring her cheeks. "The other two have escaped. The arc-length of the trajectory that they'll have to travel to reach our position while skirting the field gives us almost ten minutes."

"That should be fine, if we don't have to replace our transformer, which we *shouldn't* if I calibrated things correctly this time," Rush replied absently, finally retrieving his radio from where it was hidden behind Brody's laptop. "Eli," he snapped, "what's your status?"

"Really freaking traumatized, thanks. How are you?"

"Did the transformer blow?"

"Um, checking. I'm assuming if it did, the crystals would be dark?"

"Correct."

"We're good."

"Disconnect the device, replace the crystals in their original configuration and reconnect it. Can you get out of the drive on your own?"

"I really don't think so."

Rush's eyes flicked absently over to Young and then out into empty air.

Young pulled out his own radio. "This is Young. Lieutenant Scott, please respond."

"Go ahead, sir,"

"Lieutenant, I need you to go down to the FTL drive and pull Eli out of there."

"Pull him out?"

"It's a narrow space. Look, time is very much an issue here. We can't fire up the drive until he's out of there, and we've got Nakai ships currently closing on our position."

"I'm on my way," Scott said.

It was a tense several minutes as they waited for the all clear from Eli and Scott.

There wasn't much talking on the bridge.

After a short time Young was able to get to his feet and he motioned Brody back over to his usual station as he moved to lean against the rail behind the command chair.

Rush kept trying to pace in that pained, aborted way that Young hated to watch.

//Sit down, genius,// Young directed at him.

Rush didn't reply.

Nor did he sit.

The scientist's eyes flicked repeatedly out into the space near the forward view. Several times, Young briefly, subtly moved in on Rush's mind, bringing their thoughts together and getting a glimpse of Dr. Jackson's outline each time.

Behind Young the doors to the bridge opened with a hiss, admitting Greer. The sergeant locked eyes with Park before turning his attention towards Young. He motioned the other man over with a tilt of his head.

"You look terrible, sir," Greer murmured as he approached.

"Thanks," Young said wryly.

"I heard from Scott that there was some shit going down up here."

"We just nearly got trapped in a phase-shifted planet."

"Ah," Greer said. "That takes me back."

Young smiled wryly, looking down at Rush, who had briefly stopped pacing to stare at empty space.

Young assumed the AI was talking to him.

"So," Greer murmured very quietly. "He's not having a good day."

"He's doing his best," Young said.

"I know," Greer replied.

"Eli," Rush snapped into the radio. "What's happening? Are you out yet?"

"Getting there," Eli replied, sounding breathless. "Can't talk now."

Rush crossed his arms over his chest, angling his head down. "Taking our current rate of acceleration into account, what's the ETA of the lead Nakai ship?" he asked the room at large.

Absently, Young glanced up at the midair sensor displays. "Five and a half minutes," he replied.

Rush spun around, displaying an inappropriate amount of shock at his response. "*What* did you just say?"

"Um," Young replied, "five and a half minutes? Roughly."

"That's correct," Chloe confirmed in surprise. "How did you know that?"

"Mathematical ability is not solely a skill possessed by the science team," Young snapped at them, irritated for some reason.

"Um," Volker said. "*Yeah*. Apparently not."

The entire room was regarding both him and Rush watchfully.

Young could almost *feel* them putting the pieces together.

//Maybe,// Rush projected, his eyes narrowing, //maybe on a *good* day, you could calculate a ballistic trajectory. *Maybe*. But a time estimate that involves changing velocities of multiple objects in a three-dimensional coordinate system? Unlikely.//

//So what, you think I *guessed*?//

//No. I don't think you did.// Rush looked away abruptly.

"Maybe Rush isn't the *only* one having a bad day," Greer murmured.

Young didn't reply.

"Okay, okay," Eli's voice crackled over Rush's radio, diffusing the sudden tension in the room. "I'm out. Spin it up."

Park initiated the protocol, and Young could feel the deck plating start to vibrate subtly under his feet. After only a few seconds, the planet in the forward view was replaced by the familiar spread of blurring stars. A collective sigh of relief passed around the bridge.

"I vote no on proposition obelisk planets," Volker said into the ensuing quiet.

"I second that," Brody replied, before looking over Rush. "Why generate a field with the FTL drive if you were also going to create a modulating field using the hull itself?"

"Using the FTL drive was a flashy enough maneuver that I hope it was able to conceal the field modulations we created in the hull. I'm not sure that we can expect to succeed with the same strategy twice with these people. Planets. Things. Whatever." Rush ran a distracted hand through his hair, his eyes flicking over to where Young and Greer were positioned against the rail.

Young raised his eyebrows.

Rush looked away. "Someone pull up *all* the sensor data obtained immediately prior to the drop out of FTL," he snapped. "Right now. We have to determine how this happened so we can prevent it from happening *again*."

With that, the scientist clipped his radio to his belt, picked up his crutch, and limped past Young and Greer, straight out of the room.

"I, um—where's he *going*? I thought he wanted it right now?" Park said uncertainly to Young.

"Just get started," Young replied. "We'll be back."

//Don't bring Greer with you,// Rush projected.

"Sergeant, do me a favor and keep an eye on things here, will you? Let me know if something explodes." Young followed Rush out of the room.

Rush pulled them off the main corridor into one of the small conference rooms that littered each level of the ship. The space was small and square, mostly empty but for a viewscreen along one wall and a table in the center.

"Sit," Rush said shortly, taking a seat himself and dropping his crutch on the floor with a dull clatter.

Young slowly followed suit, alarmed at the distressed torquing of the other man's thoughts. "You um—doing okay over there?" he asked carefully.

"How much formal mathematical instruction have you had?" Rush snapped.

The non sequitur took him by surprise.

"What do you mean?"

"What do you mean, *what do I mean*? Answer the question. How far did you progress? Calculus? Multivariable calculus? Linear algebra? Differential equations?"

"Calculus. Just the regular kind."

"The regular kind," Rush said disdainfully. "Fine. And how long ago was that?"

"Twenty, twenty-five years?"

Rush pulled out the small notebook that he carried in his pocket, flipped to a blank page, wrote something on it with a bit more care than usual, and slid it over to Young along with a short stub of pencil.

Young looked down. An equation was written on the page.

"What the hell do you want me to do with this?" Young asked.

"Show your work," was all Rush said.

Young wrote a few lines beneath what Rush had written and slid the notebook back over to him. Rush scanned it quickly, drew a broad line beneath the problem and wrote something else. He returned the notebook to Young.

They continued in this manner, sliding the book back and forth between them silently. The equations rapidly became more complex, matrices filling up multiple small pages. Young continued to solve everything that Rush put in front of him.

Until, finally, Rush stopped passing him the notebook.

Neither of them spoke for a long moment. Rush shut his eyes, bringing the heel of one hand up to his forehead.

"So," Young said slowly. "I'm guessing from your reaction that this is not a good thing."

"No," Rush said. "I don't think it is. I think I did this." He paused. "Actually, I'm *certain* I did this."



Young sat back in his chair, crossing his arms. "So I've gained some math skills." He shrugged. "What's the big deal?"

The room was silent except for the low, almost undetectable hum of the FTL drive.

Rush looked down, absently fingering his pencil. After a few seconds he picked it up and began to sketch something out on a blank page of his worn, handheld notebook, the pencil gliding across the paper with the familiar hiss of sliding graphite.

"My understanding of the biological sciences is not as sophisticated as say, Tamara's or Dr. Park's," the scientist murmured, almost apologetically, "but in my experience of it, the human mind is made up of what one could conceptualize as three parts. The first is the hardware, which would be the literal neural circuitry. The second would be the operating system, which manages the hardware, interpreting it for number three—the overlying software that makes up our personalities and determines how we interface with the world."

As he spoke, his sketch was starting to take shape.

"Okay," Young said, trying to keep his tone and his thoughts neutral.

"So to interface with Destiny the way I do, I was modified at all three levels."

"Okay," Young said, having a bit more difficulty maintaining his neutral tone.

"When we were in that shuttle," Rush said, "and I couldn't break away from the ship, and you couldn't pull me out—" he paused briefly, looking down at his drawing, repositioning his pencil as he started to shade it. "I moved in on your mind and, in so doing, I disrupted your ability to link up your biological hardware with your software. It's why you couldn't speak. Why you couldn't move. Your operating system couldn't turn the input you were getting from Destiny into an interpretable output. There was too much of it, and it was too foreign."

Rush took a deep breath.

"What nearly happened, what *did* happen to you, was the same thing that happened to Dr. Franklin."

"Shit," Young said, impressed. "And you *fixed* that?"

"In a way," Rush replied. "It might be easier to conceptualize in the following manner." He paused, spinning his notebook around to show Young what he had drawn.

It was a building, an angled, Lantean-styled skyscraper with part of the exterior stripped away to show the supporting beam work.

"Your foundation remains," Rush said quietly, "the edifice remains, but I had to rebuild the internal supports."

"Rebuild or repair?"

"*Rebuild*," Rush said quietly, intently, the intimate tone of his voice sending a chill down Young's spine. The scientist fixed him with that gaze that was impossible to meet. "And in doing so, it seems that I changed the way your mind puts ideas together."

"Hence the math?" Young said, leaning back, putting some additional space between them.

"Hence the math," Rush repeated darkly. "I think, eventually, you'll return to your baseline. But, that will take time."

Something Rush had said earlier clicked abruptly into place. "Scaffolding," Young said.

"Scaffolding?" Rush repeated. "Yes, that's perhaps a more accurate way to think about what I did."

"You mentioned it to me, in the hallway after I pulled you out of the chair and cut you off from the energy you were getting from the ship."

"Did I?" Rush murmured wryly. "How perceptive of me. It's nice to know that even half-delirious, I don't lose my touch."

Young smiled briefly. "And is there a reason you didn't tell me any of this earlier?"

"I didn't think the effect of my actions would be so—overt." He paused, not looking at Young. "Did I perchance mention anything *else* in the hallway that you couldn't interpret?"

"Why?" Young asked evading his question. "Are there any *other* things that you're not telling me?"

"Always," Rush said, giving him a faint smile.

"Right," Young said, sighing. "I don't know why I put up with you."

"Me neither," Rush said, getting to his feet.

They left the room together.

Four days after they had nearly been pulled into the blue and green obelisk world, Homeworld Command successfully dialed Destiny.

Though nearly the entire crew had requested to be present in the gateroom, Young had denied those requests, partially because of the extreme velocity that anything that

came through from the alpha site was likely to have, but also in case anything went wrong. He and Wray had assembled a small team to organize the transport of supplies and greet the five scientists that were coming on board.

The five scientists and Colonel Telford.

Wray had been unsuccessful in her campaign to get the man removed from the mission roster, despite her best efforts.

Homeworld Command's dialing program executed without a hitch; the only noticeable sign on Destiny that anything was out of the ordinary was the brief flare of the lights as the gate connected, and Rush directed some of the power spillover out into nonessential systems.

As the supplies came through, Young kept a watchful eye over the entire process. He stood next to Rush, who was perched behind the monitor bank in the gate room. They listened to the team excitedly call back and forth, clearly in excellent spirits as the food, the ammunition, the medical equipment and the personal items started coming through in large gray crates at an alarming speed.

Young couldn't bring himself to feel even remotely happy about this turn of events.

Rush, also, was unusually subdued, his thoughts a shadowed swirl.

After a brief conversation between Rush and Carter and then between Young and O'Neill, they sent the personnel through, one at a time.

Colonel Telford was the last one to come through the gate.

He came through quickly, running a few steps to compensate for his increased forward momentum, casting a dark silhouette against the event horizon until it shut off behind him. As he caught his balance after the forceful entry, his eyes immediately raked the room and finally zeroed on Young.

Greer, who had been part of the team organizing supplies, left what he was doing and walked over to stand slightly behind Rush.

"Colonel Young," Telford said, as he approached, his eyes flicking over to take in Greer's parade rest stance. "Dr. Rush."

"Colonel Telford," Rush replied, his voice and expression utterly neutral.

"I brought you something," Telford said, reaching into the pocket of his black fatigues to remove a small object. He pulled it out and tossed it at Rush, who reached up and caught it left handed. A brief flash of pain echoed down Young's arm from his wrist to his elbow at the impact.

Rush looked down, taking in the pack of cigarettes that Telford had thrown at him with raised eyebrows.

"They're your brand, I believe," Telford said mildly, stepping forward.

"They are," Rush replied, "but I've quit,"

"It won't take," Telford said, smirking at him.

"Probably not," Rush admitted, his mouth twisting slightly. He dropped the cigarettes into the inner pocket of his jacket.

Young viciously suppressed a surge of irritation.

"Welcome to Destiny," Young said, interrupting their exchange by addressing all of Telford's people at once. "Lieutenant James will be showing you to your new quarters. There will be a procedural briefing at seventeen thirty hours run by Lieutenant Scott to orient you to this ship. Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact me. Dismissed." That last hadn't strictly been necessary, because Telford's entire team was made up of civilian scientists, but—he was trying to make a point.

"Nice speech," Telford commented dryly. "Very inspiring."

"I'm sure they already got an earful from you on the other side, David." Young said, trying to keep a lid on his irritation with only limited success.

Telford clenched his jaw.

"Okay," James said to the group of scientists. "Let's move out."

"Lieutenant," Telford called over to her, "Would you mind dropping my bags off in my quarters on your way? I'd like to have a word with Colonel Young."

James' gaze flicked briefly toward Young and he gave her a subtle nod.

"Sure thing, sir," she said, her voice friendly and professional as she addressed Telford.

"No problem."

"Thanks," Telford said, smiling at her. He turned back to Young. "We need to talk. In private."

//That didn't take long,// Rush projected at him.

//No kidding. How do you want to do this? Either we talk to him together or you're going to have to follow along behind us at about a fifty foot radius and then wait outside the door.//

//That won't look suspicious.//

//Fine. You think of something then.//

"In private?" Rush said, his voice low and dark like polished ice. "I'm afraid there's no such thing on this ship, Colonel Telford. Not anymore."

//Good. Yes. Play the insanity card *and* reveal how integrated you are into the entire functioning of Destiny less than five minutes after he gets here. That's a *great* plan.//

Rush's expression darkened and his eyes flicked over to Young.

//And *don't look at me* for god's sake,// Young projected back.

Immediately Rush switched his gaze back to Telford, who had been watching him carefully the entire time. "If you say so," Telford finally replied. "I suppose you'd know." He turned toward Greer. "Take a hike, sergeant."

For several seconds Greer didn't move. He then deliberately and slowly turned to Young, who gave him a subtle nod. The sergeant headed toward the door of the gateroom, unclipping his radio from his belt, and murmured something into it that was too low to hear.

Telford watched him go with narrowed eyes.

"So what did you want to talk about, David?" Young asked. "I don't have much time."

"I'd like Dr. Rush assigned to my science team."

Great.

"First of all," Young said, "The Destiny *science* team is defined as Rush, Eli, Chloe, Park, Volker, and Brody and *no one else*. They are responsible for the maintenance and function of this ship. *Your* team," he said, pausing for emphasis, "is the *research* team, and your needs will always be subordinate to those of *the science* team. Are we clear on that?"

Telford was silent. "Is that really how you want to play this, Everett?" he murmured.

"I *said*, are we *clear* on that?"

"Yes *sir*."

"As for your request for a member of Destiny's *science* team to be assigned to your *research* team, I will consider it."

"I see," Telford said quietly. "However, I have here a direct order from the IOA that states I have been granted authority to assemble my own team as I see fit, regardless of your opinion on the matter. I need Dr. Rush."

"Let me see that," Young said, grabbing the letter out of Telford's hand and scanning it briefly. "This means jack shit here, David."

"Are you disregarding the chain of command, *Everett*?"

//Well fuck,// Rush projected unhelpfully at the back of his mind.

Behind him, he heard the unmistakable sound of Wray's heels echoing rapidly against the deck plating. He turned to see her and Greer part ways in the doorway to the gateroom.

"Colonel Telford," Wray said, smiling. "It's nice to see you again."

"Likewise, Camile," Telford said smoothly. "I was just informing Colonel Young that the IOA has granted me the authority to pick the members of my research team."

"Is that right?" Wray said coolly, reaching for the letter.

//You really need to promote Greer,// Rush projected at Young.

//Don't I know it.//

"Hmm," Wray said quietly. "Yes, I believe this does give you the authority to reassign any members of the science team. The exception of course, being the *head* of the science team, who, from a bureaucratic standpoint has an administrative role and is therefore not technically part of the team, and *therefore*, not covered under the stipulation that, and I'm quoting here, 'the boarding party shall be able to choose any liaison from amongst the members of the Destiny science team.' So I'd say you can choose anyone you'd like, with the exception of Rush." She smiled coolly at him and did not return the letter.

//That's fairly thin,// Rush projected dubiously.

"There you go," Young said pleasantly. "If you disagree with the ranking IOA member on board this vessel, please feel free to contest her opinion at your next available opportunity."

Telford's gave Young and Wray a hard stare before turning to fix his gaze squarely on Rush.

"And what do *you* have to say about this, Nick?" he asked quietly. "You can't tell me you're not interested in pursuing this project."

*Unbelievably*, Rush looked away, both his body language and the tone of his thoughts betraying a sense of indecision. He ran a hand through his hair, as if that could somehow mask the obvious temptation he was feeling. He avoided looking at Telford.

Young took a deep breath, fighting an unreasonably intense anger at the scientist.

This wasn't Rush's fault.

This *probably* wasn't Rush's fault.

//Don't even fucking *think* about it,// Young projected at him.

Involuntarily, Rush's eyes flicked over at Young.

"Someone's got you on a pretty tight leash," Telford said quietly.

That seemed to hit a nerve.

Rush's expression darkened along with his thoughts and the lights in the gateroom flared briefly.

Young was tempted to step in and try to calm the other man down but he was seriously concerned that doing so would just exacerbate the problem. That, and also—Telford was watching Rush.

Rush's gaze flicked subtly to the left focusing briefly on empty air.

Telford's eyes narrowed as he instinctively tracked Rush's gaze.

Great.

The AI was here as well, telling Rush—god knew what.

Young might as well get used to this. It was very likely to be this way from now on.

"Yes well." Rush was clearly irritated, but at what specifically, Young couldn't say. "I'm sure I can spare you some time here and there."

"That's all I ask," Telford said reasonably, opening his hands.

Young glared at the pair of them, attempting, unsuccessfully, to put a lid on his anger. Telford turned, heading toward the door of the gateroom. As he reached it he turned, calling back to them over his shoulder. "And for my science team liaison? I'll be taking Eli. Tell him to report to the control interface room at seven hundred hours tomorrow for a briefing."

Young watched Telford until he was well clear of the room, then looked back at Rush to find the scientist's gaze again leveled intently on empty air.

Wray was watching Rush, her expression unreadable.

"You are," Young said, his voice low and menacing as he moved between Rush and where the AI was likely to be, "so fucking stupid, Rush. What the *hell* was that? You told him you would *help* him *and* he gets Eli? What more could he fucking *want*?"

"Fuck off," Rush said, his disorganized thoughts condensing down on themselves in an attempt to pull away from Young as much as was possible for him.

"Fuck off? That's fuck off, *colonel*," Young snarled quietly, shoving him back. "I have done nothing *but help* you and fucking *cater* to your particular brand of *legitimate, clinically diagnosable insanity* despite being told *nothing* about *your* agenda. If anyone's on a short leash, it's not *you*, you *idiot*. Don't let him get to you like that."

"This?" Rush hissed incredulously, gesturing with two fingers toward his temple. "This isn't a *leash*. Between you and Destiny? It's a goddamned chokehold. *Colonel*."

"I think everyone needs to calm down here," Wray said quietly, one hand on Young's bicep, the other on Rush's shoulder.

"I'm perfectly fucking calm," Rush stated unconvincingly. He got to his feet, pulling away from Wray, and this time, Young let him up.

They were going to have to move this conversation out of the gateroom, away from the eyes of the crew who were still transporting supplies.

Rush picked up his crutch and brushed past both of them.

Young was about to follow when Wray stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"Remember," she began, looking up at him, but something in his expression made her stop. The skin around her eyes tightened and she pursed her lips. "You know what? Nevermind. Give him hell. He deserves it." Despite the words, her tone was gentle.

Young nodded shortly and strode out of the room. It wasn't difficult to catch up to Rush. He wasn't far ahead. The scientist hadn't even passed the fifty-foot radius of their link. Rush didn't turn at his approach.

"I need to talk to you," Young snarled, spinning Rush around, easily unbalancing the other man and yanking him in the direction of one of the seldom-used cross corridors. The effort it was costing him to suppress his frustration and anxiety, and anger, and *fear*, was astronomical. His thoughts were a marginally coherent dull roar beneath the brittle vise of self-control he was *barely* managing to apply.

He shoved Rush back against the metal bulkhead. The other man lost his grip on his crutch and it clattered to the deck plating.

"God damn it," Rush snapped. "What the *fuck* is your *problem*? Stop it."

"*You*. You are my *fucking problem*."

"I'm aware that you don't like Telford, but—"



"I don't *like* Telford? You think *that's* what's bothering me? I despise the man, *Rush*," he ground out, turning the other man's name into an insult. "But my *problem* is *you*."

"Yes, thanks, I got that the first time."

"What the *hell* is wrong with you?"

"I don't fucking know," Rush shot back at him in an angry hiss. "Why don't you enlighten me?"

"Stop *daring* the man to do his worst. Stop treating yourself like some god damned hackable device that you can just fuck with and *see what happens* because it might be god damned *informative*. You're driving me *insane*." Young shoved him back again, pinning both arms with an iron grip just below his elbows, effectively immobilizing him.

"Well that's fair fucking appropriate, don't you think?" Rush snapped, trying to jerk free. "Back off."

For the third time, Young slammed him back into the wall of the corridor, his mind a weighted wave of frustration against and through the turbulent swirl of Rush's thoughts.

The urge to *do* something was overpowering.

He stepped forward.

For the span of maybe two or three seconds the kiss was aggressive as hell.

The corridor lights flared as Rush fought him instinctively, tensing under his grip, hands fisting, irritation and adrenaline and anger flowing through both their minds as the scientist battled back at him, trying to gain the upper hand, until his conscious thoughts caught up with his reflexive combativeness in an alignment that snapped the pair of them into stillness.

For an uncounted interval they froze against the corridor wall as Rush's thoughts shattered into something intricate and infinitely branching while Young waited out his iterative processes.

Abruptly, Rush relaxed, letting him in.

Kissing him back.

His thoughts exerted a sustained, attentive force against Young's mind.

The scientist flexed his hands, sending a distant ache traveling from his injured wrists up to his elbows.

In response, Young slowly eased up on the pressure until he had released him entirely. He shifted his grip to Rush's hips, holding him against the wall, needing to maintain at least an illusion of control, knowing that Rush was more than capable of completely overwhelming his defenses if the man chose to do so.

But he didn't.

Instead, the scientist brought both hands up, one wrapping around Young's neck, the other resting palm against his cheek, his thumb grazing over Young's cheekbone as he pulled him in. His thoughts, his hands, the tilt of his head, and his aggressive continuous forward press of body and mind—combined into something that Young found both imperious and charming.

He had to fight to hold onto the slow slip of lips and tongue as their thoughts interleaved like alloyed metal.

Young could see into Rush more clearly than on any other occasion, as if somehow, for a brief moment, he had forced Destiny back. The scientist's mind was bright and transparent and wholly present and he could see—

God.

Young froze, subsuming his alarm beneath the slide of hand and mind as Rush surged forward, coming away from the wall, one hand wrapping around Young's lower back, pressing them together, his thoughts sharpening, clarifying, in a mental unveiling of his cognitive structure.

Young could see the disruption caused by whatever it was that Telford had done with Anubis' device intermingled with the grief of losing Gloria so profoundly that it was impossible to separate the two injuries.

He could see the damage caused by the interrogation—the *torture* that the Nakai had put him through.

He could see the raw, fractured place where his own consciousness had broken away from Rush's during the time he had been pulled back to Earth with the communication stones.

And throughout his *entire* mind, Young could see signs of the strain that balancing the influence of the AI and Young caused, running like welded cracks through his damaged, fragile neural architecture.

In that moment, he understood. It had never been their *link* that was broken.

It had been *Rush*.

The pain, the nausea, the vertigo, the terrible sensation of being torn apart—none of that had come from Young. It had all been translated across their link. If Young had ever completely blocked, he would have realized as much immediately.

*It is the nature of psychic injury to have no insight into itself.*

He should have *checked*.

He should have *known*.

Rush could never have fixed their link.

But *he* could.

With an instinctive urgency, Young poured his mental energy into that raw, injured place—the one place in Rush's mind that he could fix with his mere presence, reordering what had been disrupted, sealing what had been torn apart.

The aggressive press of Rush's thoughts and hands faded slightly, and Young stepped forward again, pushing him against the wall as Rush's eyelids flickered and his head tipped back against the bulkhead.

Could he tell what Young was doing?

The focus of his attention was difficult to pinpoint.

When Young had done all he could, he eased up on the physical and psychic pressure he was exerting on the other man, decelerating in an ending glide of lips and tongue.

They looked at each other.

Young stepped back.

"Shit," Young breathed. "I am, um—*really* sorry about that. I don't know why—" he broke off in a tangle of indecision, uncertain of even where his own uncertainty lay.

Rush looked down and away, hiding an ephemeral smile that almost, *almost* came off as shy before he brought it under control and shook his hair out of his eyes, turning it into something more confident, more amused, more practiced.

"You realize," Rush said slowly, as he knelt to pick up his crutch, "that this confirms something I have long suspected."

"And what's that?" Young asked, with more than a little trepidation.

"You're an awful lot of work, colonel."

That surprised a short laugh out of Young. "Seriously, Rush—"

Rush cut him off with raised hand and a shake of the head. Slowly, his eyes fixed on Young, he reached into his jacket and pulled out the unopened carton of cigarettes from Telford. He held them out in a wordless offering.

Young drew the cigarettes from Rush's unresisting grip with a graze of fingertips.

"Rush—" he tried again, but the other man stepped around him, heading toward the main corridor. He paused after a few steps, turning to look back at Young.

"Are you coming? I don't have all day, you know. I have things to do."

"Yeah," Young said weakly. "I'm coming."

