

# FORCE OVER DISTANCE

cleanwhiteroom

Book Two

## Chapter Thirty Three

The muscles of Young's arms and chest were burning torturously; his abraded forearms felt like they were on fire as he carried Rush through dimly lit corridors.

Injuries and blood loss and exhaustion would have made the trek difficult under normal circumstances, but with Rush's damaged, painful thoughts firing randomly against his own, with the headache that physical contact brought into sharp relief—it was nearly impossible.

Roughly thirty yards from the infirmary Young collapsed to his knees, barely managing to control his fall into something that resembled an unbalanced but purposeful crouch.

"Colonel," Chloe whispered, turning back in a swirl of dark hair, her hands outstretched as she knelt, steadying Rush as Young laid him on the deck plating. She tipped the scientist's head back.

"No," Young said. "It's not him. Not this time. This time it was me."

Chloe looked up at him.

"He's still breathing," Young clarified, his voice ragged.

Behind Chloe, Eli bent over, his hand on the wall.

"Chloe—" Young ground out, pointing.

Chloe whirled as Eli threw up what little gray paste still remained in his stomach, his outstretched hand pressed against the wall, his nose streaming blood.

"It's okay," Chloe whispered, hand on Eli's shoulder, her eyes on the lifesigns detector she still held. "We're almost there."

"If only that meant my day would end," Eli replied, pressing the bloodied sleeve of his gray sweatshirt to his nose.

"One step at a time," Chloe whispered. "One step at a time."

Young shut his eyes, trying to recover his equilibrium. He should have insisted that Scott accompany him, but the lieutenant had been adamant about continuing, and Telford would need all the help he could get to successfully take the bridge.

"Can you put him in a fireman's carry?" Chloe whispered, looking at Rush.

Young shook his head, his elbows resting on his knees as he held his throbbing arms directly in front of him. He'd already considered Chloe's suggestion, but with Rush's