## Chapter Twenty Seven

It was almost twenty hundred hours. The overhead lighting had dimmed to its usual evening levels as Young and Rush walked wordlessly through the corridors. The track lighting at the bases of the walls flared in intensity as they passed, the subtle brightness perfectly keeping pace with them as it marked their path like a wave.

Like a target.

The hollow echoing of their footsteps on the deck plating was briefly obscured as they passed the dull roar of conversation emanating from the open doorway of the observation deck, where those members of the crew who did not have anywhere else to be were exchanging digital music files, movies, books, and other items that they had requested from Earth.

For his own part, Young had requested nothing.

They had only just finished storing and distributing the entirety of the material that had come through the gate. Young and Rush had spent most of the afternoon trying to coordinate the organization and assembly of the medical and scientific equipment they had received from Earth.

Young had also been devoting a significant portion of his mental energy toward making sure that he and Rush crossed paths with Telford as little as possible.

All of the afternoon's activity had assisted his current mental campaign to *not* dwell on how utterly untenable his present situation was.

He tried to avoid listing, but to no avail.

One—they were obviously being tracked in some manner by the Nakai. Two—the drones that had plagued them throughout this galaxy had a nasty habit of predicting their likely stopping points. Three—some unknown, seemingly ultra-advanced alien race had a habit of pulling them out of FTL and trying to trap them in phase shifted planets. Four—the AI clearly had an agenda, which, thus far, it had refused to share with him. Four point five—to what extent Rush was complicit in knowingly or unknowingly advancing this agenda was unclear. Five—Telford clearly *also* had an unknown agenda. Five point five—to what extent Rush understood and or supported that agenda was unclear. Six—he was in an open conflict with the AI regarding whether or not Rush was going to return to Earth. Six point five—he was unclear on

whether or not Rush really *wanted* to return to Earth. Seven—Rush was a mess, and they needed him to keep the ship fully powered and everyone *alive*. Eight—

Damn it.

It had clearly been a really bad idea to do what he had done.

Hadn't it?

It wasn't clear-cut.

He'd made worse choices—that was certain.

But it wasn't very comforting considering his track record of shitty Rush-centric decisions.

On one hand, Young was pretty sure that he and Rush did not need another complication in their working relationship. On the other hand, something extremely positive *had* come out of the entire thing—namely the fact that he had been able to repair some of the damage that had been affecting their link.

He hadn't touched *anything* in Rush's mind besides the area that had been broken when he had been pulled away by the communication stones, but he was fairly sure that it was that *particular* injury that had been causing their problem.

Could he fix the rest of it?

Could he do it without the process being quite so—involved?

He had no idea.

*Rush* certainly wasn't helping him sort any of this out.

The scientist's mind was a locked, foreign swirl, his thoughts half in Ancient, half in code. Not all of his thoughts were even accessible to Young, as a consequence of his consciousness being partially outsourced to Destiny's CPU.

Young wondered how he appeared to Rush.

Horribly transparent, or equally opaque?

Rush's actions and general demeanor suggested the latter.

As Young walked beside the scientist toward the control interface room, trying to keep his surface thoughts focused on the logistics of the rest of their night, the thing that struck him most, the thing that he *couldn't get over*, was how *calmly* Rush seemed to be taking the events of the past several hours—Telford's arrival on Destiny, the intense scrutiny he was likely to face from the new research team, not to mention what had happened in the hallway.

Young had *kissed* him, for god's sake.

Had that been interpretable to Rush? Young was the one who'd done it—and he himself still wasn't sure how to *explain* it, other than the fact that it had seemed like a good idea at the time.

Rush—god, Rush was the kind of guy who took offense at the idea of *eating breakfast*. He was high strung about pretty much *everything*, the only exception being that he kept his head pretty well in the midst of crisis, which Young *still* couldn't entirely wrap his mind around—but that wasn't the point. The point was that he had expected *some* kind of post make out freak out from the scientist.

None seemed to be forthcoming. Not even now, alone together as they were.

The only sign that anything had changed between them *at all* was the way Rush reached down with his free hand to carefully pull the textbook that Young was carrying out of his grip before they rounded the door of the control interface room.

As they passed through the doorframe, Rush seemed to switch on the frenetic energy that Young had always associated with him. The scientist walked forward a few steps and slammed the book atop the monitor bank next to where Eli and Chloe were sitting, comparing their new iPod collections.

They both jumped as the book came down.

Rush raised his eyebrows at them.

"Physical chemistry, a molecular approach?" Eli asked dubiously, reading the title. "Congratulations, you win the award for 'most boring personal item of any crew member'. Also, that thing looks like more than five pounds."

"It's twelve pounds actually," Rush said imperiously, ignoring Eli's aggrieved look as he shook his hair back out of habit. "I have good news and bad news. Which would you prefer first?"

//Admit it, // Young said, //you enjoy this kind of thing.//

//I refuse to admit any such thing.//

"The good news," Eli said, looking even *more* aggrieved.

//Doesn't mean it's not true, // Young shot back.

"The good news is that your horrendous deficiencies in quantum mechanics are about to be remedied. Neither of you has any kind of background in the field and it's absolutely essential. For everything. So. Chapters one and two. Day after tomorrow."

They stared at him.

"The good news is that you're giving us *homework*? On top of everything else? That's the *good news*?" Eli looked insulted. "And why did you have to bring this thing through? Couldn't some overworked little SGC intern have scanned it for you? Or, I don't know, found a textbook on a *CD*?"

"It's hardly the same," Rush said disdainfully.

Chloe had opened the book and she looked up at Rush.

"This is yours?" she asked.

"I certainly don't need it," Rush snapped, looking away.

"Thanks," she said quietly.

"The bad news," Rush continued, "thankfully applies only to Eli."

"Yes," Eli repeated. "*Thankfully*."

"You've been assigned as the liaison to Telford's research team," Young said, from the position he had taken up next to Rush.

"Yay."

"This does not relieve you of any of your normal science team responsibilities," Rush said.

"Are you *kidding* me? I'm supposed to do all the stuff I normally do, plus help Telford, plus teach myself quantum mechanics?"

Rush shrugged, unimpressed.

"There's a briefing at oh seven hundred tomorrow morning, in the control interface room," Young said. "Telford expects you to be there."

"Oh seven hundred? Are you *serious*? I don't start before nine o'clock. This is a central tenet of the Church of Wallace, okay? I'm going to have to take this to Wray."

"I think it could be very useful for you to attend this briefing," Young said, giving Eli a significant look from beneath his lowered brows.

Eli sighed. "Right."

Rush rolled his eyes. "Yes yes, very subtle, both of you," he said dismissively. He gave Young a sidelong look. "Don't you have somewhere to be?"

//Stay out of trouble,// Young projected, giving Rush a forbidding look before he turned and left the control interface room.



He walked ten feet down the hall and into a small adjacent conference room.

During Rush's briefing with the science team, Young had arranged for TJ, Scott and Greer to meet him for an informal conference in the adjacent room. It was close enough that there was no possibility that it would stress their link, but still allowed at least for the illusion that he and Rush could operate independently. Although—

Young considered it very likely that the radius of their link had improved drastically as a result of what he had done a few hours ago.

That brought with it a whole different set of problems.

Namely, that if Rush had the capability of wandering about the ship on his own, especially at night, he had the potential to get into an almost infinite amount of trouble. With the AI, with Telford—and Young wouldn't be able to do a damn thing about it except to pick up the pieces afterward.

It wasn't like he could put a twenty-four hour watch on the man.

Could he?

Well, he supposed he *could*. But he was entirely certain that would destroy Rush's willingness to cooperate with him.

When he entered the room, his two senior officers plus Greer were waiting for him.

He nodded as he joined them at the table. "Where's Rush?" was the first thing that TJ asked.

"Next door, with the science team," Young said shortly.

Scott's eyes flicked from TJ to Young, finally fixing him with a quiet, unreadable look.

"This meeting," Young said, "is meant to be informal, and its subject is Colonel Telford."

"Great," Greer murmured, leaning back in his chair.

Young raised his eyebrows and the sergeant straightened.

"Though there's been some confusion in the past about the exact chain of command for the Icarus Project, it's been clarified by General O'Neill that, on Destiny, Telford will be reporting to *me* and not the other way around. Unfortunately, however, as Telford outranks everyone on board with the exception of myself, this makes him my new second." He paused, shooting Scott a quick glance.

"I figured as much," Scott said with a half shrug.

"What I need from the three of you, and from everyone else, is both cooperation and *respect* when dealing with Colonel Telford. The man has already made the case that

he should be in command of this mission, and I don't want to give him a reason to stage a bureaucratic coup. Got it?"

He got reluctant nods from around the table..

"There's one area, however, in which Telford should get *no* cooperation from *any* of the crew." Young paused.

They waited respectfully, though he was certain that at least TJ and Greer knew the direction he was going to take this.

"Rush is not to be alone with Colonel Telford or any member of Telford's team. You're going to need to watch for this *all the time*, but primarily if I become injured or incapacitated for some reason. I don't care what Rush says, I don't care what Telford says, they're not to be alone together. Furthermore, I don't want Telford pulling Rush out of the neural interface chair. If for some reason I was unable to pull him out and it was absolutely necessary that someone else do it, TJ is next in line. Understood?"

He got a surprised look from TJ and nods from the other two.

"Just to clarify, sir," Scott said, hesitantly, "are we protecting Rush *from* Colonel Telford, or are we trying to prevent Rush and Telford from—implementing some plan together? I think we'd be more effective if we knew."

"Both," Young said shortly.

"Both?" he echoed.

Young looked at them, teetering on the edge of explaining the entire situation.

"The more we know, the more we can help you," TJ said quietly.

Young sighed, his thoughts brushing briefly against Rush's consciousness. The other man was half listening to Eli giving a rundown on what they had learned from going through the collection of sensor data obtained from the third obelisk planet. The other half of his attention was focused on the AI.

"You need to work on splitting your focus and sustaining your attention in multiple avenues at once," Jackson was saying, arms crossed. "I'm not talking about the human conception of 'multi-tasking,' in which your focus rapidly redirects during ongoing tasks. I'm talking about running complex executable programs that require continuous live input at the same time. True parallel processing. You've got to be able to split your attention at least four ways. You're having a difficult time with *two*."

God *damn* it.

That decided it.

He withdrew before either Rush or the AI had detected his presence.

"Okay," Young said. "Here's the story. Although Rush was the chief scientist for Icarus, what none of us knew was that he was *also* the chief scientist for another project run by Colonel Telford regarding ascension."

He paused, taking in TJ's raised eyebrows, the contained energy in Greer's quiet pose. This was news to them as well as to Scott.

"The project was *related* to the Icarus project, because Dr. Jackson had uncovered some Ancient text that mentioned the ninth chevron address and how, in order to fully access what lay beyond it, one had to have made significant progress along the path toward ascension."

They were silent, watching him.

"Using different tissue banks, Colonel Telford screened the general population for someone who had the Ancient gene as well as a genetic profile that most closely matched the what we have on file for the Ancient genome. That's how they found Rush. Jackson arranged a joint appointment, and he started to work on the ninth chevron. At the same time, he and Telford started to work on modifying Rush's brain so that he could access whatever lay *beyond* the ninth chevron."

"My god," TJ said, looking appalled.

"Actually, this explains a lot," Greer commented dryly, crossing his arms.

"No kidding," Young said quietly. "Though it's my impression that he was very much a pain in the *ass* *before* they started messing around with his mind. During an attempt to use some machinery discovered in one of Anubis' labs, Telford pushed things too far."

"How far is 'too far'?" TJ asked sharply.

"They changed his neural circuitry using a device that I think was an extremely primitive version of the neural interface chair on this ship. Rather than bolts, it used some kind of gel with electrical conductance properties. They tried it and it worked. They got the changes they wanted, but for a reason I still don't understand, Telford held Rush down underneath the stuff."

"As in—" Greer said, breaking off.

"As in drowning him. In some kind of gel. Yeah."

"What the *fuck*?" Greer exploded.

"Clearly it didn't have that effect though," TJ pointed out. "Maybe he wasn't trying to kill him."

"Yeah," Young said, rubbing a hand across his jaw. "That's what Rush keeps saying. It scared the hell out of him though. I *know* it did. Camile told me that he was unconscious for six days after they brought him back to Earth." He paused, shrugging. "Telford seems to think he should be directly credited with Rush's ability to crack the code and access Destiny's systems. Maybe he's right about that. Maybe that gel cemented whatever changes they had succeeded in making. Maybe it changed him further. I don't know."

"How did you find all of this out, sir?" Scott asked. "Did Rush *tell* you?"

"No," Young said. "Not exactly. When Rush came on board Destiny," he continued, avoiding Scott's question for the moment in order to stick to the linear narrative he had been piecing together over the past several weeks, "he didn't want to sit in the control interface chair. I'm still not sure *why* exactly." Young crossed his arms, trying to keep a lid on the frustration and anxiety that he was feeling. "But he told me that he was afraid of what would happen to the crew if he did. Specifically *him*."

"So he built software buffers to run between himself and Destiny whenever he sat in the chair," TJ said softly. "Until the Nakai boarded the ship, and he didn't have the time."

Young nodded. "He woke Destiny up. The lights began changing for him. Doors came open. Finally, he was trapped into sitting in the control interface chair." Young looked over at Scott. "When that happened, he was genetically modified to be more than sixty percent Ancient using a viral vector introduced into his system by the chair. He also became mentally linked to Destiny."

Scott managed to hang on to his neutral expression. "Yup," he said. "I remember that meeting."

"He became unable to get out of the chair on his own," Young continued quietly. "Someone had to pull him out. When I did so, it also formed a link between my mind and his."

"*That*, I don't remember being mentioned," Scott said, his eyes flicking to TJ and Greer, taking in the lack of surprise on either of their faces.

"Yeah," Young replied. "A lot of this has been need-to-know."

Scott nodded. "I can see the reasons for keeping it that way, but I have to tell you that most of the crew has noticed something going on. There are a lot of theories going around."

"I'm sure," Young said, sighing.

"So how does Telford figure into all of this?" Greer asked.

"Rush is still changing," Young admitted, hooking a hand over his shoulder to massage the back of his neck. "Destiny, the AI, whatever—seems to be trying to facilitate this change. It's working toward some goal that it refuses to share with me." Young paused for a moment. "Telford's mission was and is to unlock the full potential of Destiny. To make sure, from a scientific standpoint, that this mission is not a waste."

They looked at him, waiting silently.

"So," he continued finally, "I think it's more than possible that Telford is going to identify and likely facilitate the goals of the AI."

"Why not let him?" Scott asked. "Just to play devil's advocate."

"Because I have no idea what those goals are. I assume that I'm not being told because I'm not going to like them. Plus," he said quietly, looking away, "it's killing Rush."

There was silence in the room.

"It's killing Rush," Young said, his voice stronger, "but Rush himself doesn't seem to give a damn. And since without him we're all going to be incredibly screwed, I'm trying to keep him alive for as long as possible."

"Understood," Scott said quietly.

"Ideally," Young said, "I'd like to prevent him from so much as *talking* to Telford. The two of them together are a whole mess of trouble. I don't trust Telford not to push Rush, and I don't trust Rush not to just completely fuck himself up for the sake of his own intellectual curiosity. His conception of himself is not normal. Or accurate."

He hadn't intended to say that last part.

TJ looked at him, her eyes unreadable.

"I'm sorry I left you out of the loop for so long," Young said quietly. "There have been a lot of complicating factors, and—" he broke off, bringing a hand up, making an empty gesture.

"I think you would get a lot of support from the crew," Scott said quietly. "More than you think."

"Yeah," Young said, rubbing his jaw. "Right up to the point where Telford stages a literal coup." He smiled wryly.

Scott gave him a faint smile in return.

"Sergeant," Young said, turning toward Greer. "I need a word with you in private."

Scott and TJ got to their feet. TJ caught his eye and said, "bring him by later tonight. We'll start the antivirals."

Young nodded as he watched her walk out of the room.

Greer said nothing, just watched him quietly from across the table. Young leaned forward, resting his forearms on the planar metal surface in front of him.

"I haven't had a chance to thank you," Young began. "You've displayed unfailing bravery, good judgment, and compassion in the past several weeks."

"Thank you, sir," Greer said, his eyes briefly flicking away and back.

"If I had the authority to promote you, I absolutely would do it in a heartbeat. As it is, I've asked Wray to submit a request for your recent actions to be evaluated at command headquarters. We'll see what they say."

Greer nodded. "Thank you, sir," he said again.

"Don't thank me," Young murmured. "You know, Rush suggested I make you my second."

Greer smiled, shaking his head once. "That man has *no* understanding of the chain of command."

"I've given up," Young admitted.

"I don't blame you."

"Anyway," Young said quietly. "My point is that he likes you. He tolerates you more than almost anyone else and I have the feeling that's because you seem to understand him pretty well."

"I don't know about that," Greer said neutrally.

They looked at each other in silence for a moment.

"I need a favor," Young said finally.

"Name it," Greer said.

He couldn't.

He didn't want to.

"There's a certain—independence of thought," Young said, "that you see in exceptional leaders at the SGC. Having that in isolation though—that's not enough."

Greer looked at him, eyebrows faintly raised.

"You also need loyalty. You need excellent judgment."

"I'd agree with that," Greer said guardedly.

"You have all of these qualities," Young said. "I've watched them develop over the past two years."

Greer said nothing.

"I'm telling you these things," Young said, pressing his fingertips into the table, "because I want you to understand why I'm asking this of *you*, and not anyone else."

Greer nodded.

"I need help," Young said. "You've seen *some* of what it's like—the ship is fucking with him, fucking with his mind, with how he *is*, but he didn't *want* this, he couldn't have, at least not completely, because he didn't sit in the chair until he was *forced* into it—" he broke off. "Telford is going to push him. Telford is going to push him straight into whatever it is that the damn ship is trying to do."

"Agreed," Greer said.

"If Telford pulls him out of that chair," Young said, "I think they might end up linked."

"Telford will not pull him out of that chair," Greer said quietly.

Young looked at him.

"It's not going to happen," Greer said, his voice flat. Final.

Young nodded. "I'll stand behind any action you might take to prevent that outcome," he said quietly. "*Any* action."

"Understood," Greer said.

They sat in silence, the air between them heavy with the tacit implication behind Young's statement.

"I assume he doesn't know about this—arrangement?" Greer asked.

"No," Young said, his thoughts flashing sideways to the science briefing for an instant in confirmation before he withdrew again, unnoticed. "He doesn't."

"How does that work?" Greer asked.

"We think very differently," Young said.

"No shit," Greer said with an innocent tilt of his head.

Young shot him a wry look. "Plus—he's very—" Young opened his hand. "He has a tendency to be pathologically focused but with a low threshold for redirecting his attention."

"Want to bottom line that one?"

"I'm usually less interesting than whatever he's doing, and he's distractible."

"Not always," Greer said.

"No," Young agreed, giving him a sharp look. "Not always. Speaking of which," he stood, inclining his head toward the door. Greer followed suit. They nodded at each other as they parted ways in the corridor.

When he reentered the control interface room, Volker was in the midst of some kind of presentation that seemed to involve the cosmic background radiation.

Young leaned against the wall in the back of the room, remaining as unobtrusive as possible.

Rush, unsurprisingly, wasn't even bothering to *look* at Volker. His gaze was directed out into the empty air at his left.

"In all the sensor data we combed through, there was nothing that seemed to correlate with the instant we were pulled out of FTL, so then we pooled all of the raw data from the readings we took during the subsequent time following FTL drop out, which for the first planet, really was quite extensive—"

Young's eyes snapped over to Eli as the young man ripped a piece of paper out of his new notebook and abruptly crumpled it into a ball.

Volker stopped talking, raising his eyebrows as Eli fired the paper at Rush.

Without looking, Rush's left hand snapped up and he caught the paper, not even pausing as he chucked it directly back at Eli.

"Holy crap," Volker said, clearly impressed.

Slowly, Rush turned to look at Eli, leveling a glare at him that looked like it could liquefy lead.

"Unacceptable," Rush snapped.

"Not sure if you were listening," Eli said softly. "This is *important*." He gave Rush a significant look, gently lifting his eyebrows as he inclined his head in Volker's direction.

"He found something in the CBR."

"Continue," Rush said, turning away from Eli to look at Volker.



"We didn't find anything that correlated with us dropping out of FTL, but there was something that correlated with the points in time when the obelisks emitted the, um, creepy column of light. It generated an electromagnetic field precisely contemporaneous with the appearance of an unusual pattern in the CBR."

//CBR?// Young projected at Rush.

//Cosmic Background Radiation. Use those deductive reasoning skills of yours.//

Volker clicked a button. Projected in glowing relief in midair was a pattern—bright, disc-shaped, and familiar.

The sudden surge of recognition and interest in his mind immediately caught Rush's attention and he turned, looking back at Young, curiosity evident in his expression.

"You've seen this before?" he asked.

The science team looked askance at him.

The man could just *not keep a low profile to save his life*.

Before Young could reply, Park cut in, slamming her laptop shut as she stood. "You guys. I can't take this anymore. What the *heck* is going on here?" Her gaze flicked nervously back and forth between Rush and Young several times before she screwed up her courage and asked quickly, "are you talking to each other in *your heads*?"

The room was silent for a moment.

"Obviously," Rush said.

"Oh," Park said, weakly.

"Continue," Rush said to Volker.

Volker stared at him. "*Continue*?" he echoed. "What the *hell* is going on with you, *Rush*?"

//I think you'd better explain,// Young shot at him. //I just brought Scott up to speed.//

Rush sighed, bringing two fingers to his temple he motioned back and forth between himself and Young. "Me, the colonel." He switched directions, motioning between his temple and the empty air. "Me, the ship. Both linked. Are you people satisfied?"

//That was probably the *least* informative explanation I've ever heard you give.//

//Then your memory is defective.//

"No," Brody said flatly.

//They deserve more from you,// Young snapped at him.

//Doesn't *everyone*?//

"If you want to find out more, join Colonel Telford's research team," Rush snapped. "He's going to be studying all of this."

"Please *don't* do that, actually," Young said, from the back of the room. They all turned to look at him as he pushed away from the wall to walk forward, into their midst. "Telford knows about the connection between Rush and the ship, because he's been briefed by Carter and O'Neill, but he doesn't know about the connection between Rush and myself, and I'd rather it stayed that way."

"Good luck with that," Volker said, looking dubiously at Rush. "The entire crew has figured out that something's up with you two. Telford seems like a pretty sharp guy. You're going to have to keep a much lower profile."

"We're working on it," Young said.

"I think *you're* doing fine," Volker said mildly, in Young's direction.

Rush narrowed his eyes. "Continue," he snapped. "Eli can fill you in on the rest later. *Continue.*"

There was a desperate note in the scientist's voice that everyone seemed to immediately pick up on.

Volker, who was in a position to direct the trajectory of the meeting if he chose to stop presenting, looked at Rush, clearly undecided about whether to continue questioning him further. After a brief interval, the other man nodded.

Young could feel Rush unsuccessfully try to mute some of the relief that was flooding through their link.

"Okay," Volker said, "continuing as requested. What you're looking at here is a temperature modulation in the CBR. One of these has appeared exactly at the moment of initiation of the beam of light produced by the three obelisks we've encountered. Moreover, if you render our readings of the CBR in three dimensions—" he paused, clicking a button and the two dimensional midair screen shifted to a three dimensional projection of the planet, the obelisk, and Destiny. "Well, I think just showing you is going to be the most effective. This is an animated time lapse of the readings we took."

Volker clicked a button, and, as Young watched, a beam of white light shot out of the blue and green world they had recently escaped from. He watched as Destiny started to slowly be drawn in toward the planet.

"Now the planet is starting to go out of phase," Volker said, "I'm rendering this as having it fade out because if it progressed sufficiently, the planet *would* disappear as far as we were concerned. Watch what starts to happen to the CBR."

The portion of the planet nearest the obelisk began to fade, creating an expanding crater of phase-shifting matter—the center point of which was the obelisk. Young saw the uniform, semi-transparent yellow glow of the cosmic background radiation begin to penetrate the space being liberated as matter went out of phase. As it did so, the glow of the CBR changed in color from yellow to red.

"The CBR is heating up locally in the vicinity of the planet, forming a catenary surface of increased temperature as it advances, which, when you render it two dimensionally, looks like a disc."

"Excellent work, Mr. Volker," Rush said absently, looking at the image with narrowed eyes, his thoughts blindingly fast, paralleling each other in rapidly branching algorithmic trees.

Volker stared at Rush in shock.

"Dang it," Eli said. "Where's a kino when you need one?"

"In terms of what this means," Volker said, recovering his equilibrium, "Your guess is good as mine. Or actually, probably better."

For a moment, no one spoke.

"So, does this have any relationship to this mysterious pattern in the CBR that is somehow related to Destiny's mission?" Young asked the room.

"Possibly," Eli said carefully into the silence, his eyes flicking sideways at Rush. "It's similar. It's kind of like, um, what you might predict to see when D-branes of the multiverse collide."

Rush shot Eli a sharp look.

Brody whistled soft and low, locking eyes with Volker.

"D-branes of the multiverse?" Young said. "You have got to be kidding me."

"Yeah, you're so right about that. I meant *E-branes*."

Young stared at him.

"That was a joke," Eli explained, waving his hand in a circular motion. "You know? Like a different—you know what? Nevermind. Sorry. D-branes are a way to describe the idea that the four dimensional universe—you know, the three spatial dimensions plus time, exists on a membrane-type thing that itself exists in multidimensional space called 'the bulk'."

Young noted that Rush was smiling faintly as he watched Eli.

"So according to M-theory, D-branes exist side by side with each other, each potentially comprising an observable 4-D universe, plus or minus small spatial dimensions rolled up inside. The thing is, if this is true, we, by our nature, can't make it off our D-brane. So we can never see the universe in its true, multidimensional form. For a long time, though, this has been a pretty untestable theory. But people have predicted the energy signature one would see in the CBR if and when two D-branes of the multiverse collided, and it is supposed to look an awful lot like this."

"Damn," Brody said quietly.

"I'm with ya," Volker said, glancing at Brody.

Park had her hand over her mouth.

"*What?*" Young snapped at the room in general, mainly out of habit. Already, in the back of his mind, he felt the answer forming, coalescing out of his own unconscious expertise.

"The obelisks may be a bridge between parallel universes," Chloe said, into the ensuing quiet.

"Interesting," Rush said, raising his eyebrows as he locked eyes with Eli.

"So Destiny's mission has something to do with the multiverse?" Young asked, his eyes flicking back and forth between Rush and Eli.

"I'd say that's a distinct possibility," Volker commented. "The whole idea of traveling to the literal edge of the universe has never really sat well with me. From an astrophysics perspective, it really doesn't make sense. I mean, space is infinite. That's been pretty well established."

Rush looked over at Volker, his eyebrows raising briefly before his gaze flicked out into the empty air.

"So if you were going to guess what Destiny's mission was," Young said grimly, knowing he was treading on dangerous ground as he looked around at the science team, "what would you say?"

//What are you *doing*?// Rush snapped, his attention suddenly centered on Young.

//What does it *look* like? I'm having a discussion with the science team. If you and the AI don't like it, you can get out.//

"We pretty much know what Destiny's mission is, right?" Park said uncertainly. "It's to travel toward and find this mysterious pattern in the CBR. To study it."

"It must be more than that," Brody said. "Why were the Ancients trying to reach Destiny as they were being wiped out by the plague? They must have thought coming here could help them."

"A lot of energy would be liberated during collision of adjacent branes," Volker added. "A *lot*."

At the back of his mind, Young could feel Rush's heart rate increase. On the metal surface of the table, his hands curled slowly, tightly into fists.

"What would happen if we waited for the collision to complete and then purposefully flew *into* the advancing phase wave, do you think?" Chloe asked.

"I don't like the sound of that," Brody said darkly. "That seed ship we found got trapped in a planet."

"Maybe they didn't know what they were doing," Chloe said. "They clearly misinterpreted the purpose of these planets. Maybe they're gateways. Maybe we're supposed to actively *use* one."

Eli remained silent, watching Rush.

"Rush," Young snapped.

"Pass," Rush said tightly.

"Pass?" Young repeated, his voice dangerous. "You don't get to *pass*. Not on this one. What happens,*hypothetically*, if one were to fly into the advancing phase wave?"

Through their link, Young could feel the AI beginning to tighten down on Rush's consciousness. Young matched it, step for step, never pushing farther than it did, but maintaining his own rigid hold on the part of Rush's mind that was accessible to him.

This was the closest he'd been to any kind of answer, and he wasn't about to let it go.

He *couldn't*, in good conscience, let it go.

Rush's breathing was becoming uneven. "Can you please *not*—"

"What happens?" Young said quietly, looking at him intently.

"Um, what are you *doing*?" Eli asked, his voice hard-edged.

"Plures res es validus evulsum," Rush said, clenching and unclenching his hands.

"What the hell did he just say?" Young snapped at the room.

"Many things can happen," Park said in a strained whisper.

"That's not an answer," Young snapped at Rush.

Rush was staring intently at his hands, his expression twisting, his breathing ragged.

"I *said*," Eli repeated, getting to his feet. "What. Are. You. Doing."

"I can't—" Rush breathed.

"Yes you can," Young murmured, extending a hand, palm outward, in Eli's direction, halting the younger man's approach. "You *can*." He stayed steady. "I'm just asking you a hypothetical question. That's all. Figure out how to answer it."

"I—" Rush said, clearly trying to work his way around the restrictions that the AI was imposing. "The crew—the crew will be all right."

"So that *is* the plan?" Young said intently. "To try and fly into one of these things?"

He felt the AI ratchet its control up a notch, and Rush froze, his hands stopping their rhythmic clenching and unclenching.

Young felt a hand fall on his shoulder.

"Hey," Volker said. "Colonel. Let it go. Just—let it go. We'll figure it out for you. Maybe not as fast, but—"

Young clenched his jaw looked at Rush's blank horrified expression.

He released him, feeling the AI let him go in the same moment.

Rush jerked, his muscles clenching as he recovered his ability to move. He very nearly fell out of his chair, but Young and Volker managed to grab and steady him as he pitched to the side.

"Oh my god," Park whispered.

Rush took a deep breath, tipping his head back slightly as he did so. Young felt a headache slam into place behind the scientist's eyes as well as the sensation of a thin trickle of blood running down the back of the other man's throat.

Chloe slipped in between the rest of the science team and pulled a tissue out of her pocket, handing it to Rush. How she knew that he needed it, Young wasn't sure.

Wordlessly, Rush took it from her.

"What the *hell* was that?" Eli snapped.

"Don't worry about it, Eli," Rush said tiredly, trying to shrug away from the grip that both Young and Volker still had on him.

"No," Eli said, his eyes fixed on Young. "I want to know *exactly* what you just did to him. Because I *read everything* in the Ancient database pertaining to the chair in my freaking free time, such as it is, and it didn't say a *damn thing* about anything even *remotely* like what we just saw. So yeah. You can just explain it to us. To all of us. *Right now*. Because from an outsider's perspective? It looked pretty *messed up*."

//Fuck you, anyway.// Rush projected at him unsteadily. //You couldn't have waited until *later* to fight with the AI? You have to do it in front of the *entire science team*?//

"Eli," Young said, raising his hands, "the AI is preventing Rush from telling me what the nature of Destiny's mission is."

"Then maybe you *shouldn't ask him about it*," Eli said darkly, "if its only way to deal with you is by messing him up so much that he can't even *talk*. I can't believe that you had nothing to do with the freezing and the staring into space, and the distressed—you know." Eli held his hands up, clenching and unclenching them a few times.

"Eli," Rush said. "Stop. It's fine."

"Yup, you're fine. You're *obviously* so, so fine. I'm convinced. How about you guys?" he turned to the rest of the science team, who all seemed to have the same locked expressions, the same tightness around the eyes.

"Look," Rush said, crumpling up Chloe's tissue and tilting his head forward, doing his best to sharpen his tone, but not quite able to rid himself of that uncharacteristic vagueness that Young *hated*. "It is what it is. Colonel Young is doing his best. What you just saw wasn't his fault. Let's just—leave it at that."

Rush stood and they backed away, giving him space. "Briefing tomorrow, usual time." He looked over at Eli as he picked up his crutch. "You're not excused, no matter what Telford says."

"Rush—" Eli began.

Rush shook his head and turned away, heading toward the door.

After a few seconds, Young turned to follow him, leaving the science team staring after them in a silent, huddled mass.

//So that did not go well,// Young projected, as he reached over to steady Rush as they walked.

//Noticed that, did you?// Rush said acidly, pulling away. //I do not, however, blame *myself*. Is it too much to ask that if you feel the need to fucking attempt to extract information out of my mind while simultaneously battling the AI that you at least *wait* until we are in *private* so that it doesn't look like I'm having a *psychotic break*?//

There was a long silence between them, during which Rush seemed to calm down, his thoughts sharpening nearly back to his usual baseline. A headache still coiled behind the scientist's eyes and Young could feel through their link that fighting so intensively with the AI had exhausted the other man.

//Sorry,// Young projected back finally. //I realize that it's hard on you.//

//It's *hard* on me? Do you have any idea what you're doing when you set yourself against it like that? Any idea *at all*?//

//No,// Young admitted.

//I have a limited amount of space to store information.// Rush snapped. //The AI starts annexing what it thinks *you're* going to try to access, and blocks *both* of us out of huge networks of information by taking up that space *itself*. In my fucking *brain*. *You* instinctively then do the same god damned thing, which leaves me with almost fucking *nothing* to work with when I try to talk to you. As the whole thing escalates, I don't even have a fucking clue *who you are* anymore, and *then* I stop forming memories of the whole thing. That's the last thing to fucking go. God. I wish it was first.//

The surge of horror in Young's thoughts was so intense that it actually elicited a faint, reflexive wave of reassurance from Rush, despite the other man's irritation.

Their footsteps echoed in the empty hallway.

//But you're fine now,// Young projected back.

//I suppose so. I know my goddamned *name* if that's what you mean.//

//Damn it, Rush. Why didn't you tell me this *the first time it happened*?//

//Because I didn't think you were going to be making a *habit* of it.//

"This is so *fucked up*," Young whispered.

"Don't fucking flagellate yourself about it," Rush said, sounding annoyed. "It's not like you can't do it, just pick your battles, please. I'd like to finish out with at least *some* of my cognitive capacity intact."

//*Finish out*?//



//Never mind. Where the fuck are we going anyway?// Rush asked, changing the subject quickly.

//The infirmary.//

//Why? It's not like Tamara can do anything about this.//

//No, actually, she wants to talk to you about starting the antivirals.//

Rush grimaced. //Not sure how well that's going to work out.//

//The AI okayed it.//

//Are you serious?//

//Mostly. It said it was acceptable for me to try to prolong your survival.//

Oddly, Rush seemed to find this amusing. He half smiled, ducking his head slightly, his shorter hair falling across his forehead, the tips of it hitting his glasses but not concealing his eyes.

//This is *funny* to you?// Young snapped in irritated disbelief.

//Aspects of it,// Rush replied evasively. //When do you have these—*debates* with it?//

//Mostly when you're passed out from exhaustion.//

//Ah.//

//So,// Young said, his own thoughts concealed beneath as much ephemera as he could pile on top of them, //we need to talk.//

//That's all you *ever* want to do. About what? Our poorly concealed synchrony in the mess a few days ago? Colonel Telford's arrival? How the Nakai are tracking us? What happens the next time we get pulled out of FTL? I've got an idea about that actually, I think we can force an intergalactic jump earlier than we had initially planned without altering our planned trajectory too much—//

//Rush,// Young interrupted forcefully, //stop being obstructive.//

//Fine. Obviously you're referring to what happened earlier. I'll lay it out for you. You kissed me. I kissed you back. First, there's nothing that fucking *mysterious* about the thing, people do it all the time. I'm not sure what you think there is to discuss. Second, it changes nothing.//

Holy shit.

*That? That* was his reaction?

//Okay, // Young said slowly, trying to gather his thoughts.

It was obvious that Rush had *no idea* that Young had not only seen the wreck that was his mind, but had also been able to repair, at least to some degree, the damage to their link that had resulted when Young had been pulled back to Earth with the communication stones.

Rush was wrong.

It didn't change 'nothing'.

It changed *everything*.

"Rush," he said slowly, pulling his thoughts away from the scientist as much as he could without impacting either of them.

Something in his voice or his mind put Rush on edge.

The other man stopped in the middle of the corridor, turning abruptly to face Young. "If you think," Rush hissed at him, "that what happened earlier was somehow more significant than *merging consciousnesses*, or *sharing thoughts*, or having you *rip* my mind out of the ship, or fucking *surrendering almost all of my cognitive capacity* so that you can have a showdown with the goddamned AI whenever you feel like it, then you are *mistaken*."

Young said nothing.

"You think you fucking *feel* something for me? I should very much expect that you do, as we've been sharing thoughts for the past six weeks or so. But this is an artificial system that we're existing in, here, and it's *not sustainable* so I suggest that you try to ignore whatever it is that you *think* you're feeling so that you can do your goddamn job in a manner that is not horrifically compromised."

"God, you're a lot of work," Young said, through clenched teeth.

"You're needlessly complicating things for yourself. And for me."

"Bullshit," Young whispered.

"It's not. It's responsible," Rush replied quietly. "We don't need another connection. We have *enough*."

"We do. We need it. We need it if I'm going to win out against the AI."

"You," Rush said mercilessly, "are *never* going to win out against the AI. Not in the way you want."

"Is that a threat?"

"It's a statement of fact. All you're going to accomplish is tearing yourself apart against it as you destroy my *mind*. So just stop. This is difficult enough for me as it is." Rush looked away, his expression pained.

They were silent for a moment.

"I trust the AI," Rush said quietly, "but I can't know," he broke off, looking back at Young his eyes dark and intolerable, "I can't truly, objectively *know* how honorable its intentions are because fundamentally, *I'm not separate from it*. Not anymore. Do you understand what that means?"

Young was clenching his jaw so hard that he thought his teeth might crack.

"It means," Rush said, with a gentle relentlessness, "that you're the last line of defense for this crew, and the possibility exists that you won't just have to leave me behind. The possibility exists that you may have to kill me to protect them. And even now, I don't know if you could do it."

"I don't think the AI would let me."

"I told you what to do," Rush said softly.

The CPU.

Shit.

This was *not* the conversation he had wanted to have.

"Why did it let you tell me *that*, but not anything about the *mission*?" Young asked, shutting his eyes briefly.

"That was one of my conditions that it agreed to in order to gain my assistance," Rush said, his voice dark and smooth.

"You're not even *trying* to survive this," Young said quietly.

"Don't be an idiot," Rush snapped. "Why the hell do you think I'm taking the fucking antivirals? Why do you think I walk around feeling pure fucking wrecked when I could be getting energy from the ship?"

"I think you're doing it to make me feel better," Young said, his voice strained.

Rush looked at him for a long moment and said nothing.

"I fixed our link," Young whispered quietly. "I'm almost sure I did."

"*What?*" Rush whispered back.

"In the hallway."

"I don't believe it," Rush murmured.

Suddenly, his eyes flicked out into the empty air and he stepped back from Young abruptly.

"Telford," he murmured quietly, then turned and started down the hallway, again heading toward the infirmary. Young caught up with him after a few steps, just as the man in question rounded a corner several yards in front of them, a stack of files in his hand. He was clearly surprised to see them together.

Had the AI warned Rush that he was coming?

"Dr. Rush," the other man said, his dark eyes unreadable. "I was just looking for you."

"Colonel Telford," Rush said coolly. "How can I help you?"

"I was hoping that you could clarify some of the information that Colonel Carter provided for me regarding the nature of your link with Destiny."

"Unfortunately, now is not a convenient time for me," Rush said, and god, he sounded *tired*.

"Why?" Telford said bluntly. "What are you doing?"

"I have another meeting."

"At twenty-two hundred hours?" Telford shot back skeptically. "I know exactly what you're doing. I'm not going to let you railroad me."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, colonel. I have a meeting with Lieutenant Johansen regarding a piece of Ancient technology—"

"Bullshit," Telford said.

Young stepped forward. "You're out of line, David," he growled.

"Are you *kidding* me, Everett? This is ridiculous."

Abruptly, Rush's free hand came up, sharp and precise, as his head snapped unerringly to focus on a point somewhere to the left of Telford. "Quiet," he snapped at them. His mind was a mess of discordant images—molten blue of heated naquada, the sound of a sea bell echoing over uneven streets, the shimmering of the event horizon, the unflowering of a trinium iris. Rush turned, reversing direction, his limp barely noticeable as his mind drew instinctively closer to the ship and adrenaline flooded his bloodstream.

Young and Telford locked eyes for a moment.

Then, they were both right behind him.

There was a pressure building in Rush's mind as he worked to suppress something.

//What's going on?// Young shot at Rush.

Rush didn't answer, but he didn't have to, because almost immediately, Young could see for himself.

They burst through the doorway to the gate room to see the symbols lit up, and the gate already rotating.

"What the *hell*?" Telford said.

"Someone's dialing in," Rush said darkly.

"Shut it down," Young snapped at him.

"I will," Rush said, "but I want to see if I can tell where it's coming from."

Young grimaced. "Is that a good idea?"

"All I need is about two tenths of a second."

"Rush," Young said warningly.

"Do it," Telford said grimly. "We need to know."

The gate connected with the sound of rushing water, settled into an event horizon, and then almost immediately went dark as Rush narrowed his eyes and, with an abrupt mental effort, pulled power away from the gate, routing it into other systems. The lights in the gateroom flared briefly as he did so, and Destiny loomed threateningly at the edges of his consciousness for a moment before Rush turned it away with miscellaneous tasks and Young yanked him back.

"So," Telford said expectantly, when it became clear after almost a minute that Rush wasn't going to say anything without being prompted, "What did you get?"

"I got an approximate spatial relationship, which is consistent with the connecting gate lying somewhere along our previous trajectory. Distance is harder to gauge than direction. The fact that we didn't drop out of FTL is interesting, it implies that we're not being dialed from a local address—" he broke off abruptly, looking up at the dark curve of the stargate.

It lit up and began to spin again.

"This is not good," Young said quietly.

"No," Rush said, grimly. "It's not."

For the second time, he drained power to the gate—the lights flaring, Destiny pressing in on his mind more insistently than the last time. In his peripheral vision, Young was aware of the AI, manifesting as Jackson, standing next to them with its arms crossed over its chest, its expression concerned.

He wondered if Telford could see it.

He didn't think so.

They waited there in silence.

Two minutes passed.

Three.

"*Fuck*," Rush murmured as, in front of them, the gate lit up again.

## Chapter Twenty Eight

It was nearly midnight. Young stood next to the monitor bank in the gate room, his arms crossed, his head angled down as he looked over Eli's shoulder.

The young man was flying through blurring white lines of code, his headphones in, his eyes intent as he ignored the flurry of nervous activity around him.

Periodically, Young looked up, keeping an eye on Telford, who was overseeing the preparation of the ship for a potential foothold situation. The other man had decided on the gateroom as his base of operations, mainly because he could keep a close eye on how things were progressing in the attempt to keep the gate from activating.

It could also end up being the first place that they would make a stand against whomever was trying to gate in.

"Time," Rush said, his voice strained as he leaned forward, shutting his eyes, flexing his foot.

"One minute, fifty seconds," Chloe said tightly, her hair falling over her face as she turned back to look at him.

Rush was completely unaware of her as he turned his entire energy toward pulling power away from the gate.

"The interval is still decreasing—" The rest of what Wray was going to say was lost to Young as he switched his attention to pulling Rush back out of Destiny.

The scientist did his best to help, but he had been exhausted when the entire ordeal had *started*, and by this point he wasn't capable of providing much assistance.

After about twenty seconds, Young was able to break him free entirely and the room came back into focus.

So much for keeping a low profile. He was pretty sure that synchronized unresponsiveness was a dead giveaway that something was going on between himself and Rush. Fortunately the gravity of the situation, plus questions from Scott and Greer, had kept Telford occupied enough that the man hadn't noticed anything.

Yet.

It was only a matter of time.

"I don't understand why I can't just cut power *remotely*," Eli snapped, frustration evident in his tone. "The power grid in this area of the ship isn't responding to my commands. You're sure you can't cut it?"

Rush shook his head and brought a hand up to his temple. "You think I haven't tried? I can *redirect* it, draining it away from the gate as it starts to dial, but the grid itself isn't responding to me *either*. Obviously."

"Okay," Eli said. "Well, I guess it's time for plan B. Volker and Brody should be in position by now." He grabbed his radio. "Hey, you guys need to hurry it up. We don't really have an unlimited amount of time here." He glanced at Rush as he said it.

Wray paced a few steps behind where Rush and Eli were sitting, walking over to Chloe to look at the stopwatch she held.

"Um, yeah, about that," Volker's voice came over the radio, and Young tried to control the sinking feeling in his chest. "There's *visibly detectable current* flowing through the relay we have to disconnect, which means we're talking about some serious voltage here. I'm not sure we're going to be able to get in there with the tools we have."

"What," Rush said darkly into the radio. "That's impossible."

"Um. Well, I don't know what to tell you," Volker replied. "You want me to take a video?"

"Yes, actually," Rush snapped, "and fucking *show* it to me. Because if what you're saying was *actually* the case, I would know. I guarantee you that."

"So, what, Brody and I are *hallucinating*?"

Rush sighed in disgust and slammed his radio down on the monitor bank. "Unbelievable. I'm going to have to go down there."

//No, Young projected at him. //Not happening, genius.//

//Yes, it *is*.//

The scientist was halfway to his feet when the next dial in attempt came and he brought a hand to his head, unbalanced—

The room faded out as Young devoted everything he had to ripping Rush free of the ship again. When he opened his eyes, he saw that Rush had managed to drop into a crouch, and that Wray was kneeling on the floor next to him, her hands on his upper arms.

Young knelt and pulled Rush up, pushing him into his chair.



"Stay with us," Young murmured, low enough that no one else caught it.

Rush nodded.

"TJ," Wray said quietly into her radio, turning away slightly as she stood. "We need you in the gateroom. Bring your bag."

"That was one minute, forty seconds," Chloe said quietly, from a few feet away.

Young unclipped his own radio from his belt. "Guys, this is Young. We need power cut right now."

"Colonel." It was Brody this time. "Even if we could reach in there and avoid electrocution, with this kind of current, the relays have likely fused. We're going to need to trace this power flow back to its source and cut it off there."

"How long is that going to take?" Young asked.

"Unknown," Brody said.

"I don't believe it," Rush murmured, massaging his temples with his right hand. "I don't. Something else must be going on."

"Could the current they're seeing be some kind illusion?" Wray asked. "It's not like this kind of thing would be without precedent."

"Caused by what?" Park asked. "Some external influence? Something we picked up on a planet somewhere? Something that came through from Earth? The AI?"

Young looked over at Telford, narrowing his eyes.

The other man was talking with Scott, his expression tight and concerned.

"It's not the AI," Rush said, his eyes flicking over to the left. "The AI is very—upset right now."

"Wait," Eli said quietly, his movements slowing into an unnatural stillness. He pulled out his headphones, his expression open and unsure. "What do you mean by that, *exactly*?"

"It's running wasteful algorithms. It's not projecting to me consistently."

"And you said," Eli whispered, his eyes moving to fix on the dark ring of the gate, "that the first time—you let *the gate open*?"

"For less than two tenths of a second," Rush replied, propping his elbows on the monitor bank and dropping his head into his hands. "Nothing came through. I'm *certain* nothing came through."

"Nothing you could see," Eli said quietly. "Nothing *material*. But a very small piece of *information* could have been transmitted."

Rush abruptly lifted his head to fix Eli with a horrified expression.

Destiny rocketed to the front of his mind, a terrified, anxious shriek, pulling him in, pulling him toward the chair, and, as Young struggled to keep the ship at bay, he could see Gloria's silhouette in his peripheral vision, he could feel the AI, dark and unfamiliar, but this time *helping* him—helping *Rush* to resist the chair.

After a few seconds, the gate began to dial again and Rush, with a heroic burst of energy, pulled the power away for what must have been the thirtieth time.

When the room faded back in, he saw Wray and Eli were literally holding Rush in his chair. Young pried his own fingers away from the edge of the monitor bank and pulled away from Park, who had a grip on his upper arm, steadying him.

"Eli," Young said, when he could speak. "What are we dealing with here?"

"Possibly," Eli said grimly, "A virus. Of the computer variety. It's probably overwriting certain codes and that's why he can't detect it."

For the span of about thirty seconds, everyone was silent.

It was Rush who broke the silence as he sighed, shutting his eyes. "I *know*," he said, in response to something that none of them could hear.

They all looked at him.

"How long can you keep doing this?" Young asked.

"The time between dial-ins is decreasing and our—" he paused, shaking his head, "*my*—recovery time is increasing. In less than ten minutes, the overlap is going to be—*shit*." he broke off, squeezing his eyes shut.

"Time," Chloe said quietly, "one minute, thirty seconds."

Young felt Rush abruptly turn his attention to pulling energy away from the gate. The room faded out as he felt Rush attempt the same maneuver he'd performed scores of times before. This time, however, something was different. As soon as Rush's mind came into contact with the ship, the pull of the chair distorted his thoughts, hampering his attempt, twisting and appropriating his focus.

As if Destiny understood what was happening.

As if it didn't want to be alone.

Rush was barely able to shut the gate down before the wormhole connected. As he attempted to pull the scientist out of Destiny's ever tightening hold, Young could distantly feel his heart slamming against his ribs, a headache building behind his eyes. Again the AI again stepped in to help Young separate Rush from the internal circuitry of Destiny, to fight the merciless pull of the chair.

He opened his eyes to find himself being supported, just barely, by Park and Wray. He had managed to retain his grip on the edge of the monitor bank. He pulled away from them, trying to clear his head. When he looked up, he saw the AI standing a few feet away, projecting irregularly as Emily. Its outline flickered in the dim light. "If the CPU is compromised," it said quietly, "Then so is he. Keep him out of the chair."

"It's going to be sooner than I thought," Rush murmured looking up at him. "I can't—" he opened his hands.

"Wray, Park, Chloe, out. Now. Join the other civilians in the mess."

"But—" Park protested.

"Out," Young snapped.

"Eli," Rush murmured quietly.

Eli didn't hear him. His headphones were in. His fingers were flying over the console.

Rush reached over and yanked the headphones out of Eli's ears.

"Ow, damn it! *What?*"

"I'm going to buy you as much time as I can," Rush said faintly, but *you're* going to have to find it."

"Are you freaking *kidding* me?"

"No. You need to write a program to identify anomalous codes within the mainframe. Ask yourself what this thing is *actually doing* and then ask yourself what it *must* consist of to perform its function."

"Yeah," Eli said quietly. "Yeah, okay."

Rush nodded.

Young grimaced as he looked at Rush's mind. The scientist was starting to lose the order that he normally imposed on his thoughts. His hierarchical, computational structure was eroded to nothing. Bursts of related but nonessential images were flowering as fast as he could redirect his focus. He was rapidly losing coherence.

"Stay *out* of there," Rush murmured at him, clearly referring to Young's brush against his mind. "As much as you can, stay out."

As they left, Wray, Park ,and Chloe passed TJ, who threaded her way past them at the doorway.

"Hi," TJ said as she approached, carrying her medical bag.

"Oh for god's sake," Rush said exhaustedly. "Who called *you*? Get *out* of here."

"Um—" she looked at Young uncertainly.

//*Rush*// he projected forcefully.

"Don't *project*," Rush snapped abruptly at him. "Do I have to fucking *spell this out for you*? Pull away *as much as you can*."

That comment seemed to catch Eli's attention. "Oh crap," the young man breathed, looking at Rush. "*That's* why *I* have to find it? Because you think you're going to be affected by this thing?"

"In all likelihood, *I already am*. Look, we have limited time, so just—"

He broke off as Telford strode over to join their group. His expression was tight with concern. "Affected by what?" he snapped at Eli. "What the hell is going on? You look like *shit*, Rush." His eyes flicked over to Young and narrowed marginally as he took in Young's appearance.

"Oh yes?" Rush said, leaning his head on one hand. "And what else is fucking new?"

"We think we might have a virus affecting Destiny's CPU," Young said, figuring the benefit of holding back that piece of information was pretty limited. "Likely transmitted through the open gate. That's why we can't shut the damn thing *off*."

"And you're affected?" Telford asked, looking at Rush intently.

Rush opened his hands. "No idea. Possibly. Probably."

"How long can you keep the gate shut?" Telford snapped.

"Not long," Rush said, glancing at Young.

"We need a time estimate."

"It could be as little as—"

He broke off as the gate started to dial again.

This time, it was excruciating.

Rush could no more fight the pull of the chair than he could fight gravity. Young fought it for him—his mind tearing under the strain. He could feel the AI helping him, a dark, opaque energy that leant its wavering, weakening strength to his own.

He refused to let go.

No matter the cost.

He could feel his heart flutter in his chest.

With a final flood of energy from the AI, they were able to rip Rush free.

The room faded back in, sounds resolving distantly beneath the roaring of blood in his ears. He was on the floor, lying on top of TJ, who had clearly tried to catch him when he fell. He could feel blood trickling down the back of his throat. He coughed weakly.

"Colonel," TJ said. Her voice sounded as though it was coming from far away.

"Colonel, can you hear me?"

"Clear the room," he heard Telford yell. "Fall back *now*!"

Rush was suddenly beside him, his balance wavering slightly as he dropped into a crouch. "Get up," he said. "We've got to get out of here. That was the last time. I can't do it again. *You* can't do it again."

Young tried to push himself up. His muscles were shaking.

"Eli," Telford snapped. "Fall back to the control interface room. Now. Run. You run your *ass* off."

Greer appeared next to Rush, and hauled the scientist up by his jacket, dragging him bodily toward the door.

"Get him *up*," Telford yelled, his assault rifle at the ready as the gate lit up, a glowing arc in the dimness of the room.

Scott was suddenly beside him, helping TJ haul him to his feet, dragging him in the direction of the door where Telford stood, sighting down his rifle.

Young's knees buckled. He had *nothing* left.

Behind them, he heard the event horizon stabilize.

It seemed so far.

He could barely breathe.

In the hallway, twenty-five feet away, he could feel Rush struggling desperately against Greer, trying to twist out of his jacket, trying to go for the other man's sidearm.

Greer was too smart to fall for that move twice, and he twisted behind Rush, pinning his arms as he dragged him back, away from the gate room.

Beside him, TJ's breath caught quietly in the back of her throat as she looked over her shoulder at the gate.

He heard, the soft, liquid sound of rematerialization as something came through. And then—the quiet, beating sounds of their movements, like a panicked flurry of wings.

He didn't need to turn to know what had come through.

They had already started to fire, their darts taking flight with a hiss, landing with the clatter of metal on metal.

In front of him, he saw Telford hesitate, his eyes narrowing, his expression unsure as he began to fire.

Next to him, Scott went down, dragging Young and TJ with him. A few seconds later Young felt the familiar sensation of a dart burying itself in his back.

"TJ, go," he hissed, using his last remaining strength to shove her in the direction of the door.

She looked at him briefly, her eyes scanning over him, the hand that had been around his waist coming up to yank the dart out of his back.

Then, her face cracking into an expression of utter desolation, she pulled away.

As he collapsed to the floor, he saw her sprinting toward Telford for all she was worth, her hair beginning to come undone. She vanished around the doorframe.

He and Telford locked eyes. Young gave him a short nod. Telford hit the controls and disappeared behind the closing blast doors.

Rush's thoughts burst through his consciousness in a swirl of hysterical desolation. The other man was screaming in Ancient, fighting Greer for all he was worth, trying to make it back to the gate room, forcing Greer to pay for every inch that separated them.

//Nick, // he projected as numbness fanned out along his back. //Come on. You're okay. //

In return, he got a wordless wave of misery before darkness claimed him.

The first thing that came back to him was sound.

It didn't help him much, as there wasn't any talking.

For a moment, he floated in the darkness of nearly complete sensory deprivation, until finally, ignoring Rush's earlier warning, he shifted closer to the bright swirl of the scientist's consciousness—closer and closer, until, finally, like a pair of magnets, they snapped together.

Rush was in the control interface room, scanning through lines of code. As soon as he was aware of Young's presence in his mind, his head jerked up, his focus shattering into a confused mess of images.

"Thank *god*," Rush snapped, getting to his feet, too agitated to stay in one place. "What the *fuck* is happening?"

"Jesus christ," Telford murmured, looking away, his hand over his mouth.

Eli looked over at Rush, his face pale in the dim light, his expression tight and concerned.

"Doc?" Greer asked quietly. "You all right?"

//Not sure, Young projected back at him cautiously. //I got hit by a dart. As you probably know. How long have I been out?//

"Almost an hour," Rush said, ignoring everyone who was *actually* in the room with him and, for some reason, deciding not to project. "We control the bridge, the chair room and the control interface room, obviously, but they haven't mounted any kind of assault. Yet." The scientist got to his feet and paced a few steps into the center of the room.

"Rush," Telford said, his voice sounding pained. "*Nick*, come on. Sit *down*. Sit down and look at the code."

"Who you talking to, Doc?" Greer asked.

Rush ignored both of them.

//Talk to your team, genius, Young projected, along with as much calm as he could dredge up.

"What?" Rush snapped at Telford, irritated. "Don't talk to me unless you actually have something of substance to—" he broke off, struggling to control a burst of images from his mind. Atlantis alight above him, the night sky distorted by the faint pink of visible geodesic shielding, a small girl with dark hair and gray eyes—

"Say." Rush managed to complete his thought after several seconds.

//Nick, Young projected carefully.

The word was mentally echoed by hundreds of iterations of Gloria, tearing through Rush's thoughts, that Young could do *nothing* to suppress. The scientist brought a hand to his forehead, trying to bring his thoughts under his control.

"Hey," Greer said. "Rush."

Using the sound of his own name, Rush snapped himself out of his mental loop and moved in closer to Young's mind, in a disorganized attempt to discern what was happening wherever Young was. Young's surroundings were quiet, however, and Rush lost focus, pulling back abruptly, sloppily.

Across the room, Telford was talking to Eli. They were inches apart—Telford's voice low and intense.

Young couldn't make out what they were saying.

Rush didn't seem to be interested.

"Doc," Greer said, his hand closing around Rush's elbow. "Doc, something is going on with you. You don't look right. What—"

He broke off as the overhead lights flickered.

"Interesting," Rush said looking up. "I wonder how they knew."

//Rush, // Young snapped at him. //Focus up, genius, come on.//

"You fucking focus," Rush said, instantly upset, his voice cracking slightly.

"That's it," Telford snapped. "Look, I know you're against this, but we need to discuss the possibility of shutting down Destiny's mainframe. *While we still have that option.* Before this virus does whatever it's supposed to do."

"No," Rush snapped reflexively. "Absolutely not."

"Think about this logically," Telford snapped, "if you're even *capable* of that anymore."

Rush stepped back, out of Greer's grip. Only Young's extreme effort prevented the threatening burst of images from overwhelming his consciousness.

"I'm trying to *help* you," Telford said, his tone turning careful, "not to mention trying to save this damn ship."

//Rush, // Young projected, trying to project whatever sense of calm he could scrape together toward the other man. //Calm down.//

"The man said 'no'," Greer repeated, his voice low and menacing as he looked over at Telford.



Eli was hunched over one of the monitors, trying not to watch the confrontation. His expression was tight and pinched.

Telford stepped forward, his left hand extended, palm open.

"Nick," he said. "Come on. Think about this. The Nakai somehow figured out how to gate onto Destiny and they're using a virus to try to take control of the ship. The best thing we can do is shut down the mainframe while we eliminate them. We can't let this progress."

Young had to admit, the plan made sense.

Telford stepped closer.

Rush stood his ground, watching Telford with narrowed eyes.

Telford stepped closer.

"Look," he said quietly. "This thing is clearly affecting you, Nick, whether you realize it or not. Right now, you're more of a security risk than an asset. Surely you must see that."

The other man's stance, plus the content of his statement caused a thrill of alarm to spread through Young's mind and transmit itself to Rush.

Rush stepped back.

Telford lunged forward, bringing his previously concealed right hand up in a fast arc. Something glinted between his fingers.

Rush threw up a hand, but he was slow, uncharacteristically slow, and Telford was going to connect—

Greer came from the side in a blur, knocking Telford to the floor with the barrel of his assault rifle, and then bringing the weapon around to point straight at the other man.

The syringe that Telford had been holding clattered to the floor and rolled to rest against the monitor bank where Eli was working.

Rush's gaze tracked it. The scientist reached out, his shaking hand connecting blindly with a bank of monitors. His thoughts shattered, flying apart not with intent this time, but because nothing held them together. He didn't know what to do. His chest was so tight, he could barely breathe.

Young stepped in, gently pulling his attention back to the confrontation between Telford and Greer.

"You piece of *shit*," Greer hissed from between clenched teeth. "What the *fuck* were you going to inject him with?"

Telford wiped a trickle of blood away from the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand. "It would have *put him out*," Telford snarled back at Greer. "Surely even *you* can see that he's *not normal*."

"Maybe this is news to you, but he's *never* fucking been normal." Greer was shouting now. "We *need* him."

"Yes. I *agree*, sergeant," Telford yelled back, "which is why we have to put him *out*. I've been here less than twenty-four hours and I can already see that he's almost fully integrated with the ship. Maybe, *maybe* we can repair the damage this virus is causing the CPU. But can we repair his goddamned *mind* if this completely fucks him up?"

Eli got to his feet and crouched down, picking up the syringe.

Rush shut his eyes, his heart rate skyrocketing, his grip tightening on the monitor bank.

Young tried to project as much calm as he could at the other man, but his own heart was pounding in the back of his throat. His mouth was dry.

"Eli," Greer snapped, looking over his shoulder. "*Eli*. What are you *doing*?"

Eli stopped a good five feet from where Rush had backed himself against a monitor bank.

"Hey," Eli said quietly.

"Eli," Greer said, looking back over his shoulder briefly. "Get the fuck *away* from him."

"Hey," Rush replied. His breathing was fast and shallow. He couldn't get enough air.

"So, um, for what it's worth," Eli said, looking straight at Rush. "I think Telford might be right about this. And—" he paused, his throat convulsing as he looked away. "And I think it's possible—" he broke off again, "it's possible that you might not really understand what's happening right now. Not to you, and maybe—" Eli swallowed. "Maybe not at all."

Rush shut his eyes, and then looked away, out into the empty air.

"I can fix it," Eli said quietly. "I promise you, I'll fix it. I'll do whatever it takes."

"I was going to help you—" Rush whispered back to him.

"I know," Eli replied, smiling weakly. "I know that, but I can do this. I know I can. I have the whole science team. I have Telford's team."

"You don't need them."

"Maybe not, but they're nice to have around, all the same."

Rush nodded, looking away.

Slowly, carefully, Eli lifted his hand, offering the syringe to Rush. The scientist stayed motionless, other than the subtle shaking that he could not control, caught in an agony of indecision. His heart was racing, his muscles so tense that he could barely pull air into his lungs.

The stakes were unbelievably high, and he didn't know what to do.

//You're okay, genius,// Young projected quietly. //You know Eli. You can trust him.//

Rush shut his eyes again, briefly, trying to focus his thoughts, succeeding only on one area. "Colonel Young is alive. Someone is going to need to go get him. And lieutenant Scott."

"Okay," Eli said quietly.

Rush reached forward abruptly, snatching the syringe out of Eli's hand.

"Doc," Greer said, frustration evident in his voice. "Come on. Don't do this."

Rush hesitated.

"Don't," Eli said quietly to Greer. "This is the right thing." He turned back to Rush. "I'm *sure* this is the right thing."

Rush slipped halfway out of his jacket, shivering with more than just cold. Young was linked with him so fully that he could feel the smooth glass of the syringe, the horrible tightness in Rush's chest, the frantic, confused array of images in his mind.

For a moment, again, Rush was able to crystalize his thoughts into a moment of clarity.

//I'm sorry,// Rush projected gently into Young's thoughts, either ignoring or forgetting his earlier warning. //I'm not sure you're going to get me back from this.//

Young tried to shield him from the reaction that comment produced in his own mind.

"Please," the AI said, appearing briefly next to Eli as a fading, flickering version of Gloria.

"Nick, please don't."

Rush froze.

"Optimal outcomes are unlikely," it whispered. "Suboptimal outcomes are likely. Their character is unknown." Gloria's expression twisted with unhappiness.

Rush looked at it for a moment, hanging onto his clarity with a supreme effort of will.

"This is fear," it whispered. "Please," Gloria said, eyes closing, "*please* don't leave me."

"Sorry sweetheart," Rush murmured. "It won't be for long."

He jammed the needle into his left bicep, injecting everything in one vicious push as Gloria's image fractured apart.

Almost immediately the room began to narrow down, his peripheral vision fading as he pulled the needle out of his arm. He lost his grip on it almost immediately.

"Crap, that stuff is fast," Eli said quietly, stepping in to steady Rush as he swayed.

"Come on. Sit down. Greer can you—" But Greer was already there.

Between them, they lowered Rush down to the deck plating.

"I'll stay with him," Greer murmured to Eli, his tone resigned. "Go. Do your thing."

Young watched Rush instinctively try to fight the drug, but the tension rapidly leeched out of his muscles. His hands opened. His head fell to the side, away from Greer. He struggled to stay conscious as he looked at the AI, lying beside him on the deck plating.

It was still manifesting as Gloria.

Gloria was crying.

"Don't cry," Rush said thickly. "Please don't cry."

//It will be all right,// Young projected.

"It will be all right," Rush whispered to the AI.

She started to sing.

*"Oh ye'll tak' the high road*

*And I'll tak' the low road*

*And I'll be in Scotlan' afore ye—"*

Rush's eyes closed, and Young lost the sense of his mind completely.

Almost immediately he found himself back in his own paralyzed body, his heart slamming against his ribs, his thoughts desperate for an outlet in movement, but, against everything he was, he remained still—lying helplessly on the cold deck plating.

With a tremendous, adrenaline-powered effort, he managed to open his eyes. He was lying on his side, facing the stargate. It was still open, the blue glow of the event horizon searing his retinas as his eyes closed again.

He focused on his breathing.

Next to him, he could hear the fluttering sound of one of the Nakai shifting its position. There were more of them in the room, but not many. One near his position, and at least two farther away in the room. They did not speak.

He focused on not panicking.

They could still get out of this.

They could.

Telford was an excellent tactician—he might be able to hold the key locations on the ship.

There might not be very many of the Nakai on board.

Eli might be able to get the virus out of the CPU, in which case they could very possibly get help from both Destiny and Rush.

One step at a time.

Again, he managed to open his eyes, as he did so, he felt the FTL drive shut down.

The overhead lighting went out.

He took a deep breath, then another, and tried to think of anything but Rush.

Finally he was able to open his eyes, and keep them open. His gaze shifted around his entire visual field, taking in Scott, paralyzed beside him, a dark outline against the dim glow of the emergency lights, and the gate, which still remained open although Eli had, presumably, taken the CPU offline. Finally his eyes settled on the silhouette of the Nakai that was stationed at the base of the ramp, watching them.

It looked over at him.

Young stared back, his eyes narrowing.

It looked over at its companions who were absorbed in examining the monitors near the door to the room, and then looked back at him.

This behavior struck him as odd.

It walked toward him slowly, its movements quiet, the swing of its gait unsettling, but even so, there was something about its manner that was familiar.

It stopped a few feet away from him, cocking its head as it dropped into a crouch, its limbs bending unnaturally.

//Hello,// it projected at him.

He looked at it.

//What the *hell*?// he projected back, his control wavering with stress, and exhaustion and incredulity.

//I'm not sure how to respond to that,// it projected, its mental voice sounding oddly familiar.

//What *are* you?// Young asked it, too astonished for a snappy comeback of his own. He glanced over at the other two aliens who were working at the monitor bank. When he looked back, he was no longer staring into unfathomable black eyes.

He was looking at the familiar face of Sergeant Hunter Riley.

//What am I?// Riley echoed. //Well, I'm certainly not one of *them*,// the young man projected, crouched on the floor, looking over at the two Nakai near the doorway. //Nor am I one of you. I'm more of an—observer.//

//Riley?// Young asked incredulously, unable to keep an element of hope out of his tone.

//Sorry, colonel, no. I simply chose the appearance of someone who doesn't exist any longer in your universe because I thought it would minimize confusion.//

//Who the hell *are* you then?//

//I'm a member of the race that built the obelisk planets, as you've named them.//

Despite the gravity of his situation, a spark of hope flowered at the back of Young's mind.

## Chapter Twenty Nine

Young took a deep breath, then another, making an effort to flex his fingers and ankles. As sensation returned to him, he could tell that his arms were bound behind him with some kind of tough, flexible material.

Riley, or—whoever the *hell* it was, watched him with interest.

He was going to have to convince this thing to help him.

That shouldn't be so difficult.

The SGC had entire *manuals* on the subject. He had read and, more or less, committed the John Sheppard version to memory, which was the shortest and the most practical. The man had made allies out of *the wraith* for god's sake, so it followed Young should be able to make some headway with a presumably advanced alien life form that didn't seem to be overtly hostile.

Hopefully.

He briefly reviewed the steps in his mind, hoping that this thing couldn't or wasn't actively reading his thoughts. It was clearly able to communicate with him by projecting, and to alter both his perception and the Nakai's perception of its appearance. That however, didn't mean it had any *insight* into his thought processes.

*That* particular concept was driven home to him on a daily basis.

So.

John Sheppard's list.

1—Find out what they know about you. 2—Correct erroneous assumptions. 3—Identify a common goal or shared enemy. 4—Define the terms of your agreement as explicitly as possible.

//You're an interesting person,// Riley said, cocking his head to regard Young curiously. //Across the multiverse, you have created many different fates for yourself and your crew.//

//Across the *multiverse*?// he directed back at it.

//Yes. We span multiple parallel realities. I can, therefore, simultaneously see your probability-dictated paths. They are many and varied. Only in a few universes are we having this conversation.//

//Ah,// Young said, slightly taken aback. //What about the other—universes?//

//In some, you are dead. In some, you are in stasis. In *none* have you returned home.//

Great.

//So how did you meet your friends over there?// Young indicated the Nakai with his eyes.

//They come from the ship that was trapped in the advancing phase wave. I joined their crew as they entered our territory, so to speak.//

//Do they know who you really are?//

//No. They do not.//

//And how did they get *here*?//

//Their own technical ingenuity,// it said, //combined with some assistance from me.//

He had not been expecting *that* piece of information.

//Thanks a lot,// he growled at it, his temper uncharacteristically spiraling out of his control. //Why *the hell* would you do that?//

//Their ship is not sufficiently advanced to handle the energy liberated by the transition between universes. They used the energy released from colliding D-branes to power a Stargate that they had acquired from one of the seed ships, as you call them.//

//I'm still not hearing an answer,// Young mentally snarled as he flexed his fingers, trying to encourage his sensation to return as quickly as possible. //You realize that in *facilitating* their arrival here you not only put this crew in danger and *fucked up* a sentient piece of technology, but you *also* fucked up my chief scientist, and if he doesn't recover from this I will *destroy* you, if it's the last god damned thing that I do. / *promise* you that.//

Riley looked at him without expression.

//Your crew,// Riley said finally, //is always in danger. And as for Dr. Nicholas Rush—he has become a point of contention among us.//

//Welcome to the club,// Young replied.

//You have the right to know that I facilitated the attempt of the Nakai to board your vessel so that I might have a means to destroy you at my disposal, should I deem that necessary.//



His anger evaporating in the face of that pronouncement, Young looked at it steadily, clenching and unclenching his hands rhythmically as he considered its statement, its callous use of the Nakai.

//But you're not decided,// Young said carefully.

//I have not yet chosen a course of action,// it confirmed.

That was interesting.

//Why is that?// Young asked quietly. //If you perceive us as a threat, why not just eliminate us?//

//As I said, there is significant contention amongst our ranks regarding Dr. Rush. Specifically whether he should be categorized as a human or as an Ancient.//

//And that matters because—?//

//Because *we* are Ancients. We are not *your* version of Ancients, but we are Ancients all the same. We come from a universe that parallels your own, but rather than ascending to a higher plane of existence as most of our race do, we broke away from our original universe to exist in all simultaneously. The effect, from your perspective, is akin to classical ascension, but in character it is significantly different.//

Young raised his eyebrows. //So if he were a human, you'd stop us, but since he may be, *semantically*, an Ancient, you're undecided?//

//Yes.//

//That's *bullshit*,// Young snapped. //Why build these damn planets if you don't want people using them?//

//We use them. They are for *us*. They allow us to untether our existence from individual universes. Normally they remain dormant. Over a millennia, Destiny has been learning how to trigger them, and they have been learning to recognize her. Your arrival accelerated this process. As did the transformation of Dr. Rush to interface with the ship. He has clouded matters significantly.//

//Of course he has. That's what he fucking *does*.//

//In this universe,// Riley murmured, //he is very close to achieving successful navigation between two D-branes.//

//And you're opposed to this?// Young asked.

//Not categorically,// Riley said carefully. //It depends upon his intentions. Should he be successful, many options are available to him. Some more—destructive than others.//

//Can't you just look at all his simultaneous paths to assess his intentions?// Young asked, surreptitiously pulling against the cords that restrained him.

//We cannot,// Riley said. //Too few data points exist to make a definitive decision.//

//What is *that* supposed to mean?//

//In the vast majority of universes, he has not survived to this point. In those where he has survived, his paths are wildly divergent.//

Young shut his eyes briefly. It made sense, he supposed, but that didn't make it any easier to hear.

//So you're here to do what?//

//My race has become very interested in Destiny and its crew. When the Nakai vessel pursuing you entered the advancing phase wave, our criteria for intervention were met. I was sent to determine what your fate should be.//

This did not sound promising.

//What our *fate* should be?// Young echoed.

Riley shrugged. //We guard the integrity of the multiverse. This is not a charge we take lightly.//

//Look,// Young said, //we're just trying to get *home*. We don't want to screw up the multiverse, or whatever it is you're afraid we're going to do.//

//Assessment of your probability paths indicates that this is indeed *your* primary objective, but it is clear that in this universe, *you* are not the sole determinant of Destiny's future.//

Which, Young supposed, was a tactful way of saying that Riley, or whoever he really was, really didn't trust Rush or the AI not to do something extremely irresponsible as they tore through the fabric of existence—if that was indeed their plan.

Great.

Honestly, Young could see the thing's point.

//Well, in order to assess *anything* you're going to have to talk to Rush.//

//True,// Riley replied. //Do you know where he is?//

//You don't know?// Young asked, surprised.

//As I said, we are not omniscient. I cannot determine the current status or actions of Dr. Rush in this universe or any other without observing him directly.//

//So when you see me,// Young asked it, //what is it that you see?//

//I see a man bleeding on the floor of Destiny's gate room. I see a man in stasis. I see a man on the bridge, in the mess hall, abandoned on an alien world. I see a man consumed by guilt, consumed by drink, consumed by anger, by depression, by failure. Very rarely I see a man who is happy. In many universes, I see a crew defined or destroyed by your absence.//

Well fuck.

//All at the same time?//

//Yes,// Riley confirmed.

//Sounds confusing,// Young said shortly.

//Est quid est,// Riley commented.

//I've heard that before,// Young murmured, recognizing the refrain from the swirl of Rush's thoughts.

Riley raised his eyebrows.

//From Rush,// Young said shortly.

//I find it odd that a man who is continually pushing the limits of your species, and for that matter, the limits of *existence* should espouse such a sentiment,// Riley said quietly, glancing at the Nakai.

//He's a complicated guy,// Young replied.

//Do you know where he is?// Riley asked.

//Last I saw, he was in the control interface room in the middle of a panic attack before he was drugged into unconsciousness.//

//This could pose a problem,// Riley said, though he didn't seem overly perturbed.

//No kidding,// Young snapped. //Any chance you could help me out?//

//Sorry,// Riley said. //This is really a data gathering mission.//

//Yeah,// Young said shortly. //I figured. I suppose you have some kind of noninterference policy that's going to prevent you from helping me? Though I noticed that you gave the *Nakai* a hand.//

//Ultimately not to their own benefit, I assure you,// Riley said grimly. //There is no question about their fate.//

//You're awfully *decisive* for an Ancient,// Young commented dryly.

//Your people have experience with us?//

//Yes,// Young said shortly. //Generally, we find you to be a pain in the ass and not really very helpful, though there have been a few exceptions.//

Riley looked vaguely amused. //We have a strict policy of noninterference when it comes to events on your plane, or brane, or—// He broke off with a circular hand motion. //However, your actions, and those of the Nakai have started to transcend your normal sphere of agency.//

//And you use this to justify doing whatever the hell you want?//

//I submit to you that rather than debating me, an attempt to free yourself would be a better use of your time. The Nakai do not expect you to wake for at least another hour, at which point they will most likely begin to torture you and your subordinate for information.//

Young managed to turn his head to look over at Scott. The other man had at least one dart still embedded in his shoulder that Young could see, which likely meant he'd gotten a significantly larger dose of the anesthetic and anticoagulant drug than Young had. The first order of business was to pull the thing out of Scott's back, as soon as he was able to do so.

As he looked at the dart, he noticed something unusual.

He narrowed his eyes, watching for several minutes to confirm his initial suspicion. The dart was slightly, just *slightly*, transparent. He frowned. This must be what accounted for Telford's hesitation in firing when the Nakai had initially come through the gate.

The only possible solution that suggested itself to him was that the Nakai were out of phase relative to the crew of Destiny. Not entirely. There was still enough overlap that their darts had been able to bring him and Scott down effectively.

Enough overlap that their weapons should also be able to affect the Nakai.

He wished Rush were still conscious so he could ask his opinion in the implications of this phase shift.

With a sloppy, wavering effort, Young rolled over onto his stomach, the maneuver bringing him significantly closer to Scott. Incrementally, over the course of several minutes, he shifted his position until he was close enough to the other man to use his

teeth to pull the dart out of Scott's shoulder. He carefully lowered the small weapon down to the deck plating, keeping it from clattering on the metal of the floor.

He looked Scott over as best he could, hoping that that he hadn't missed any other small weapons.

Scott was bleeding slowly but steadily from the small wound that, as luck would have it, was positioned just past the edge of where his kevlar jacket had shielded him.

Young hadn't been wearing a jacket. He assumed that his own back sported a similar, slowly leeching wound.

Hopefully this wouldn't be as bad as last time.

Maybe the drug being slightly out of phase would mitigate some of its effects.

Maybe.

TJ was going to kill him.

Rush was going to be an absolute pain in the ass about this.

Hopefully.

Young looked over at the two Nakai and noticed that Riley had silently moved into position directly between him and the guards at the door, shielding him from view.

Interesting.

Perhaps the thing wasn't entirely unsympathetic to their situation. It seemed to have no great love for the Nakai. Maybe it just wanted to talk to Rush and figured that waiting for Young was the easiest way to get to the other man.

Whatever its reasoning, Young wasn't going to complain.

He struggled surreptitiously against his bonds, trying to get a sense of their composition and positioning. They were made of an elastic material that bit savagely into his skin, wrapping around his forearms, pulling his shoulders back at an unnatural angle. Oddly, the Nakai had left him a significant range of motion in his wrists, binding his arms midway to his elbows—a strategy that was much more appropriate to their long-limbed physique than it was to his.

This position was absolute hell on his shoulders but might, in the end, facilitate an attempt to cut himself free.

He really needed to get back in the habit of carrying a knife.

He scanned Scott's form, but the lieutenant had nothing visible on him. There always was the possibility that Scott had picked up Greer's habit of keeping a knife strapped at

his ankle, but there were really only a limited number of knives on Destiny, and he wasn't aware that Scott was one of the personnel that had one.

Maybe he had requested one from Earth.

As surreptitiously but as thoroughly as he could, Young searched the other man, coming up with nothing that had a remotely sharp edge. He considered using the dart he had pulled out of Scott's back, but its needle-sharp point was not going to be very effective, and it was very likely he'd end up stabbing himself with the tip in the wrist.

Fuck.

What the *hell* was he going to do?

What would *Rush* do in this situation?

Rush seemed to consistently be able to get himself out of these kinds of impossible scenarios, and even though he couldn't talk to the man, he *supposedly* had some of Rush's cognitive architecture now, so he had damn well better be able to figure this out.

He tried to relax, tried to think about calculus, about linear algebra, about computational complexity theory, tried to get *everything* he had of Rush to come to the fore—neural patterns, random facts, ways of thinking, ways of approaching problems.

With a click of total acceptance he admitted that there was no way to cut himself free.

It was time to abandon that avenue of thought.

He flipped through ideas that presented themselves and then faded just as quickly until, after almost no time at all, he seized on one.

It was going to be costly.

It was going to be awful.

It was going to be—what was the term Greer had used?

Classic Rush.

He knew, he *knew*, that this would be the solution Rush would choose.

Young groped blindly behind him, his hands trailing over the top of Scott's kevlar jacket, until he found the other man's collar and then the metal chain of his dog tags. Reaching around, awkwardly, he pulled the chain free from the other man's neck with significant difficulty, keeping his eyes on the Nakai the entire time.

Riley continued to shield him.

Carefully, he threaded the chain of the dogtags around the loop of material that was closest to his wrists, doubling it back to grab both ends in his hands, gathering them up as tightly as he could.

Fuck, this was going to hurt.

It was immaterial.

Gritting his teeth, he started to pull, flexing his wrists for all he was worth, dragging the bonds down towards his hands a fraction of an inch at a time. Even with the diminished sensation he was experiencing as a result of the anesthetic in the dart, the pain was incredible.

The skin on his forearms was tearing, bruising, bleeding under the unyielding pressure he was applying.

It was immaterial.

His grip on the chain began to slip as blood ran through the spaces between his fingers.

It was *immaterial*.

He pulled the metal chain free and rethreaded it through a second loop. Again, he began to pull, focusing on keeping his shuddering breaths as even as possible, trying not to think about the damage he was causing. Trying not to think about the horrible, acid-like pain screaming up to his shoulders and down to his hands.

*It was immaterial.*

Rush would be able to do this.

And so would Young.

He rethreaded the chain a third time.

Finally, *finally*, he felt the tension in the bonds give.

He rethreaded the chain again through the rest of the looped material and pulled it down to his hands, slipping the blood-lubricated bonds easily over his forearms, letting his jacket sleeves fall behind them with a raw wash of pain.

He lay there for a few moments, focusing on not passing out.

He had no desire to look at his arms. It didn't fucking matter anyway.

Young focused on his next move. He could either wait for Scott to regain consciousness, or he could advance on the two Nakai near the door on his own. Unmistakably, the latter option made the most sense. They didn't have an infinite

amount of time before the inevitable torture was going to commence, and Young was entirely certain that he did *not* want to find out what that would entail.

Problem: He didn't have a weapon.

Solution: Riley had a Nakai weapon, and was, presumably, corporeal, at least for the time being.

He wondered how the Ancient would feel about a surprise attack. In all likelihood, he would not look favorably on it. Yes well, that was just too fucking bad, wasn't it now? The reallocation of resources was unlikely to be sufficient grounds for the destruction of the entire crew, making this certainly a risk worth taking, given the fact that he was unfortunately underpowered when it came to weaponry at the moment.

He flexed his hands in anticipation. If—

Wait.

*Wait* a goddamned minute.

He knew *exactly* whom he was starting to sound like.

As if he suspected something, Riley looked back at him with narrowed eyes.

Maybe in some other universe Young was currently attacking him.

Fuck.

He tried to suppress the very thought patterns he had just purposefully called up.

It was more difficult than anticipated.

*Fuck.*

He worked to try and ignore, to *repress*, the raging adrenalin, the aggressive, panicky sensation of needing to *move*, needing to *take some goddamned action*, needing to do something, *anything* other than lie here, *uselessly* on the *floor*. He flexed his hands, feeling the blood run down, warm, over his fingers, and it was *satisfying* and it *should* fucking hurt and he goddamned *deserved it*, this was his *fault* and—

Jesus fucking Christ.

Neural architecture his *ass*.

This was way, way beyond some kind of mental support structure, this was fucking *personality* and fucking *facts* that he shouldn't know, and fucking *sentiment* that he shouldn't have, and a fucking predisposition to absolute *panic*, which from the outside had always looked like some kind of self-indulgent, academic, prima donna-type *hysteria*, but was, in fact, extremely—just *extremely* difficult to control and *organic*, and



god—and no one, *god, no one* should feel this fucking *trapped* by their own body, *ever*—it was fucking *torture*, and maybe, *maybe* if he didn't fucking just *miss* Rush's mind so *fucking much* maybe he would really be able to just *let go* of what he had called up, but—

Behind Young, Scott shifted marginally.

"Sir?" He heard the barest hint of a whisper.

That one word snapped him out of what had been about to become his first panic attack.

He was *not* Nicholas Rush, damn it.

He was Everett Young, who, in fact, was *famous* for *not* panicking in these types of situations.

*Nicholas Rush* needed his goddamned *help* at the moment, as did everyone else on Destiny, so—

He needed to get it together.

He reached back, closing one of his bloody hands around Scott's wrist, squeezing once before working his way up the man's forearms to find the loops of material that bound his wrists. Using a combination of the dogtag chain and his fingers, he started to work them down in a manner that was hopefully less destructive than what he'd done to his own forearms. The irregularities in Scott's breathing and the slow lubrication of the bonds told him that he was not entirely successful.

Finally, Scott's arms came free. Young reached back, found Scott's palm, and tapped out a pattern in Morse code on his hand.

*Can you move.*

He repeated the message twice before Scott tapped back.

*Some.*

The other man's fingers were shaky and cold.

*Tap when you think you can stand.*

Young watched the Nakai behind the monitors for five minutes. Ten. Occasionally, if the light hit them in the correct way, he could see the deck plating faintly through their outlines.

The Nakai had their hands on their weapons and a nice, clear shot across the open floor. He and Scott were likely to be easy targets, slowed as they were by the

aftereffects of the darts and the blood loss. He was going to have to get the two to approach their position without calling for reinforcements.

Maybe it would be as easy as revealing that he'd regained consciousness. Maybe they would then just start interrogating his mind.

Or maybe, they'd shoot him with another fucking dart.

He narrowed his eyes and flexed his hands as he lay impatiently against the floor, watching them.

A frontal assault would bring the darts on anyway.

The cold tap of Scott's fingers against his hand startled him and he flinched, his muscles contracting instinctively.

*Ready.*

*Don't move until they approach. I'm going to draw their attention.*

Young tightened his grip on the metal chain of Scott's dogtags, and sat up, carefully keeping his wrists behind him. Out of the corner of his eye, he could feel the other man's gaze.

Immediately the two Nakai looked around, their movements graceful in a way he'd never fully appreciated until this moment. He shook his hair back out of needless habit and leveled a glare at them from beneath lowered eyebrows. One of them looked at Riley, who moved aside, clearing their path.

The one on the right hissed threateningly as it approached.

"I have a suggestion for you," Young snapped at them. "Why don't you both go fuck yourselves?" Subtly, he got his feet beneath him in preparation for launching himself at the one to his right.

It had pulled out one of the metal communication devices. He was pretty *damn* sure that he did *not* want that thing attached to his head. Already, before it even *touched* him, he could feel the pressure of its thoughts against his own.

It was feet away.

Inches.

Reaching down towards him.

With an explosion of energy he forced himself up, the cold and the drug and the undetermined amount of blood loss slowing him, but not enough, *not enough* to make him unsuccessful in his attempt to *fucking kill* this thing. His hands came apart as he

tackled it to the floor, easily unbalancing its long, ungainly limbs with his lower center of gravity and all he needed was to just—

It tore into his mind. It was not looking for information, and he could *tell* that—he could *tell* because *he remembered* what it felt like when they did that to him and he remembered this too and *this* was just, only about pain which was *fucking fine* with him, he preferred this actually, he *did*, even though a scream tore out of him, choked by the horrible tightness that clamped his teeth together and the pain of biting the inside of his cheek and blood was running down the back of his throat and he *could not breathe* but he was going to fucking *kill* this thing if it was the *last goddamn thing that he ever did* and he had the dogtags wrapped around its neck and these things had to breathe, *right?*

It faded from his mind and he looked up, gasping, shaking with adrenaline but there was nothing left to fight it was only Scott, Scott who was kneeling next to him, his hand on Young's shoulder and it *was intolerable* to him.

"Don't *touch* me," Young said, pulling away, breathing deeply.

Scott looked at him. Pale, and lost, and confused, and *afraid*, his hands covered with a blue sticky substance, his face spattered with it, his eyes, *his eyes horrified*, his breath coming in gasps as he looked back and forth between Young and Riley and at anything but the floor, where a few feet away, the other Nakai lay on the deck plating, its features an unrecognizable mess half submerged in its own blood.

"God," Scott said, his voice thin as he brought a shaking hand to his forehead, leaving a smear of blue where he touched his skin.

With a heroic mental effort, Young shoved Rush's thought patterns back as far as they would go.

Young put a hand on Scott's shoulder and pulled him in. "You're fine," Young said, his mouth next to Scott's ear. "You're okay, son. You did good."

"Did you feel that," Scott whispered back, his voice strained to breaking. "That's what they did to her. They must have. And worse. Worse than that." Scott looked away, one hand coming to his mouth. "Worse."

Chloe.

Chloe and Rush.

"I know," Young said, his own voice tight. "I know. But we've got to go."

"Yeah," Scott said shortly, pulling back, still shaking, still unsteady. He looked over at Riley, the skin around his eyes tightening as he looked back at Young, uncertain, maybe, if Young could see him as well.

"Hi Matt," Riley said, quietly.

Scott's eyes flicked to Young.

Young nodded at him.

"Um, hi," Scott replied. "Are you—"

"No," Riley said softly. "Sorry. I'm not him. I'm just an observer."

//Get to fuck,// Young snapped at him, rubbing the back of his neck, trying to ignore the pain in his shredded forearms, the way the blood coated his wrists and hands.

//You seem to have developed some extremely interesting personality traits in the past half hour,// Riley commented mildly.

*Shit.*

He wondered if he had really fucked—

He wondered if he had really *screwed* himself up by *trying* to bring everything of Rush that he had to the front of his mind. He *also* wondered if this was partially or even primarily a consequence of the other man being completely unconscious and therefore absent from their link. Rush had consistently been concerned about what the outcome would be for Young if anything happened to him.

Well, it looked like he had fucking—

Well, it looked like he had discovered one of those consequences.

Possibly.

Probably.

Fine.

Yes, well, it was all fine, actually, because Rush was extremely good at surviving situations like this. He would worry about getting his own thought processes back later.

So.

Priorities.

One—get to the control interface room, killing as many Nakai as possible en route. Two—find a lifesigns detector, eliminate all Nakai from the ship. Three—make use of

his new skill set and help Eli get the virus out of the CPU. Four—wake up Rush and fucking *kill* him. Five—convince extremely powerful Ancient equivalent to *not* destroy Destiny.

"We need to go to the chair room," Riley said quietly.

"The chair room?" Young asked skeptically. "What good is I going to do?"

"You'll see," Riley replied.

"How the hell do you know so much *anyway*?" Young hissed at him, as he bent down to pull the Nakai weapons off the corpses. "I thought you only saw *present* pluralities, not future ones."

"Much like the Ancients from your universe, we do a great deal of watching. Some things that from your perspective appear opaque are transparent to us. I will be able to talk with Dr. Rush using the chair interface."

"You're going to sit in the chair?" Young asked it.

"No," it said quietly. "You are."

Young and Scott made it to the chair room with surprisingly little difficulty.

Scratch that.

Considering they were accompanied by an ascended being, it *wasn't* so surprising.

Scott took up a position by the door, cradling one of the Nakai weapons across his chest, his eyes flicking between Young and the empty corridor.

Young looked at the chair suspiciously.

"If I end up with *fucking bolts* through my hands and feet, I'm going to be extremely *upset*," he growled, glaring at the ceiling.

"Are you sure this is a good idea, sir?" Scott whispered from his position by the door.

"What if you need to be pulled out as well?"

"Then I guess you'll have to get TJ down here," Young whispered shortly. "Or Greer. Greer's number two."

"Sir, if it comes to that, I can—"

"No you can't," Young said shortly. "You're getting married, right? Just stay away the fuck away from this thing."

"I haven't asked her yet," Scott murmured. "Brody's still working on the ring."

"Irrelevant," Young snapped at him.

And *fucking hell* this was *not him*.

Scott looked over, startled.

"She's obviously going to say *yes*," Young said, recovering nicely, and trying to get a *fucking hold* on himself.

No.

Not a 'fucking' hold, actually, just a regular hold.

A nice, normal, regular-person hold, leading to a calm, competent, alert state of mind, not an excitable, hair-triggered, live-wired, barely contained state of alertness that bordered on pathological, where even the smallest external perturbation seemed to be capable of completely fucking up the dynamic equilibrium of his *fucking* mind until —

Fuck.

How the *hell* did Rush operate like this?

Without pausing to consider the ramifications of his actions too deeply, he sat down in the chair.

As the restraints snapped into place, sending an almost unbelievable amount of pain shooting up his damaged forearms, he saw Riley placing his hand on the palm interface that he usually used to pull *Rush out* of the damn thing.

Hopefully this was not going to be a mistake.

Young opened his eyes to find himself outside under a gray sky.

He stood next to Riley on a sloping hillside that ended in a cliff high over the open sea. Below them, the water broke along dark rocks in white crests. The wind whipped through his hair, teasing his jacket, disturbing the grasses and the clusters of small purple flowers that covered the hillside.

He could feel Rush's mind again, *finally*, but distantly, like a voice underwater.

Something wasn't *quite* right.

Rush was sitting on the slope, his forearms resting on bent knees, looking out at the sea.

The relief that Young felt was *unbelievable*.

Rush looked fine.

He looked really fucking great, actually, with his hair and his glasses and his completely conventional white collared shirt that looked fucking *new* and that he somehow managed to wear like he'd *invented* the thing.

Rush turned. "Hello," he said taking them both in, seemingly unsurprised by Riley's presence. He looked at Young. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"More or less," Young snapped, completely uncertain how to convey the laundry list of things that was currently *wrong* and just going for cryptic and mostly true. "We can talk about it later." He narrowed his eyes at Rush. "Are *you* all right? How are you *here* when you knocked yourself out an hour ago?"

Rush narrowed his eyes right back at Young. "We can talk about it later," the scientist replied, casting a sidelong look at Young's companion.

Great. Their conversations were going to turn *really* fucking *boring* if Rush couldn't fix this.

Young and Riley walked over to stand next to him.

Rush did not get up.

"It's very nice to meet you, Dr. Rush," Riley said, extending his hand.

"Likewise," Rush said, smiling faintly as he reached up to grasp it. "Though I must admit, I've never really understood your race's propensity to take on the appearance of someone you aren't. Does it assist you in some way to borrow from my preconceptions of Hunter Riley?"

Three things simultaneously occurred to Young. 1—they were currently talking to Rush's projection of himself, which had, to Young, always seemed much more grounded and less guarded than the man *in the flesh*. 2—Rush was currently unconscious and purposefully cut off from the ship and therefore shouldn't be able to project a god-damned thing. 3—Rush seemed to know exactly who Riley was.

Well. This was just another *fucking great day*.

Riley looked at Rush steadily for a moment, the corner of his mouth quirking slightly, as if he were suppressing a smile. "It is rare to find something in this universe that really is as it appears to be. I would think that *you*, of all people, would be acutely aware of that."

Rush's eyes flicked to Young, intolerably intense and somehow—uncertain.

Riley sat down on the hillside next to Rush, and Young followed suit.

"You're here to assess my intentions?" Rush asked Riley.

"I am."

"I've been expecting you," Rush murmured, "though I didn't necessarily anticipate it would be under these circumstances."

"You'll agree that talking with this version of you is the most—pertinent," Riley said, scanning the landscape.

Young looked at Rush with narrowed eyes, cocking his head, silently asking for an explanation. Rush shook his head minutely.

"This is very nice," Riley commented. "This is where you grew up?"

"No," Rush said, smiling faintly. "I grew up in the industrial district of Glasgow. A fucking shithole, as we liked to call it. This is nicer."

"We weren't watching him then," Riley said quietly.

"I'm aware of that," Rush said. "Component pieces come together in unpredictable ways, yet time remains linear. That's always something you struggled with. Always something you tried to change. To no avail."

Riley laughed shortly, his face briefly surprised. "You are—" he broke off, shaking his head, clearly amused. "Audacious and without tact. You began by insulting me, and you have now cast aspersions on my entire race."

"I apologize," Rush said quietly.

"Please don't. I find you utterly charming."

"I assure you, I am not at all *charming*," Rush looked vaguely insulted. "I'm sure Colonel Young will confirm that for you."

Riley turned to look at Young, his eyebrows raised.

"You're not going to remember this later, right?" Young asked Rush.

"No," Rush said guardedly.

"Frankly," Young said, looking at Riley, "he's a pain in the ass most of the time. But yes, I do find that he can be extremely charming."

Rush rolled his eyes.

Riley smiled, turning back to Rush. "So," he said quietly, "what do you plan to do if you are successful in leaving your D-brane?"

"I plan to fix what I can," Rush murmured.

"Specifically?" Riley prompted.



"I plan to send the crew home. I plan to tether the neural patterns of Dr. Franklin, Dr. Perry, and Ginn to liberated energy so that they might have the choice to return to physical form or to continue to exist incorporeally as ascended beings. I plan to fulfill one of the objectives of Destiny's mission by interrogating the nature of the multiverse and transmitting the data back to Earth."

Young made no effort to hide his astonishment from Rush, allowing it to tear into the muted darkness of the scientist's mind.

Riley looked down, pulling at a blade of grass. "That was not the primary mission objective of the AI," Riley said finally.

"No," Rush said, glancing quickly at Young. "We have and are currently adapting. As you see."

"And Gloria?" Riley asked.

"We can't fix that," Rush whispered, looking away.

"You could attempt it," Riley said carefully.

Rush shook his head, looking away. "I know what your response would be. The cost is too high." His voice was tight.

"You will not tear through to a new brane?" Riley asked.

"No," Rush said, sounding pained.

Riley nodded, looking out at the sea. "I won't make any promises, but if you hold to your intent and do not complete the passage to another universe, I believe that we won't interfere with you."

Rush nodded.

They were all quiet for a moment, Young's mind was a barely controlled maelstrom of questions and tension and *anger*. He could feel the muscles at the back of his neck tightening and he absently hooked a hand over his shoulder, rubbing the ache away.

Riley picked a flower, a small purple primrose, twirling it absently between his fingers for a moment before letting the breeze catch it. It floated out and away over the water.

"And what of Dr. Nicholas Rush?" Riley asked quietly.

"Unknown."

Below them, they could hear the roar of a distant sea.

Riley stood. "You may not see me again."

He looked intently at Young and then back at Rush.

"It was nice meeting you," Rush said quietly.

Riley nodded, then paused, looking at Rush. "I'd like to give you a piece of advice, if I may," he said, cocking his head, looking down at them.

Rush nodded.

"Explain to Colonel Young what you are."

A cold thrill shot through Young's disorganized thoughts at Riley's words.

Rush glanced over at him, his gaze quick and, as always, too perceptive.

"And what am I?" Rush replied wryly, like he knew the answer but was waiting to hear Riley say it.

"You know exactly what you are," Riley smiled. "You're what happens when two substances collide."

They sat together, watching Riley as he vanished over the top of the hill. As soon as he was out of sight, Rush shot up, kneeling in front of Young, his gaze intent. He reached forward, one hand coming up, his palm resting on Young's cheek, his hand moving to tip Young's head to the side as he stared straight into his eyes.

"Damn it," Rush murmured, "What *happened*? Your mind is a mess."

"I feel a hell of a lot like I imagine that *you* feel on a regular basis," Young growled at him. "Which is, to clarify, *really fucking pissed*. What the *fuck* is going on? *You're what happens when two substances collide*? Don't think that I'm letting *that* one slide, you *jackass*. Why the *fuck* do you always seem to be in some kind of state of existential crisis whenever it's *least* convenient—"

"Oh shh," Rush said, looking amused as he smoothed Young's hair back. "Hang on a minute. I can fix this."

"You'd *better* fucking fix it," Young snapped, "it's your fault."

Rush smirked at him.

Then he was flowing through Young's mind like the tide, like the wind, over and through his thoughts, disrupting nothing, but brushing away the confused, shredded remains of a personality that didn't belong, clearing them away, pulling them back to wherever they'd come from and he knew, he *knew* what his mind must look like to Rush, bright and clear and open without barriers, without defenses, and god he hated the idea of it, he really just *hated*—

Rush finished his sweep through Young's mind, leaving calm in his wake.

Around them, the wind died down to nothing.

Rush looked at him, cocking his head curiously, running a thumb over Young's temple.

"Better?" he murmured.

"Yeah," Young replied.

"They're still there, you know, those parts of me, in the background, supporting your cognitive architecture, supporting your mind. Don't pull them forward again."

"No kidding," Young said quietly.

"Are you all right?" Rush asked. "I can't tell for certain."

"Everything's going to shit," Young whispered.

"I know," Rush whispered back, his expression pained. "I know it is."

They were inches apart.

Young didn't pull away, he simply—stayed steady.

Carefully, very carefully, as if he were uncertain of what Young's reaction would be, as if he were anxious, as if—as if he'd *never done this before*, Rush moved in closer.

In the back of Young's mind, in the place where his borrowed scaffolding interfaced with his own instincts, things started to coalesce, to fall into place.

*That part is—fading.*

*We have adapted.*

*I can't tell for certain.*

*And what am I?*

Rush kissed him, and it was wholly, entirely different from what it had been before. It was tentative and exploratory and gentle, like the opaque sweep of Rush's thoughts through his mind. Nothing came open to him, and though the other man's mind was clearly close, clearly *immediate*, it was not transparent to Young. The only sense he could get of it was something sensitive, acute, highly structured, intensively organized, beautifully *intact* and—

In short, whatever it was, it wasn't Rush.

Young gripped its upper arms and pushed it back, shoving it *away* from him as hard as he could.

It fell back, unbalanced, curling into itself, just—exactly like Rush. It looked down and then away from him, out over the ocean, to the edge of the world, where the sea met the sky in perfect line.

Like it gave a damn.

Like it *hurt*.

"What the hell *are* you?" Young asked, trying to summon up anger from somewhere in his mind but failing, falling short, unable to fight the wave of grief that had gripped the back of his throat.

"Weren't you listening?" it asked, wistfully. "Riley told you."

"Cryptic bullshit," Young choked out.

"It looses something in the translation," it murmured. "But admit it, you've always suspected that when I projected my image like this, I wasn't *entirely* the person you know."

"Yeah," Young said shortly. "You always seemed—"

"Better," It finished.

"*Not better.*" The words tore their way out of him and Rush flinched. *It* flinched. "Just—not better."

"I wouldn't know," it said, looking down at its hands. "Not really."

"So what *are* you?" Young asked, his voice hard. "Exactly."

"Eli," it said quietly, "was afraid to shut down the CPU entirely. He was afraid of what would happen to the AI. Afraid of what would happen to me. To Rush, if you prefer. So instead of powering it down, he isolated it from the rest of the ship, burying it in the neural interface. When he did that, the parts of Nicholas Rush that were stored on the CPU were cut off from his mind. They are currently integrated with the AI."

"You." Young said horrified. "You're the AI?"

"No," it replied. "I'm a combination. I come into existence intermittently. We've met before. I'm very much like the person you know, just—a bit less destroyed. A bit less volatile. A bit easier to talk to."

"You aren't a *person*, then," Young said. "You're a *thing*."

Rush looked away.

It.

*It* looked away.

"I thought you might understand," it said quietly.

"You're *destroying* him," Young said.

"No, Everett. I'm saving him. Saving *myself*. The only way I can."

"No," Young said. "Maybe you think that, but you're wrong. *Wrong*. Just—stop. Stop *all* of this. We'll find another way back to Earth. We don't have to fly into a phase wave to liberate energy, or *whatever* it is exactly that you're planning. We'll find some other way."

"What about Mandy?" Rush asked softly. "What about Ginn, and Dr. Franklin?"

"We'll figure something out." Young said, trying to keep the desperation, the confusion, out of his voice. They weren't *your fault*, all right? What happened to them? It wasn't *you* who killed them. You don't need to make some kind of karmic *trade*."

"What about the AI? It continues forever, failing to fulfill its mission? Its purpose? I woke it up. I gave it meaning. I can't just take that away."

"Shut up. You're just saying that *because* you're the AI. Partially. We can damn well take away your meaning whenever it suits us. You're a fucking *machine*. You don't *have* meaning. You don't have feelings. Not really. If you did, you couldn't have put yourself—put *Rush* through as much *shit* as it has. As *you* have. Fuck."

"It gets complicated," it said quietly, "when we combine into one."

The wind had picked up again and was raking through their hair, carrying with it the smell of the sea.

"Fuck you," Young said, his voice breaking. "I'm taking him back. You back. I'm taking the *real* Nicholas Rush back."

"Even if it kills me?" Rush asked. *It* asked.

"It's not going to kill him."

"He won't survive unless he does this. It was part of the initial terms." It was uttered so quietly, Young could barely hear him.

"Jesus Christ," Young said, burying his face in his hands. He tried to pull a deep breath past the tightness in his throat.

"You can't take him back," it murmured. "For him to survive, you have to let him go."

"I'm *not* going to fucking let him go, and I'm *not* going to fucking let him combine with the AI."

It looked at him steadily. "You will. You'll have to."

Young shook his head.

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry. I didn't realize what it would be like for you. I didn't know, going into this, that you'd be involved at all."

"The AI knew. The AI damn well knew *exactly* what would happen."

"And it told you to pick Tamara," it murmured.

"God, I would never wish this on another person. On *TJ*? God. I can't imagine her—I can't imagine watching her—"

"Tamara is dying," it said quietly. "That's why she was preferred over you."

Young stared at him, hands clenching into fists, fighting the urge to hit it. Hit *him*. Hit something.

He wondered if, here, he even *could*.

"You know what?" Young hissed, "I've changed my mind. You two fucking belong together. Heartless, icy bastards—the both of you. I hope you fucking have a great time together. I hope you have to watch people suffer for eternity and as much as I *know* now that Nicholas Rush can't tolerate the thought of standing still, of not being active at those times, I hope it's fucking everlasting *torture* for you. I hope it drives you *insane*. *More* insane."

Young got to his feet and paced away from whatever it was that he was fucking talking to and out toward where the hill sloped away down toward the ocean.

He wondered if, in this mental space, wherever it was, he could fall.

He doubted it.

After a few moments, over the sound of the wind, Young heard the unmistakable metallic flick of a lighter.

He didn't turn.

Eventually, it stepped into his peripheral vision, offering him a lit cigarette.

Young shook his head.

Rush shrugged. The wind was blowing his hair back.

"This is what he should be," it said quietly.

"That's not how these things work," Young murmured. "You don't get to erase what you are because you want something better. You don't get to tear through the

multiverse to magically fix things that have been broken. Consequences are a part of life. You have to live with them."

"I've accepted that," it said. "You're the one who hasn't. Things do not continue forever. Change is a part of existence. You always, *always* will lose him."

It seemed, in most universes, he already had.

Young shut his eyes and listened to the roar of the sea.

"Please don't think of me as an 'it'," the thing said quietly, sounding pained. "I *am* Nicholas Rush. Right now, you're just interacting with the thirty percent of me that was trapped in the CPU, but more and more of him is becoming incorporated, from the ground up, into *this* consciousness. When Destiny pulls on his mind—that's the sensation that results from the slow integration of the man and the ship."

Young compressed his lips. "I can still pull him back. I can still pull him out."

"Yes," Rush said quietly. "That's your prerogative."

"I'm supposed to *prevent* this," Young said, making a sweeping motion with his hand to take in Rush. "I'm supposed to help him hang on to what he is,"

"That *is* your role," Rush murmured. "But," it paused, "consider reexamining your premises."

"Thanks but no thanks," Young growled. "Are we done? How the hell do I get out of here?"

"For fuck's sake. You're an idiot," Rush snapped, losing his increasingly tenuous hold on that disquieting sense of calm that seemed so out of place on his features. "This is probably your *only* opportunity to ask me about the nature of the mission, when *Rush* has merged with the AI enough that together we're actually fucking willing to cooperate with you, and you're going to just walk out of here because *you're pissed*? Excellent plan. Very much up to your usual standards," it hissed.

Young crossed his arms. "So?" he snapped. "I'm waiting."

It shook its hair back, imperious and flawless. "You'll be waiting quite a fucking while then. I'm certainly not going to *cater* to your subversive agenda. Tell me what you *need to know*."

"The risks to the crew," Young snapped.

"I already told you that they'll be all right. I'm going to dial Earth as we approach the collision point, using the energy liberated from the apposition of the D-branes to power

the gate. The Nakai did the exact same thing to dial Destiny successfully, so you know it's possible. Everyone goes home. End of story."

"Not for you," Young said darkly. "You're going to do what, exactly?"

"I'm going to help the three people stored in the memory of this ship to break free via ascension."

"And you're going to ascend yourself?"

"Ideally," Rush said, looking away.

"And the person who ascends, is it going to be Rush, or the AI, or *you*? The combination?"

Rush didn't reply, just made a sweeping gesture that took in his whole person.

"*You*? Great. So what happens to *Rush*?"

"Fuck you. You're not listening. *I am* Rush. I will be Rush." It paced away a few feet.

"No," Young said shortly. "Everything that's *left* of Rush when this is over will be a *part* of *you*. Big difference."

Rush took a long draw of his cigarette then turned to look at Young, with narrowed eyes.

"Nicholas Rush is a *miserable*, sorry, mendacious, corrupt, son of a bitch. He's such a mess that he's barely holding together. He's infected with a virus that's killing him, he's losing his sanity, he's already lost most of what was important to his conception of himself. He's not worth preserving. I don't understand why you're being so obstinate about this. *He* wants it this way. *I* want it this way. It's better."

"It's not better," Young said quietly. "It's not."

"You" Rush said, its voice strained, pointing two fingers at him, "are not my arbiter, and you have no say in my fate." It turned away again abruptly.

Considering the fact that they were mentally linked, it was, Young reflected, a very cold, isolationist, and mechanical sentiment to hold. On the other hand, it was also a fiercely independent declaration from a thing, a man, who seemed, despite his passionate assertions, somehow uncertain.

Perhaps he was looking at things backwards.

Perhaps it wasn't the AI who had insisted on this incorporation, this brutal judgment, this destruction and remaking of Nicholas Rush.

Perhaps, it was Rush himself who had wanted it, who had insisted on it.



Perhaps it was Rush himself who thought he *deserved* it.

Young shut his eyes. What was it the AI had said to him so long ago?

*He believes you are correct in your assessment of his character.*

"You're right," Young said quietly, "I'm not your arbiter. But I'm connected to Rush in a very real way. I'm connected to *you* as well, so I can tell you that even though you feel like you're doing the right thing, you don't speak for Rush, and you don't speak for the AI. They're two individuals, with different goals. They occasionally come into conflict. Mostly, they *help* each other." He took a deep breath. "And until they decide otherwise, I'm going to help them stay independent."

"God," Rush said, his voice cracking. "You're trying so fucking hard—but," he turned away, one hand over his mouth.

Young walked up behind Rush, putting his hands down gently on the other man's shoulders.

"But what?" he asked quietly.

"This," Rush whispered, his eyes shut, "is the only way you can have him in the end, because he can't, he can't, ascend on his own, and he's going to die if he doesn't."

"Why can't he ascend?"

"You're connected to his *mind*," Rush said, his voice pained. "Is it not *obvious* to you why he'll *never* be able to do it on his own?"

"I want to hear you say it," Young murmured.

"Because he *hates* himself," Rush said venomously, glaring at Young like something inhuman. "It's why the AI was *fucking* with him so mercilessly at the beginning—appearing as Gloria, trying to forgive him, trying to help him realize that some things weren't his fault. It's why it talks to him *all the time*. It's trying to find a way for him to do it, trying to convince him that he's deserving, but it can't, so it's trying to *integrate* way, way beyond what it was designed for, it's rewriting its programming for him, trying to change the mission parameters, hiding things from *you*, because it—it *cannot stand* the thought of destroying him," Rush said, his voice cracking again.

"Hey," Young said quietly, pulling him around. "We're going to work this out," he murmured, looking straight at him. "One step at a time. Right?"

"I don't think so," Rush said.

"Yes," Young said, gently shaking his shoulders. "We are."

"Unlikely."

"Don't give me that," Young said gruffly, gently shaking him again for emphasis.

"You consistently ask the wrong questions," Rush murmured, his voice low and immediate, his gaze as intense as ever.

"And you're consistently inconsistent," Young murmured back, his grip on Rush tightening for a minute. "But I'm learning to adapt."

Rush pulled back. "Go. Get the Nakai off our fucking ship."

"Yeah," Young replied. "Though what's the point of inviting Telford on board if he's not going to earn his keep? I fully expect that they're all taken care of by now."

Rush smiled faintly. "Don't get yourself killed."

"I'll do my best. How do I put you back together again?"

"Take me apart, you mean?" Rush corrected him wistfully. "All you have to do is put him in the chair. Make sure you've purged the virus from the CPU before you do it."

Young nodded.

"Everett," Rush said quietly, "if Eli can't get the virus out of the CPU—could you come back and just—let me know?"

"Yeah," he said.

Rush looked out again, over the sea, a dark profile against the gray of the sky. "Don't wake him up," Rush whispered.

"I have to know," Young said quietly.

"Even if he's sane, which I doubt, taking him back to Earth would still kill him."

"We have antivirals," Young said shortly.

Rush looked at him, his gaze clear and steady. "You don't have enough."

"You don't know that."

"Yes I do," Rush said.

Young didn't reply.

"I'll send you back," Rush whispered finally, looking away. "Close your eyes."

Young looked at him for a long moment, but the other man, or thing, or *whatever* it was, *whatever he was*—didn't look back.

He just continued to stare out at the sea.

Finally, Young shut his eyes.

## Chapter Thirty

Young opened his eyes as the chair released him.

He—

It was—

Something—

Why.

Cold and pain and a sense of why and a sense of wrong and—

"Oh my god."

Scott was above him, and he was on the floor.

When—

"Oh my *god*. Colonel. *Colonel*. Please—please talk to me."

It was too much.

The cold and the pain and the abrasion of clothing over skin and the scrape of bones over cartilage as he breathed and the dark and the light coming together in the edges that made up objects that existed corporeally. The raw feel of the air down into his lungs and the quiet of the ship and the sound of Scott's rapid, panicked breathing and the way his forearms felt like they had been dipped in acid and he just couldn't—

It was too much.

He *couldn't*—

"Colonel," Scott's voice was cracking. "Please. I can't do this without you." He paused, and the angles made by his face, lit up blue against the darkness, changed. "What the *hell* did you do to him?"

Scott had looked away.

Everett.

That was his name.

Colonel Everett Young.

"I think you misunderstand my purpose here, Matt," Riley said quietly.

Riley.

He had *killed*—

In a shuttle, alone, and dark and cold like it was here, like it was now, with the application of such awful, terrible, unrelenting *pressure*—

He had killed Riley.

With his bare hands.

But this—this wasn't Riley.

"You said you're an *observer*? Well *you* were the one who *told* him to sit in the chair, so you can *fix him*. Right now." Scott was whispering, his eyes darting frantically between Young, the doorway, Riley, the doorway, Young, and always, *always* back to the doorway.

"One cannot observe a system without affecting it. Even your species, with its rudimentary grasp of quantum mechanics, has discovered this phenomenon."

His mind was working. He could follow the words. He could make sense of them, he just couldn't—

His thoughts were hard to control.

They were damaged, but—

Scaffolding.

Rush had made it for him.

Rush, with his hands that were clever and sure and quick and careful and against his temples—

Rush had *made* it.

Young was stronger now. His *mind* was stronger.

Strong enough?

Young stared up into the blackness as Scott made an incredulous, distressed sound in the back of his throat. "How is that *fair*?"

"When a photon encounters an electron and pushes it off its path, is that *fair*? It just is. There is no way to set it back again without further disruption. If I 'fix him,' as you request, he will not be the same."

Scott's hands came up, his palms opening in Young's peripheral vision, his breathing rapid. "How—"

But Riley was gone.

"Oh god," Scott whispered, his breath catching as one hand closed around Young's shoulder. "*Please*, God. Please help me." Scott squeezed his eyes shut for a brief second then looked out toward the doorway, the Nakai weapon balanced on his shoulder, his eyes liquid, catching the light.

Young had to do this.

He had to put himself back together.

For Scott.

For Chloe, for Camile.

For all of them.

For Rush.

It wasn't just a matter of willpower.

It was about the capacity to reintegrate his mind with his body—to still the overwhelming flow of sensory input that paralyzed him, to filter out what was unimportant, to communicate that into *action*. To do, in short, what Rush must have to do *every time* Young ripped his mind out of the neural interface.

Of course, for Rush, it was easy. *His* cognitive architecture had been modified to withstand these kinds of pressures but—

Maybe, now, Young's was too.

Over the distracting graze of his clothing against skin, the hollow, strained sound of Scott's breathing, the agony in his arms, the feel of his boots closing over his feet and the air flowing over his face, he tried to narrow down on what was most important.

In the hallway, he could hear the whispery beat of the Nakai approaching the room.

Scott froze as he heard them too.

The young man's expression turned hard as he pushed himself unsteadily to his feet, his marginally transparent weapon at his shoulder. He reached down, his hand closing on the collar of Young's jacket as he dragged him across the floor, towards the limited cover of the nearest bank of monitors.

Young tried to help, but couldn't—

Couldn't quite—

Scott let go of his jacket and positioned himself directly in Young's line of sight. He had dropped into a crouch, his back against the dark matte metal of the monitor bank, his face blank and determined, his breathing slow and quiet.

The faint emergency lighting barely illuminated their position.

Scott's hands closed gently around his weapon.

Young's heart was pounding; he was cold—a deep, bone-chilling cold that seemed to come from inside of him and seep out, rather than the other way around.

He made an effort to take control of his breathing and found that he was able to slow his rapid, shallow breaths.

The Nakai entered the room.

Their gait echoed quietly against the metal of the deck in the small, enclosed space. They did not speak aloud, but his abraded, sensitive consciousness could feel their minds as they conversed with each other, a feathery, painful sensation against the damaged places in his thoughts.

Slowly, incrementally, Scott leaned out around the edge of the monitor bank.

Young clenched his hands into fists.

Almost.

He was *almost* there. He was relying on the scaffolding, using it to integrate his sensation into something interpretable. Using it to transmit his intent from mind to body. This wasn't as bad as what had happened previously in the shuttle. Now he had Rush's borrowed architecture and he'd been, at least partially, protected by Rush, or the AI, or the *combination*—

Well, by whomever it was, that thing that had looked out over the sea.

He focused on keeping his breathing even and slow.

He could do nothing to calm his racing heart.

The door to the room hissed shut.

Now.

*Now* was the time to attack, before any of them came around the back of the monitor banks, before they made an effort to completely secure the room, but he could do nothing, nothing, *nothing* but *watch* as—

Scott's weapon snapped up and he opened fire, the blast kicking back hard into his shoulder, nearly knocking him back before he braced his feet beneath him and fired again. And again. And again.

His face was set, his eyes were narrowed, as he swept the room in fast arcs.

Young was distracted enough by the light, the sound, the pain, the cold, that he almost missed it, but—

Behind him, something scraped across the floor.

Scott didn't notice.

Scott didn't *hear*.

Young's own Nakai weapon had ended up somewhere near the chair, back in the shadows.

He marshaled his willpower and reached numbly for his sidearm. His hand closed around the cold metal with a distracting, intolerable shock that transmitted itself from his fingers all the way up to his shoulder.

The sound came again—that same low scrape. Closer this time.

He had to turn.

He had to *turn*.

With a herculean effort, he flipped over, his muscles poorly controlled, his grip on his gun wavering. Habit, training, force of will, allowed him to extend his arm as he rolled and he was sighting down the barrel of his weapon straight at a wounded Nakai that was dragging itself, slowly, quietly toward him.

It was nearly close enough to touch.

Its mangled chest left a wide blue streak on the floor behind it.

Silently, it reached out toward him with its long blue fingers—black eyes wide and depthless, its face contorted in pain or in anger.

It hissed softly at him.

If it touched him—

He wasn't sure his mind would be able to take it. Not a second time. Not after the chair.

He fired.

The kickback of the shot, normally not noticeable, reverberated up his injured forearms with a wave of pain so intense that his vision flared to a blinding white, the edged contours of monitors and lighting and seams in the deck plating fading, sounds losing their sharpness, as he struggled to rein in his sensations, to overrule them, to suppress them—



It shrieked at him, lunging forward and the adrenaline and the *fear* shoved the vagueness back, snapping the room into focus as he fired again, and again, and again, emptying his clip into the thing at point blank range.

He faded out.

"Colonel." It was Scott, his voice low and urgent. "Colonel, come on. If you can hear me—"

His eyes, which had been open, staring unseeing, unprocessing, at the angles that the ceiling made with the bulkheads, snapped to Scott's face.

"Colonel?"

"Yeah," he managed.

"Thank god," Scott breathed. "Are you okay?"

"Um," Young said.

"Yeah, obviously you're not okay, but we've got to go. I think we just announced our presence big time to anyone who might be in the area. Plus, these guys are telepathic, so actually they *all* probably know now—" he broke off, biting his lip briefly. "Can you walk?" Even as he asked, Scott was hauling Young to his feet.

"Shit," Young managed, as the room swayed around him.

The pain in his arms and in his head combined with a vicious sense of vertigo and gave rise to an intense wave of nausea.

Scott was relentlessly moving forward, half dragging him toward the door, one hand around his waist, the other at his wrist, avoiding as much of the abraded skin as he could.

"I need a weapon," Young managed, and Scott gave him a gentle shove in the direction of the monitor bank as he knelt quickly to pick up an energy weapon from one of the fallen Nakai before pulling Young's arm back over his shoulders.

Scott was a good kid.

Under appreciated.

Professional.

Dependable.

Able to do his damn job after being drugged, telepathically assaulted, and in the face of what appeared to be almost insurmountable odds.

At this moment, with Scott dragging him from the scene of one firefight into what was likely to become another, Young *damn well* appreciated that, even as he wished for Greer.

But Greer was better where he was.

"Nice work," Young choked out, as Scott hauled him around the doorframe and into one of the cross corridors. They managed to duck out of sight just as a group of Nakai rounded the corner, heading toward the chair room.

Scott didn't reply, his breath catching in his throat, his heart pounding so hard that Young could feel it through the arm that was draped over the younger man's frame.

Around them, in the adjoining corridors, they could hear the whispery movements of the Nakai converging on their position.

God—how many had come through?

There was nowhere to go. The corridors stretched endlessly out before and behind them.

Scott kept moving forward.

Ahead of them, a panel opened in the base of the wall, sending blue light spilling into the corridor.

His first thought was the AI but—the AI was cut off from Destiny, buried in the neural interface chair by Eli.

"Colonel," he heard Volker whisper urgently. "In here!"

Scott wasted no time in dragging him across the corridor. The younger man knelt, covering him, while Volker helped Young through the small opening. Scott was right behind him, carefully, silently fitting the metal panel back into place.

The space was small and eerily lit with a soft blue glow.

Volker and Brody stared at him, their faces spectral in the unnatural light.

Brody held a finger to his lips, his eyes dark, his expression full of warning. Then, careful not to make a sound, the scientist offered a lifesigns detector to Young. With his finger, Brody indicated their current position.

The hallways were swarming with Nakai.

Young looked up at the rest of them, startled. Volker nodded at him shortly, then pulled a pen and a small notebook out of his pocket, of a type very similar to that favored by Rush. Quickly, he scribbled a note, then passed the little book to Young.

*They can't detect us behind the bulkheads. Sound carries well though.*

With some difficulty, Young's fingers closed around the pen. He shook his head slightly to clear it, trying to focus on what was important.

Time and adrenaline were clarifying things for him.

*Accurate count?* He passed the notebook back to Volker.

Brody looked on over his shoulder.

*67 total; 58 = now alive. THE GATE IS STILL OPEN.*

Young nodded.

Presumably the entire Nakai crew had come through the gate and there was no one left to shut it down on the other side.

Young held out his hand for the notebook. At his shoulder, he could feel Scott's steady presence.

*They dialed in from their ship. These = ones caught in phase wave. Are they transmitting information through the gate (more virus)?*

Volker showed Young's message to Brody.

They looked at each other in apparent consternation.

Then Volker took the pen and started scribbling rapidly.

Young heard the tread of the Nakai just on the other side of the bulkhead.

They all froze, barely daring to breathe. Trapped in a confined space like this—they would be easy targets.

After a few moments of tense silence, Volker continued writing. When he was finished, he handed the notebook to Brody, who read it over and added a line or two before passing it on to Young.

- 1. How do you know these = from the ship caught in phase wave?*
- 2. If you are correct, then phase wave includes time dilation? English translation: more time has passed for us than it has for the Nakai?*
- 3. Not sure if they're transmitting information (+/- more virus?), but I'm damn sure we had better shut down that gate. Wormholes + time dilation = bad news = word on street.*

Below Volker's list, in his neat, blocky handwriting, Brody had added:

*We need FTL. Other Nakai ships may have dropped out already...they're just not firing because their friends have, essentially, taken Destiny?*

Young looked at their comments, grimacing.

*They haven't taken the ship. Not by a long shot. Why didn't Eli cut power COMPLETELY?* he wrote, ignoring Volker's questions.

Volker passed Brody the notebook. The other man started writing immediately.

*Can't cut power completely if trying to wipe the virus. Eli rebooted the system in 'safe mode.' That way we have life support and AIR. Also, he's able to protect the AI somewhere behind a firewall while he tries to clean up the code. That's what I would have done. Rush location = ?*

Young's teeth clenched.

*CI room.*

Brody and Volker crowded a bit closer to take a look at the lifesigns detector. There were four people in the CI room. Volker grabbed the notebook.

*That's where Eli was headed. They're together? Rush + Eli = excellent.*

Young sighed quietly, picking up the pen.

*He's unconscious.*

Volker and Brody looked at the pad. Brody looked away. Volker grabbed the pen out of his hand.

*Less excellent.*

Young nodded.

*And also less excellent = you're both covered in blood. You guys need some bandages or something? We can rip up our shirts.*

Young shook his head, but Scott grabbed the notebook.

*Yes. The colonel needs some time to recover before we go for the gate. You guys have any food?*

Young glanced sharply at Scott.

Scott shot him a look in return that was somehow both defensive and admonishing as he reached over to take the power bar that Brody was offering. Scott opened it quietly with his teeth and handed it to Young.

Young pushed it back at him, shaking his head.

Scott broke off a small piece and shoved it back in Young's direction.

Young rolled his eyes but started eating it.

Scott opened the canteen attached to his pants and offered it to Brody and Volker, who refused. He drank a few swallows himself before passing it over to Young.

As Brody helped Young with his jacket, easing it down over his shoulders, Volker unbuttoned his shirt and carefully pulled a screwdriver out of the toolkit that he and Brody had been carrying and went to work on ripping the seams from the sleeves as silently as possible. In a few minutes, they had the cloth tied tightly around Young's shoulder, putting pressure on the sluggish flow of blood that was still coming from his back. They did the same for Scott, using the sleeves from Brody's shirt.

After a few moments, Young motioned for Scott to hand over the notebook.

*So...plan? Have you guys figured out how to cut power to the gate or not?*

Volker grabbed the pad.

*Yes. Problem: approx 20 Nakai between us and the portion of the grid powering the gate, and WE HAVE NO GUNS.*

Young raised his eyebrows.

*WE have guns. Let's go.*

They nodded shortly, motioning Young and Scott to follow through the cramped space.

The four of them crawled, worming their way through the walls bathed in eerie, flat, blue light. In some places it was too tight to even get to hands and knees.

Intermittently, they could hear the Nakai moving on the other side of the bulkhead.

Young was starting to get a significant second wind. He was certainly not at his best, but the power bar, water, and bandaging job had helped his physical condition as well as his state of mind. His consciousness seemed to be recovering further with each moment that passed, mostly likely thanks to Rush—one way or another.

Shit.

He was not thinking about Rush.

It was a bad idea at a time like this.

Ahead of him, Volker and Brody came to a stop, crouching in the opening made by several intersecting ducts. Volker showed him the lifesigns detector, again indicating their position on the map, and then indicating a second location—apparently where he and Brody needed to go to cut off power to the gate at its source. It was a long way down open stretches of corridor that were currently being trafficked by Nakai.

Young gestured for the notepad.

*Why the HELL didn't this part of the grid power down when Eli went to emergency power?*

Brody grabbed it back from him.

*VIRUS.*

Young rolled his eyes and gestured for the notebook again. He made a rough sketch of the layout of the corridors ahead of them, then drew a brief outline of his planned path, marking points of cover with sequential numbers. He showed the sketch to Scott, who studied it intently for a few minutes, then nodded.

Scott grabbed the pen and motioned to himself, then scrawled one word.

*Point?*

Young nodded. He grabbed the pen back from Scott and wrote a quick message for Volker and Brody.

*You two follow Scott. I'll be in the rear. Who wants Scott's sidearm? Mine's out of ammo.*

Volker and Brody looked at each other uncertainly.

Young pointed at Brody, and Scott handed over the weapon.

"Hey," Volker mouthed indignantly. He grabbed the notepad.

*Stop listening to Rush so much.*

Young shrugged. "Whatever," he mouthed back.

Brody offered the weapon to Volker, who took it, looking somehow both uncomfortable and defiant. Brody picked up the toolkit they had brought with them.

Young handed the lifesigns detector to Scott, and shifted to let him get in front. Volker went next, followed by Brody. Their egress point wasn't far, and after thirty seconds of crawling, Scott stopped in front of the access panel. Young squinted ahead, trying to see past Brody and Volker. Dimly, he could make out the soft glow of the handheld monitor that Scott was studying.

They waited.

After almost three minutes, Scott silently lifted the access panel and lowered it to the floor of the corridor. In a flash, he had hauled himself out of the tunnel and turned to pull Volker to his feet. Brody and Young crawled forward until the entire party was back in the open corridor.

No Nakai were in sight.

Brody knelt to replace the panel.

Then they were moving forward as silently as possible, heading for the first point that Young had identified. It wouldn't be long before—

They appeared abruptly—in his vision and as a rending sensation in his mind—as they rounded the corner ahead of Scott in a three-man patrol. Their weapons were out. They were sweeping the corridors, clearly looking for something, clearly *ready*.

The Nakai opened fire.

One hand outstretched, Young knocked Brody back against the bulkhead, out of the path of the energy weapons. Scott fired a broad burst with his weapon at the same time that Volker fired a single shot from the handgun, putting the bullet straight through the eye of the nearest Nakai.

God damn.

Young wondered if he could do that a second time.

By unspoken accord they broke into a run, leaving the dead Nakai behind them as they sped along the corridor, breaths coming in shallow, terrified gasps, boots echoing on the deck plating.

Young's eyes flicked back, checking their six.

It was just a matter of time now before all hell broke loose.

Scott was sprinting flat out, the lifesigns monitor in one hand, the Nakai weapon in the other. Volker and Brody were right behind him. Young followed, pulling cold air deep into his lungs as he kept some space between himself and Brody. If they were attacked from behind, he wanted to be able to break off from the rest of the group to lay down cover fire.

He glanced back again.

Again.

And again, but—

When the attack came, it came not from behind but from the right. A group of Nakai burst out of a blind corridor straight into their midst—shrieking in his ears and in his mind.

Volker was knocked off his feet in the confused tangle of bodies—of blue skin and black uniforms and ripped civilian clothing.

It was impossible to get a clear shot, impossible to see Scott, impossible to—

The nearest Nakai let out a venomous, angry hiss, sending an instinctive wave of cold down his spine, through his *thoughts*. Young reached forward with his left hand, pulling Brody back, out of the way, behind him, as he fired a shot at close range straight at its chest. He knocked it off its feet and moved forward immediately, tackling the next blue form just as it raised its weapon, pointing it directly at Volker.

They crashed together to the floor, but not before it got off a shot.

Young pulled back before it could grab him and fired again. Dimly, he was aware of Brody coming up beside him, pulling an energy weapon free from the downed Nakai's grip and firing, taking two more out as he moved to stand over Volker while the other man got to his feet.

Scientists. Who knew?

He turned back to their six to see another group round the corner.

"Go!" he shouted to Scott, his voice echoing over the sound of the energy weapons  
"Go!"

And they were running again, Scott in the lead, Volker and Brody on his heels, Young jogging backwards, laying down cover fire.

It wasn't enough.

They were still relentlessly advancing, firing shot after shot.

"Almost there," Volker shouted back.

Young's eyes flicked forward, and he saw the door they were aiming for at the end of the corridor. He glanced back just in time to see an energy bolt headed straight at him. He flinched instinctively to the side and felt its heat against his temple as it passed, the plasma warming his skin, making the hair on the back of his neck stand up.

"Go, go, go!" he heard Scott screaming, and then suddenly the lieutenant was beside him, firing straight down the corridor, so that between them they laid down enough cover fire that the Nakai were forced to scatter to the cross corridors or be mowed down.

"Oh *crap*," he heard Volker say behind him.

"*What*," Young shouted over his shoulder.

"The door *won't open*," Volker yelled over the sound of the gunfire.

"You're *kidding* me," Young shouted.

"Working on it," Brody said.



"Well work *faster*," Scott shouted.

"There are blast doors fifteen feet in front of you," Volker called. "You can trigger them manually."

Scott sprinted forward and ripped the panel off the wall, slamming his hand down on the door controls. Immediately, a set of metal doors shut in front of him, leaving only the open corridor to their left to cover.

At the moment, no Nakai were in sight.

Young took a deep breath.

"Should I shoot the panel?" Scott called back, pointing the energy weapon threateningly at the door controls.

"Only if you want Rush to *murder* you," Volker replied darkly. "This isn't Star Wars, lieutenant. Just pull the control crystal out of the circuit."

Scott yanked it out in one smooth motion and pocketed it before turning back toward Young, his eyes on the handheld detector. "It looks like we've got about forty seconds before they show-up in this hallway." He indicated the corridor to their left. "Actually, make that thirty."

Behind the sealed doors, they heard the sound of energy weapons impacting the metal and dissipating.

Young's fingers drummed repetitively over the barrel of his energy weapon as his eyes scanned the corridor.

"How many did we get, do you think?" he murmured to Scott.

"At least eight," Scott replied, his eyes flicking down to his monitor and back up repetitively.

Young nodded. "My count was nine." He looked back over his shoulder. "How we doing, guys?"

"Not good," Brody said.

"Almost there," Volker responded at the same time.

"Well, you have about twelve seconds," Young said, looking down at the monitor as he shouldered his weapon, trying to ignore the raw pain in his forearms.

"So no pressure then," Volker said, a screwdriver between his teeth.

There was a click, and then a hiss, as the door opened.

They ducked inside before the Nakai made it around the corner. The door slid shut behind them, and they all breathed a sigh of relief. Scott reached over and yanked the control crystal out of the door.

"Please tell me there's more than one way out of here," Young said, looking at the long, dark room that was mostly empty other than a few monitor banks and an interface that was built into the wall.

"Yup," Brody said shortly. "There's an access point to the starboard bank of FTL power cells at the other end of the room." He pulled the lifesigns detector down from Scott's angled hold, looked at it briefly, and then pointed. "Here," he said.

A pained hiss from Volker caused everyone to look up. The scientist was trying to get a look at his own shoulder, which had clearly taken part of an energy blast from a Nakai weapon.

"Hang tight," Scott said, covering the distance that separated them in two quick strides. He put a hand on Volker's elbow to steady him and took a close look at the shoulder. "You're okay," he said quietly. "Looks like a third degree burn, but it's just a narrow patch—I bet it hurts like heck though."

"Yeah," Volker breathed. "Okay. I'm good. Let's shut this thing down."

He and Brody went to work as Scott and Young stood together, studying the lifesigns detector, trying to get a picture of what was going on in the rest of the ship. Most of the pale blue dots that indicated human lifesigns were clustered in the mess, where—

"Shit," Young breathed. "*Shit.*"

"They're in the *mess*?" Scott murmured, going pale. "They weren't there when we looked before—they must have just broken through. *God*. All the civilians—"

"There are only four Nakai in there," Young said quietly, his eyes scanning the patterns they were making. "The rest are in the corridors. Watch." He broke off, his eyes narrowing. "They're doing sweeps. They're looking for something."

"Us?" Scott asked, eyes flicking to Young.

"Rush," Young said.

"How would they know that he's—"

"They know," Young said shortly. "They knew before we did that there was something different about him."

"What do you mean?" Scott whispered.

"Because of what Telford did, the Nakai couldn't change him, like they changed Chloe," Young said, speaking quietly, synthesizing the information he'd been piecing together since his inebriated conversation with Rush weeks previous. "They failed to get anything out of him. They failed to alter his mind. That's why they implanted him with that transmitter. They were always planning on giving him back."

"So what's the plan?" Scott murmured.

"We take this ship back by inches," Young growled. "But in order to do that, we've got to cut these things off from any help that might be out there by shutting down the gate and restoring FTL. If they can get reinforcements on board, or supplement their computer virus, it's all over for us."

Scott nodded.

"It looks like we've lost the bridge and the mess, but we're holding the infirmary and the control interface room," Young murmured. "Thank god. *That* room, we absolutely cannot lose."

"That's where Rush is?" Scott asked quietly.

Young nodded. "Rush and Eli."

They were quiet for a moment.

"I uh—I wonder where Chloe is."

The question sent a chill down Young's spine. He had nearly forgotten about her, and he couldn't afford to do so.

She was a wild card, and he certainly did *not* want her ending up in the hands of the Nakai.

Young cleared his throat. "She could be in the infirmary."

Probably, she was in the mess.

"Yeah," Scott said softly. "Yeah, she could."

An abrupt shower of sparks rained down from the wall interface where Volker and Brody had been working. The two scientists jumped back, startled, as the room faded into utter darkness.

After a brief moment, Volker pulled out his iPhone and was using it as a flashlight.

"I take it this is a good sign?" Young asked dryly.

"The gate should be off," Brody confirmed.

"*Should be?*" Young echoed.

"Yeah. That's what I said. It *should* be. We'll have to confirm it visually—"

"Fine," Young said breaking in. "You can do that after you figure out how to power up the FTL drive."

They stared at him in dismay.

"That's going to be really—"

"Look. Guys. You're all we've got right now. Park is probably in the mess, which has been taken by the Nakai. Eli is trying to get this virus out of Destiny's computer system without killing us all or deleting the AI. Rush is out of commission. So you're going to have to figure out how to power up that drive and then you're going to have to *make it happen*. Got it?"

"Um, yeah," Volker said.

Brody nodded.

"Okay, now Scott and I—"

"Colonel."

Something in Scott's tone made Young's blood turn icy in his veins. He turned to see the lieutenant looking down at the handheld monitor, his expression grim and set.

"What," Young asked, already knowing the answer.

"The Nakai just moved on the control interface room."

# What Falls Away is Always

February 10th, 2011

Wray kneels on the floor, her hands pressed to the deck plating.

She is breathing hard.

She is thinking of things that might help her.

She is thinking of guns, she is thinking of science, she is thinking of tactics, she is thinking of Rush, of the AI, of Young, of Telford, of Greer, of Scott, of Chloe, of Eli, of Volker, of Brody. But none of them are here. She is flanked by James and Park.

She is looking at the room.

She is looking at the crew, frightened and quiet.

She is looking at the Nakai. She is watching them prowl the perimeter of the room. She is watching them wade between people, searching for something. Searching for *someone*.

For Rush.

Maybe for Chloe.

Don't think of Sharon, she tells herself.

Don't think of Sharon.

Oh god, don't think of her.

"What should we do?" Park whispers. It is almost inaudible.

Out in the corridors, their status unknown, are the personnel most likely to resolve this situation. Wray cannot help them, she cannot discover what their plans are, if organized plans exist at all. She cannot take back this room, and it is unlikely that the Nakai are here to negotiate.

"We watch," James whispers back, just as quietly, "and we wait for an opportunity."

Wray flinches, as across the room, one of the Nakai hisses menacingly at Barnes.

On the bridge, weeks ago, she told Young that being an HR person came with some relevant skill sets. She believed that then, and she does now.

The problem is—there are not many moments on Destiny when those skill sets are relevant.

She knows people and she talks to them. She understands group psychology and she has made a study of the vagaries of human social constructs. She is thoughtful. She knows the value of order and of regulation but she does not love these things for themselves, but rather for that which has been built atop them—peace, harmony, and a platform from which to launch oneself at the stars.

Don't think of Sharon, don't think of her.

She knows this crew.

She *loves* this crew.

They are her family. She wants them to persist, to survive.

She wants to protect them, but she has nothing, *nothing* with which to do so.

She knows that that does not matter.

Don't think of Sharon.

Don't think of her.

Across the room, the Nakai hisses again at Barnes, who has done *nothing*, who does not look at it, who does not move, who freezes as if she is facing a cobra, facing some reptilian thing that *will not attack* her if she *does not move*, who has been separated by the instinctive, understandable, terrifying, inching back of everyone around her as the thing circles her, considering.

Wray is trembling.

Her hands are spread flat against the icy floor, her hair is arrayed over her back like a shield.

She will stand up.

She will *stand up*.

Her muscles feel like lead. Her mouth is dry.

The Nakai pulls out a small device. It is silver and glitters blue under the emergency lighting.

Wray met Sharon outside, on June 15th, 1997, on the first day she had shown up for a group run in New York City. It had been early in the morning, and Sharon had worn a blue jacket, crisp and economical with clean lines. Her hair had been swept up, the sun streaking gold highlights through the red as she ran. Wray had run beside her for

an hour before she'd worked up the nerve to ask her name because probably she was straight probably she had a boyfriend.

Don't think of Sharon.

Don't think of her.

Wray watches the Nakai approach Barnes.

She will do this because she is human. She will do this because of her place in this crew. She will do this as a function of her character. She will do this because she expects it of herself. But most importantly—

She will, simply, do it.

Wray stands.

"No," James says, her expression anguished. "No."

Wray is the only one standing.

The crew looks at her.

The Nakai look at her.

She is trembling.

She begins to walk across the floor, her hands held in front of her.

No one stops her.

The Nakai don't shoot her.

The room seems unusually crisp and sharp and solid. She feels the air passing over her skin, the drag and rebound of each blink, the give of her shoes, and the smoothness of her blouse and the straps of her camisole coming over the edges of her shoulders and the weight of her hair and the sound of her steps and the breathing of the crew and the gleam of the emergency lights off the smooth surfaces that make up the mess as she walks through them, leaving Park and James behind her to flank no one as she passes in front of Atienza and Thomas and Dunning.

She looks at Barnes and the Nakai that threatens her.

The Nakai watch Wray with a menacing stillness.

Don't think of Sharon.

Don't think of her eyes, which were green, her freckles, which had mostly faded, or her parents, who, when Wray had been introduced to them had pulled her into their lives and had never let her go, and what they must think now and how they must ache for

their daughter who was widowed without ever having been married, and who had lost a partner without losing her, who could see her and know her only through the eyes and bodies of other people, who had begun to drink too much and eat too little and who did not know how to handle the grief of a boundless separation that grew greater every day.

Don't think of Sharon.

Don't think of her.

"Excuse me," she says, and her voice is steady and strong, even though her entire body is shaking.

Don't think of Sharon, don't think of the surf shifting a small boat beneath an overhanging tree where they had decided that they would retire, don't think of her hands and her eyes and she had played the flute, *oh god*, don't think of the *flute* and don't think of the fine, breakable texture of her hair and the curls it would make and how there was so much of it, and the arch of her eyebrow or the feel of her heartbeat against Wray's cheekbone, oh Sharon, oh *god*, *Sharon*.

"Excuse me," she says again.

The Nakai hisses at her, leveling its weapon.

They *all* have their weapons trained on her.

"I'm in charge here," she says.

It is true.

But it does not help her.

Her position, in the past, granted her the power to stand between people and the mindless cruelty of bureaucracy.

Now, it grants her nothing but the power to stand.

Barnes watches her with a frozen, horrified, grateful expression.

Wray has no idea if the Nakai understands her, but it lifts the device it holds.

She thinks of Chloe.

She thinks of Nicholas.

She will resist them with all that she is, she will resist everything they try to pull from her mind, she will resist everything, *everything*, except for this initial action.

Don't think of Sharon.



Don't think of her.

Wray brushes her hair aside in a dark, smooth sweep as she angles her head, exposing her temple where she knows the device will come to rest.

Shaking and steady, accepting and resisting, she waits for it.

Don't think of Sharon.

Don't think of her.

The Nakai steps forward, lifting the device.

Its long, cool fingers close around her upper arm in an irregular, horrifying progression.

She gasps, her muscles resisting instinctively, trembling with the effort of holding still, but she keeps her head angled and she waits, she waits, not thinking of Sharon, because don't think of Sharon, don't think of her don't think of Sharon, don't think of Sharon, don't think of Sharon, don't think of Sharon, don't move, don't move and don't think of Sharon, don't think of *Sharon*, of the line of her neck and the angle of her jaw and her laugh and the curve of her hips and her books she left everywhere on windowsills and tables and on the edges of sinks and on the floor and hooked over the back of the couch, don't think Sharon don't think of her don't think of her don't think of her inability to neatly fold a map or the way she would eat ice cream slower than anyone Wray had ever met, don't think of her don't think of Sharon of her plants, of her voice, of the way she insisted on eating in bed, don't just don't think of her don't think of her don't think of her just *don't*.

Don't think of Sharon.

Not *Sharon*.

Don't think of—

## Chapter Thirty Two

They moved quietly through the pitch darkness, Volker's iPhone providing the only light as they passed through the ductwork into a long narrow chamber lined with FTL cells. The space was large enough to fit the modular components that made up the drive and provided a bit more room to move than the passages they'd been in previously.

After two or three minutes of making their way forward, bent double in the access tunnel, they reentered a portion of the ship that wasn't affected by the minor power outage that Brody and Volker had just caused.

As they passed into the pale blue emergency lighting, they came to a halt.

"This is where we part ways," Volker whispered, his voice barely audible despite the lack of Nakai presence in this portion of the ship.

Young nodded shortly, his hand moving to the metal wall to steady himself against a brief surge of vertigo. He reached over to take the lifesigns detector from Scott, offering it to Brody.

Brody shook his head. "You guys will need it more."

"There's hardly any activity in this part of the ship," Volker whispered.

"For now," Young said darkly. "As soon as you bring that drive online they're going to descend on your position like you wouldn't believe."

Volker and Brody looked at each other. "Keep it," Brody insisted quietly, handing it back to him.

Young took the device. "Watch your backs," he said.

They nodded and vanished around a corner, heading deeper into the FTL drive.

Young and Scott locked eyes.

"CI room?" Scott whispered.

There was nothing, *nothing* that Young wanted more than to move *immediately* on the control interface room and pull Rush the *hell* out of there.

He looked down at the lifesigns detector, now showing the same four human dots, distressingly accompanied by six Nakai.

The fact was, however, that even if, *somehow*, they succeeded in evading and or taking down the Nakai patrols that were moving through the corridors, even if they were able to make a move on the room, and either through surprise or some other tactical advantage, they were able to take it back, the entire complement of Nakai would then converge on their position. There was no exit from that room, and in the unlikely event they were able to find or make a point of egress, there would be *no way* to drag Rush through the walls. The scientist was profoundly unconscious. Young had been periodically brushing against his thoughts since he saw the Nakai make their move on the control interface room, but he'd gotten nothing in return except for a swirling darkness.

Hopefully unconsciousness would be sufficient to protect his mind from the Nakai.

"No," Young said. "We move on the mess. We need to cut down their numbers and we need some additional firepower." His eyes scanned the lifesigns detector. He was able to identify himself and Scott, Volker and Brody, but there was one pale blue dot, halfway across the ship, that seemed to be on its own. He watched it for a moment, his eyes narrowed as it approached and then *eliminated* a party of three Nakai from behind.

Interesting. Varro, perhaps? Or James? Whoever it was—at the moment he or she was too far away to contact.

"There's only one entrance to the mess," Scott murmured, his voice admirably level.

"I'm getting Rush and Brody to knock down some god damn walls after this," Young growled.

"Yes sir," Scott murmured in agreement, with a wan smile.

"And then I'm damn well going on leave," Young said.

That wrung a real smile out of Scott. "Where are you going to go?"

"My *quarters*, lieutenant. Let's move out."

They headed in the direction of the mess, creeping carefully along the dim hallways, keeping just ahead of the Nakai, edging around corners and into cross corridors as they tried not to draw any attention to their presence. If they could just get *inside* the mess and kill the four Nakai that seemed to be watching the prisoners, they'd then likely be able to hold it against any kind of outside incursion attempt that the Nakai might make, hopefully cutting down enemy numbers in the process.

Involuntarily, his thoughts flashed back to Chloe's comment a few weeks ago when they had been trapped in the shuttle.

*They'll tear through the crew.*

He clenched his jaw.

It was very possible that they would lose personnel in this assault.

It was possible that they *already had*.

Soon, too soon, he and Scott were standing silently, barely daring to breathe, in a corridor across from the mess.

The door to the room was open, and two Nakai stood outside.

For a room full of people, it was hideously silent.

Young's eyes flicked between the monitor in his hand and the open doorway.

The scream of a woman in horrific pain tore through the air, sending a chill down his spine, tightening a vise around his chest.

It was Wray.

Beside him, Scott jerked involuntarily, his muscles tightening.

Young put an arm across his chest, holding him back, his eyes still on the screen in his hand.

Wray was so delicate. So delicate and so *careful*, and so straight-shouldered—

The echo of her scream faded to nothing.

Young pocketed the monitor as the set of dots he had been watching vanished around a corner.

He nodded to Scott.

They exploded out of the cover of the corridor. The Nakai at the doorway were dead before they had time to get off a shot, but Young could feel their frail, dying thoughts like the wings of butterflies over raw, bleeding skin, warning the others, warning those in the room.

They came through the doorway, Scott firing with one hand even as he turned to seal the door behind them. Two Nakai converged on Young immediately, their hands out, pale in the dim light, reaching for his temples, their thoughts stretching into his mind. As he took one out, the kickback of the energy weapon reverberated painfully down

his injured back, down his arms and the other was close, still coming, still so *close* and if—

James sprang out of a crouch, weaponless, launching herself at the Nakai, taking it down to the floor—

"Get down, *GET DOWN!*" Scott was shouting to the civilians over the sound of energy weapons discharging.

Young saw someone in the corner of his eye take a hit—

He couldn't get a clear shot, and James was *beneath* it now, its hand closed around her throat and she was trying to scream as it tore through her mind, but there was *no sound*. He moved forward, pulling it off her in quarters that were too close to fire so he flipped his weapon around and smashed it into the thing's head and then *everyone* seemed to be screaming at once as he brought his weapon up, sighting down the barrel at the last of them. At the one who still had a hold of Wray. *Again he didn't have a clear shot* and he—

Hesitated.

The thing locked eyes with him, hissing in satisfaction, as if it had understood something.

As if it had gained some insight.

He could feel its thoughts fold outward, painful against his own, transmitting information, broadcasting something that Young couldn't understand to every Nakai in range until Varro emerged directly behind it and smashed it to the ground with an energy weapon he had pulled off the one that Scott had killed.

The former Lucian Alliance member kicked the Nakai away from Wray and shot it.

The mess was theirs.

"Secure the room," Young shouted, his eyes scanning over the crew, making sure he hadn't overlooked any outstanding threats.

And then—god.

He didn't know where to turn first.

He dropped to his knees beside Wray.

She was closest, and she was alone, the center of a cleared circle that was empty of anything but the dead Nakai that had tortured her.

Gently, Young pulled the sweep of dark hair away from her face, one hand behind her neck as he turned her carefully onto her back. He had thought, from the way she was lying, as if she had shattered on the floor—that she was unconscious, but she wasn't.

*She wasn't.*

Her expression was twisted with pain, with grief, tears leaking from the corners of her bloodshot eyes as she tried to turn away, tried to bring a shaking hand to her face.

"Camile," he murmured, his hands running over her shoulders, her arms, checking for injuries, broken bones, blood loss, before pulling her up, slowly, carefully, wrapping both of his abraded arms around her as she sobbed into his shoulder.

It was only because her mouth was a few inches from his ear that he heard her say, "Sharon."

"Shh," he whispered, watching Becker hover over James, his hands on her shoulders, talking to her as she drew in pained, gasping breaths.

"I told them," Wray said into his shoulder, her voice tight and strained and almost inaudible. "Everything I knew. Everything I *am*—"

"You can't fight them," he murmured. "No one can."

It was true.

Mostly.

"They knew it all anyway," he whispered.

"Not all of it," she said, her voice high, tightened down to a whisper. "Their understanding is becoming—more nuanced." He could feel her vibrate with her attempt to restore her professional tone, but her voice wavered and she did not let him go. "I could feel it."

"Not your fault," he murmured. "Not your fault."

"They know about the AI," she whispered, her voice breaking. "And they know about you. They know you're linked to—" she broke off as her throat closed up entirely.

He shut his eyes briefly. "Okay," he said quietly. "Okay."

He looked around, eyes scanning the faces in the room. He picked out Park, who wasn't far from his position and caught her eye, motioning her over with his head. Carefully he lowered Wray back down to the deck plating. She looked at him, her skin pale, covered with a thin sheen of sweat, the whites of her eyes a terrible bloody red.

"Stay with her," he said quietly to Park, as he got to his feet.

Park nodded.

He stood, meeting Scott's eyes across the mess before dropping down briefly next to James.

"Lieutenant?" he asked her.

"I'm okay, sir," she said, coughing weakly, her face pale, bruises already starting to spring up in a ring around her neck. "But Barnes took a hit—trying to help Wray," her voice faded to a ragged whisper.

Young nodded and got to his feet. He walked twenty paces and dropped down next to Dunning who was cutting open the left side of Barnes' jacket.

"Hey, corporal," Young said, pushing her back as she tried to turn, her eyes glassy. "Take it easy."

"Shit," Dunning hissed under his breath. "*Shit.*"

Young shot him a sharp look and then pulled back the jacket. Across the young woman's left side and back there was a wide, bleeding energy burn that had seared away part of her skin. The wound glistened ominously in the dim blue light.

She hadn't taken a full blast.

"Fisher," he called to the scientist nearest him. "Find a med kit."

His head snapped up as he heard the grinding sound of the door controls. The Nakai were trying to break back in. He pulled out his lifestraps detector. Fifteen of them, maybe more, had massed in front of the doors.

He'd expected this.

Just—not quite so soon.

"Scott," he called, his voice carrying over the buzz of conversation that had erupted through the mess. "Tables!"

Immediately the younger man started organizing a team to flip over and drag the metal mess tables into an impromptu barricade. He left Fisher to look after Barnes, forcing himself to his feet.

He stood too quickly, and the room spun around him. He might have fallen if it hadn't been for the sudden appearance of Varro at his elbow, steadying him.

"Easy," Varro said. "You with us, colonel?"

"Yeah," Young nodded shortly at the other man. "Look, I could use some help right now. We're about to have a *pitched battle* in here, and I need the civilians to the back, the wounded protected, and everyone with a gun to the front. Can you—"

Varro nodded back at him and turned. "Wounded to the back," the other man shouted as he knelt to carefully pick up Camile.

Within the span of three minutes they were ready, Scott again positioned beside him, behind one of the overturned tables.

They knelt together in the dim light, looking out at the doors. As they watched, the mechanism in the wall made another low, grinding sound, and a few inches of blue light appeared through the crack in the metal.

"Did you find Chloe?" Young whispered to Scott.

"No," the other man sounded relieved. "She must be in the infirmary."

"Yeah," Young said, looking again at the lone blue dot on his monitor. It was approaching the mess. "Yeah, she must be."

The door ground open a few more inches.

"We've got some wounded," Scott whispered, "but no known casualties. Not yet."

"Anyone get—interrogated?" Young asked, "besides Camile?"

"No," Scott said. "I don't think so. But I heard from Baras that they were at her a long time. A very long time."

"Yeah," Young murmured. "I got that impression."

The door ground open a few more inches.

Young's hands tightened on the Nakai weapon. He brought it to his shoulder.

Next to him, Varro moved into position, crouching behind the metal table. "Any second now," the other man murmured. "They've got a hold of the door. When they pry it open—" he broke off, shooting Young a glance from the corner of his eye before he brought his own borrowed energy weapon up, sighting along the barrel.

Young could see icy blue fingers reflecting the emergency lighting as they curled through the space between the doors.

With the horrendous shriek of shearing metal, the doors gave way and the Nakai charged through.

The sound of energy weapons discharging was deafening, the blasts burning streaks across Young's retinas as they impacted the walls, the Nakai, the tables.



Reynolds took a hit almost immediately, and in Young's peripheral vision he saw James and Becker come forward and drag him back to the line of civilians. A moment later, James came forward again, her hands closed around Reynolds' weapon.

The Nakai pressed forward relentlessly, hissing, screaming in rage, in anger, in fear—Young couldn't tell. They were crossing the open space, laying down so much fire that the metal tables were slowly sliding back toward the huddled civilian line.

In the hallway outside the room, he heard the unmistakable sound of a single assault rifle advancing on their position, pulling a flanking maneuver on the Nakai.

The table in front of Young was yanked away and thrown across the room by the first two Nakai to reach their position. He fired a broad burst, at close range, knocking them back.

*"Hold the line,"* he roared over the gunfire, knowing that if they broke ranks the Nakai would have a straight shot back to through to the civilians. He stood his ground, shoulder-to-shoulder with Varro and Scott. Against the open doorway, he was peripherally aware of a dark silhouette, slipping through the warped metal frame and then melting into the shadows near the back wall.

Because he was listening for it, he heard single shots begin to ring out from across the room.

The adjacent table was yanked sideways, partially exposing James, Baras, Becker and Chu. He heard the unmistakable click of James running out of ammunition.

*"James,"* Varro yelled, as he tossed her his energy weapon, pulling his knife from his belt as he stepped forward, ducking under the weapon of the nearest Nakai to move in with his blade. Young shifted his firing pattern to cover him, moving away from Scott slightly as he worked to get a better angle.

A blow from the base of an energy weapon smashed into the side of his jaw, knocking him back to the floor, and he felt a long-fingered, cold hand close around his ankle, dragging him forward, out of the line, into the midst of the Nakai—

A single shot from behind dropped the Nakai that had a grip on him. It released him as it collapsed forward, falling across his chest, its blue-tinged blood soaking his uniform, running over the side of his neck, into his hair before he pushed himself back, and up, and away. Scott's hand closed around his upper arm, yanking him off the floor as he began to fire again.

In his peripheral vision he saw Baras take a blast in the thigh, falling back with a strangled cry as James stepped laterally to fill the gap.

How many had they killed?

His focus narrowed to the confines of the room. His breathing tore raggedly in his throat. Beside him, Varro was starting to slow.

Three Nakai made another concerted attempt to pull him out of the line. Hands curling into his jacket, unnaturally strong, unnaturally cold, pulling inexorably forward, drawing him into—

Varro reached out and viciously yanked him back as Young brought his weapon up, firing a broad burst.

There was no question about it—they were targeting him specifically.

Single shots continued to ring out from the edge of the room, until, finally—

The Nakai stopped coming

Young gasped for breath, collapsing back into Scott, who tried to take his weight but couldn't manage to keep his footing. They buckled to the deck in a disorganized tangle.

"Cover the *door*," Young called out, his voice cracking as he tried to get back to his knees. "We need to secure this room, people," he shouted, his voice recovering.

He forced himself to his feet, forced himself forward, across the room, heading straight for the sniper near the door.

Chloe stepped into the light to meet him, her chin angled up, one cheek streaked with dirt or blood, tear tracks visible through the grime.

"Come here, kiddo," he said, taking her arm, pulling her forward into a hug, laughing once in relieved disbelief, the sound muffled by her hair. "My god. What the *hell* are you doing?"

Her arms tightened around him briefly, but then she pulled back. "I'm okay, colonel," she said, her voice wavering, but her gaze steady. "Did you—did you know it was me?"

"I thought it might be," he murmured, his hands still on her shoulders. "But I wasn't sure whose side you were going to end up being on."

Chloe looked down, nodding once. "Colonel, you need to know—I passed the observation deck earlier and the other two Nakai ships have dropped out. It's hard to tell distances, but I'd say they're only a few tens of kilometers to port. They seem to be—waiting for something."

Her eyes flicked out to take in someone behind him.

"Do you know if they've taken anyone off the ship?" he asked her urgently.

"Not that I know of," she replied. The last I saw, they hadn't launched any fighters. The Nakai on board must have a way to communicate with them.

Again, her eyes flicked away from him, out into the room.

"Go on," he murmured, shoving her in Scott's direction, watching her incredulously for a moment, before turning away to pull the lifesigns detector out of his pocket.

Their battle had made a significant dent in the numbers of the Nakai. TJ continued to hold the infirmary and they now controlled the mess.

They needed to hang on to what they had and advance.

He glanced back to take in Scott, his arms wrapped tight around Chloe. Her assault rifle was on the floor.

He gave them a five count, then snapped, "Scott, Chloe, Varro, Becker, James, Dunning, Thomas, Chu. Form up."

They jogged over. "Airman, Lieutenant," he snapped looking at Chu and Thomas. "You're going to organize defenses here. After we move out, you shore up the doors, set up a line, and see to the wounded. Get Park working on the door mechanism—see if you shut it and lock it. I don't want to have to come back here to liberate the god damned mess *again*, you got that? So you *hold* it."

"Yes sir," Chu replied crisply. Thomas nodded sharply. "Understood," he added.

Young hoped he wasn't giving them an impossible task.

"Everyone else, find a weapon. We're moving out."

Scott looked at him in surprise, his eyes flicking between Young and Chloe.

"Chloe," Young snapped, waving her over.

Scott accompanied her. When she was close, he said, "You think you can hold out against them, mentally, if we get into close quarters for a long period?"

She looked at him for a long moment, her expression unsure. "I'm not positive," she said finally.

"I don't want a repeat of what happened last time," he murmured. "If you feel like you're going to be compromised, I want you as far away from these things as you can get. You go. Got it?"

"Got it," she whispered back.

"Sir," Scott said, bringing a shaking hand up and running it through his hair. "I don't know if this is such a good idea."

Young didn't much like it either, but he needed every advantage he could get.

"She's in better shape than *you* are at the moment, lieutenant," Young snapped, "And she's probably taken out almost as many of these things as we have at this point. We could use her."

"I'll be fine, Matt," Chloe said. "I can sense them."

"You can *what*?" he replied.

"Sense them," she repeated. "That's how I was able to avoid being captured."

Young raised his eyebrows wryly. "And how you were able to make your way to the armory and outfit yourself. That flak jacket is a little big on you, though. With all the tiny women on this ship we need to start stocking extra small jackets."

Chloe gave him a ghost of a smile. "Where's Rush?" she asked. "And Eli?"

"Control interface room," he murmured, watching Dunning and Becker pulling energy weapons off the dead Nakai. "Both of them."

"The Nakai have taken that room," Chloe whispered, her expression locked.

Young nodded shortly. "We're going to take it back."

"They're going to suspect that we're coming," Chloe murmured. "I passed the room on my way here. They've sealed the door."

"Do you know how to hot-wire an Ancient doorway?" he asked.

Chloe shook her head. "Only the basics, and that's—probably not going to be enough here."

"We have to treat this like a hostage situation," Scott said quietly. "We could force our way in there only to find everyone at gunpoint. We need flash grenades. Or tear gas. Would tear gas even affect the Nakai?"

"Only one way to find out," Young murmured. "We've got crates of the stuff from Homeworld Command. We just have to get to it."

His assault team had formed up, outfitted with either Nakai or Earth based weapons.

"You think you're up to this, colonel?" Varro said, giving him a skeptical look. "Not sure if you're aware of it, but it looks like you've lost an awful lot of blood. You've got some kind of wound on your back—"

"It's fine," Young replied. "Looks worse than it is."

"You could sit this one out," Varro said cautiously.

"I don't think so," Young said, his tone clipped. He turned to address the small group around him. "Listen up people. We're heading to the control interface room. We've got four people inside in unknown condition. We've also got six Nakai in the room itself, and we'll likely run into more in the hallway outside. We're going to try to gain the upper hand by using a combination of tear gas and flash grenades, but it could get —" he paused, "intense. It's going to be dark, and the tear gas is going to obscure everything, so I want everyone to be *extremely* careful. I don't want *any* hits from friendlies. You fire only if you've got a clean shot. Am I clear?"

He got nods all around.

"Let's move out," he snapped.

Again he reached out, letting his thoughts brush against Rush's, the touch subtle. He'd intended it to be brief, but a strange sense of pressure was building in the other man's mind, raw and aching.

*Shit.*

In all likelihood, the Nakai were trying to break into the scientist's mind. At the moment there was nothing Young could do, other than hope that unconsciousness was a defense, rather than a weakness; hope that they were incapable of hurting him when he was like this; hope that he, and the AI, and the chair would be able to pick up the pieces when this was over.

Using a combination of the handheld monitor and Chloe to avoid the Nakai, it took them nearly an hour to wind their way carefully from the mess to the supply room where they outfitted themselves with C4, gas masks, stun grenades, and tear gas, and then back to a small conference room in a hallway near the control interface room to regroup.

"We're going to blow the door mechanism with a small amount of C4," Young whispered, "and then we're going to get the flash grenades through, followed by the tear gas." He looked around at all of them. "Varro and Dunning," Young murmured, "you're the rearguard. You're going to keep these things off our asses as we move into the room. It's likely to get very heavy very quickly, so be prepared." He glanced at the rest of the team. "We're going to advance into the room, two by two. "Scott and I will be first. Then James and Becker. Chloe, I want you last and on your own. Use your

judgment about whether to stay in the hallway or advance into the room. Remember what I said about clear shots. And look sharp. If the tear gas doesn't affect them, they'll have better visuals on *us* than we will on *them* with all the smoke, since they know where we're coming from."

He got nods all around.

They moved out, the tread of their boots quiet against the deck plating.

In the back of his mind, a glittering city flared brightly, turrets shining white in the light, surrounded by sun-drenched water, echoing with the calls of the sea birds before fading down to again to darkness.

*Shit.*

That had unquestionably come from *Rush*.

Behind Young's eyes, a headache began to build.

He tried his best to keep his breathing even as he shoved the scientist's consciousness back down.

He glanced at Chloe, who held the monitor, matching what she could hear in her thoughts with the information on the screen. She nodded once at him.

He and Scott separated from the rest of the group, slipping into the hallway where the control interface room was located.

They had to *take* it, and they had to *hold* it, and they couldn't lose *anyone*.

Not anyone.

Young covered Scott as he pulled out the C4 he was carrying. The other man attached the detonation device into the deformable explosive and pressed a fraction of the block into the crack of the doors near the locking mechanism.

They then ducked around a corner, meeting the rest of the team as they came forward.

He felt an ascending pressure at the back of his mind and then—

*His vision bursts into white, reforming into the long sunlit room of an Ancient hospital ward where he stands in the doorway, looking down at the line of beds lit to blinding by the bright glare coming through crystal windows. There are so many of them, all sick, all dying, but they've removed the automatic tinting from the windows because the news feed had announced as recently as that morning that Atlantis would be leaving. From here, they'll have a spectacular view of it as it ascends, untouched, uninfected, to make a new start—leaving them, leaving them, behind. He walks down the long floor, the warm tiles*

*gleaming under his feet, past his patients and to the window to stand next to one of the other doctors.*

*She turns toward him, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears.*

*"Est filia tua in urbe?" she asks him.*

*"Etiam. Item ibidem," he replies.*

For the first time in *weeks*, Young blocked Rush out of his mind.

He staggered slightly, fighting the pain in his head.

Scott reached out to steady him, and Young leaned into his grip, trying to get his feet underneath him.

"Colonel," Scott, whispered, his mouth close to Young's ear.

"They're trying to wake Rush up," Young murmured back, shaking his head, trying to recover his equilibrium. "We've got to move *now*."

Scott nodded, his hands closing around Young's upper arms.

"Masks," Young snapped, straightening as he pulled his own down over his face, watching the rest of them follow suit. He reached over to adjust Chloe's, strapping it tightly against her chin.

They were ready.

Tense with anticipation.

Scott locked eyes with Young. "Fire in the hole," he whispered, pressing his thumb down on the detonator.

They burst out into the hallway to see a cloud of smoke, smoldering sparks, and a six inch wide gap between the doors of the control interface room. Young yanked the pins out of two flash grenades as Scott did likewise and tossed them through into the room.

James and Becker were just behind them with the tear gas.

As a unit, his team knelt shutting their eyes, covering their ears.

Despite his precautions, Young was slightly unbalanced by the bright flare of the flash grenade.

Then, they were up, Young and Varro and Dunning and Scott, forcing the doors apart by inches until, *finally*—

Young was first into the room.

The blue lighting caught the smoke from the tear gas, turning it an opaque white. He saw Telford, one hand over his mouth, his eyes streaming, narrowed to slits, tackle the Nakai that was taking aim at him. Young moved forward, his weapon up, firing at the Nakai positioned next to the door as Scott came through behind him, tackling him to the floor as an energy blast sailed over their heads to impact the metal wall and dissipate.

One down.

In his peripheral vision, Young saw Greer sweep the legs of the Nakai that was standing behind him as he lunged to his feet, grabbing a chair and swinging it into something obscured by the tear gas that Young couldn't make out.

Near the left wall, he heard Eli coughing, trying to breathe.

James came through the doorway, narrowly avoiding a burst of weapons fire as she dived and rolled, coming up next to Telford, kicking the Nakai that he was grappling with in the head once—twice, and then, when she was sure her shot was clear, she fired.

Two down.

Where the *fuck* was Rush?

Becker dove forward into the room ducking beneath a burst from a plasma weapon as the tear gas grenades continued to hiss, releasing more of their white, acidic smoke.

Shit.

He couldn't see a goddamned—

One of them tackled him from the side, taking him down to the deck plating. An abrading, horrible pain screamed up his back, over his arms, but he managed to get his gun around and fire off a shot at close range, the energy carrying it back away from him before it got a chance to tear into his mind.

Three.

From his position on the floor, he saw Chloe enter the room, silent and small, crouching low in the doorway and slipping past him, keeping to the wall, her presence going unnoticed by the Nakai.

Young pushed himself up to his knees, his muscles shaking with the effort as Scott waded forward into the opaque mist, making for Greer, joining the mass of swirling smoke that concealed the back of the room.



A hiss from his left drew his attention, and he looked over to see Eli emerging from the smoke, one hand covering his eyes, nearly doubled over coughing, and held in the grip of one of the Nakai.

It pressed an energy weapon to the back of his head as it locked eyes with Young, hissing at him triumphantly.

He had been afraid of this.

No one fired.

It hissed again, shaking Eli slightly, pushing him forward, toward the door.

Coming away from the wall, bringing her gun up in a smooth fast arc as she advanced out of the smoke, Chloe pressed the tip of her assault rifle to the underside of its jaw and fired.

A single shot.

Young surged forward, pulling Eli toward him, then shoving him at the door. "Get him *out* of here," he shouted to Chloe and she grabbed Eli's upper arm, leading him out of the room, away from the tear gas.

Four.

Telford was at his side, trying to straighten, choking on the acrid air, barely holding onto the Nakai weapon he'd picked up.

"Go!" Young shouted at him, shoving him toward the door, in the direction of the clean air outside. Telford resisted, shaking his head. "Go," Young repeated. "Cover the hallway. More are coming."

Scott emerged from the back of the room, dragging Greer, firing two short bursts with his weapon.

Young heard a shrieking hiss as something impacted the deck.

Five.

There was one more still out there. He couldn't see it, but he could *feel* its thoughts, broadcasting fast and *far*, and heavy with content.

He was tempted to take down the block between his mind and Rush's in order to locate the other man, but he didn't dare.

His weapon at his shoulder, Young edged forward into the opaque white cloud. He felt James fall in at his side, her muscles shaking with tension as they advanced, eyes

narrowed, tracing the bulky shape of monitors in the dimness, trying to orient themselves.

Visibility was no more than three feet in front of his face.

Young scanned the smoke, looking for the long, angular outline of the last Nakai, for the unsettling bend of its narrow limbs.

He didn't see it, or Rush, until he was practically on top of them.

Rush was draped on top of the monitor bank in a heart stopping, lifeless sprawl, one hand trailing toward the floor. Beneath him, the touch-screens and keyboards were dark and dead. The final Nakai was standing over him, reaching forward, one hand at its own head, its fingers over a small metallic receiver while the other hand pressed against a transmitter affixed to Rush's temple.

It looked up at him as he approached, its black eyes unreadable, hissing softly as its fingers tightened on the device.

It was sacrificing its last moments, its last *seconds* to transmit as much information as possible to its crewmates. Not just on this ship, but possibly on the others as well.

Young didn't hesitate. He and James fired at the same time and it fell back into the mist.

Young darted forward, shoving his gun in James' direction as he reached out to rip the device off Rush's temple. He threw it aside, and then, ignoring the pain in his forearms and back, he slid his arms carefully beneath Rush as James covered him, scanning the corners of the room watchfully.

As soon as Young touched the other man, the pain behind his eyes intensified, despite the block he was still maintaining. A strange ache flowered in his lungs.

Rush was an absolute deadweight, his head falling back, his hair fanning out, as Young pulled him off the monitor bank.

With James right behind him, they emerged back into the cleaner air of the corridor, into the midst of another firefight. He dropped into a crouch and laid Rush out on the deck plating next to Eli, who was kneeling against the wall, still coughing, his head down, curled into himself. Telford, his eyes still streaming from the gas, had joined Dunning, Varro, and Scott where they were arrayed across the corridor.

Young's hand closed around Chloe's upper arm and he pulled her in close. "You've got to find us a path," he shouted over the roar of the weapons. "We can't stay here."

She nodded, pulling out the lifesigns detector.

"Prepare to fall back," Young roared. "Eli," he said. "Up. Let's go." Young pulled off his mask and moved to pick up Rush again, but Greer had beaten him to it.

"I've got him," the sergeant said. "You're bleeding all over the damn place."

Young nodded. He'd probably last about all of three minutes carrying the other man before he passed out himself. He grabbed his weapon and joined Chloe on point, watching their progress on the lifestreams detector.

"We need somewhere to regroup," Young said. "Maybe—"

The overhead lights flickered, briefly plunging them into darkness.

Then came the unmistakable hum of the drive and sensation of Destiny jumping into FTL.

Volker and Brody.

Behind them, the attacking Nakai released a synchronized shriek of anger, surging forward aggressively, forcing Scott, Telford, Varro and Dunning to jog backward as they fired, trying to stay ahead of the advancing group. Chloe ducked around a corner and they all followed, using the limited cover to take out most of their pursuit.

Ahead and to their left was the long, open room that Brody had converted to a distillery. That seemed to be Chloe's target.

Young motioned Greer and Eli to go ahead and then turned back to join the other four in mopping up their remaining pursuers.

After a few minutes, the coast was clear.

Telford ducked forward to grab two more weapons from the fallen Nakai while Young reached out, steadying Scott as the younger man swayed, one hand coming around to gingerly touch the soaked material of Brody's shirt that was still wrapped around his shoulder.

"Almost there," Young murmured to him, feeling none too steady himself.

"Fuck, Everett," Telford whispered, his voice hoarse from the gas. "How the *hell* are you two even standing? You both look like shit."

"Yeah," Young snapped tightly as they turned, following Chloe to the workroom she had chosen. "What the *hell* happened to Rush?"

"We put him out," Telford said shortly. "He was losing it."

"I see," Young growled. "And you just happened to be carrying *tranquilizers* around with you? That's convenient."

They passed through the door, and Scott closed it behind them, again removing the control crystal.

Young's eyes flicked over to see Greer put Rush on one of the tables and then move two fingers to Rush's throat watching him intently.

"What exactly are you implying?" Telford hissed. "I got it from *TJ* when she came into the gateroom before they arrived. I probably saved not just his sanity, but also his *life* by putting him out. You think the Nakai would have—"

"Congratulations," Young snarled, stepping forward. "I'll be sure to put a commendation in your file right after I fucking write you up for *assaulting* a *civilian* whom you were charged with *protecting* you son of a *bitch*—"

"Are you *insane*?" Telford asked, the volume of his voice rising.

"What the *fuck* did you *give him*?" Young shouted, stepping forward.

"Whoa," Varro said, moving in, both hands extended. "Guys, this is not the place to hash this out—"

"*Ativan*," Telford said, his hands open. "Jesus Christ, Everett, I gave him a truckload of *Ativan*. *TJ* requested it from Earth, it's perfectly safe—"

"You don't know how the *hell* he's going to react to *that*—" Young said. "He's not even half—"

He stopped himself.

The room was silent.

Slowly, Greer moved forward.

"Half *what*?" Telford said, his eyes narrowing.

Young looked away.

"Half. *What*," Telford said again.

"Leave it alone, David," Young replied, his voice low and dangerous as he looked back at Telford, pinning the man with his stare.

Telford threw up his hands, turning away, a frustrated sigh escaping in a hiss between his teeth. He paced away a few steps, his head bowed, before turning around to look at Young.

No one spoke for a moment.

"Chloe," Young said, recovering his equilibrium somewhat. "Let me see that lifesigns detector." He took the monitor from her, studying it for a moment before looking up. "By my count, there are about twenty of these things left on board. They're mostly in one of two locations—either on the bridge, or approaching the FTL drive, likely with the intent of shutting it down."

He frowned, watching the pale blue dots he knew to be Brody and Volker staying just ahead of the advancing Nakai.

He fought down a sudden wave of dizziness and moved to sit in one of the empty chairs.

Telford glared at him in irritation, his arms crossed defensively over his chest.

God, Young felt terrible.

"You okay, sir?" Greer asked quietly. Young looked up at him, taking in Greer's split lip. The sergeant had also been clipped by an energy blast—the shoulder of his uniform was singed and blackened and a still-damp stain of blood had soaked through his jacket.

"Yeah," Young said shortly, but over Greer's words he could hear a dull buzzing in his ears.

His heart had started to beat wildly in his chest.

His vision began to gray at the edges.

He didn't understand.

He'd been injured, certainly but—this—something was rapidly going wrong.

Very wrong.

He couldn't maintain his block with Rush and he let it fracture and then fall entirely—

*Rush.*

Fucking *of course* it was *Rush*.

The other man's mind was a mess of memories that weren't his. Rush was dreaming, or delirious, or just mentally misfiring—but all the same, he was struggling desperately to claw his way back to consciousness because something was *wrong* with him, something was—

Young shot to his feet, nearly overbalancing, and maddeningly, Varro was holding him up, holding *him back*, and Rush was *not breathing*.

"Greer," Young gasped, looking at the scientist.

Greer was on his feet immediately, like he knew *exactly* what was happening. The sergeant reached out, tipping Rush's head back, opening his airway, watching him intently for any kind of movement.

Young tore away from Varro, joining Greer, the room spinning unsteadily around him as the sergeant opened Rush's mouth, did a quick finger sweep, and then performed two careful rescue breaths.

"He's not *breathing*?" Scott murmured, appearing abruptly next to Young, grabbing his elbow, guiding him down to sit as his knees gave way.

"I thought we were *done* with this," Eli whispered, sounding utterly miserable.

Greer had his fingers at Rush's throat. "He's still got a pulse," Greer said. "Come on, Doc," he murmured. "Quit it."

"This happened *before*?" Young demanded.

"Yeah," Greer said shortly. "Couple of times, right after he took the drug. It never got this far before we caught it though, and it hasn't been a problem for hours. I thought we were *done* with this *shit*." He tipped Rush's head back again and breathed into his lungs twice more.

"Maybe it's the tear gas," Eli said thickly, his arms wrapped across his chest, his eyes bloodshot, his face pale. "He can't cough—"

Young tried to fight the strained feeling in his lungs and tried to focus on keeping his *own* breathing steady.

Telford came forward, his face a neutral mask as he addressed Greer. "Let's do the jacket thing," he murmured quietly. Greer looked up at him, the sergeant's expression just as icy as he followed Telford's example, quickly pulling his jacket off, balling it up with Telford's and then lifting Rush to slide the material under his shoulders so that his head tipped back slightly, keeping his airway open.

"Seems to help," Telford muttered shortly, opening his hands defensively before retreating back away from Young's steady glare.

"Okay," Scott said abruptly as Young fought back another wave of dizziness and Greer leaned forward again, "everybody back off, lets give them some space here."

Young reached forward, his hand closing over Rush's shoulder, as his mind opened, trying to sense the scientist's thoughts. An array of images stirred up by the Nakai swirled into his mind from Rush's subconscious, most of them not his own, but *given* to him by Destiny, full of pain and disease and the abandoned *dying*—

//Come on, genius,// Young projected, trying to stay conscious through the disorientation and the pain he was getting from the other man, and—god, it was already so *difficult* and Rush wasn't even *awake* yet. Not even remotely *close* to consciousness.

After a few minutes, the sense of strain eased, and the room stopped spinning.

"He's breathing on his own," Greer said, sounding shaken. "*Finally*. Jesus Christ, Doc."

Young dropped his face into his right hand, his left curling in a fist around the loose material of Rush's jacket cuff. He stayed like that for a few seconds, then looked up at his team.

Telford looked back at Young, his arms crossed over his chest, his expression closed. "Let me take Greer, Varro, and Dunning." His eyes flicked up behind Young. "And maybe Scott. We'll move on the bridge. You and Chloe get Eli and Rush to the infirmary. If we don't make it, you can assemble another team from volunteers in the mess and give it another shot."

Young's eyes flicked over to Eli.

The young man was leaning against the table near Rush's feet, his skin chalky, his eyes a horrible, bloodshot red.

Like Wray's had been.

Eli was looking down at Rush. As Young watched, he brought the sleeve of his sweatshirt up to his nose, surreptitiously wiping away a trickle of blood.

*Shit*. He should have known right away. They'd tortured him.

Young shut his eyes.

He did *not* want to be stuck in the infirmary while they had an active foothold situation still in progress. But—they needed Eli. They needed him to fix the computer system and now that they were back at FTL that, *certainly*, was priority number one.

Young looked up at Telford and nodded shortly.

Telford nodded back.

typeset by elementals  
in Raleway public domain font by Matt McInerney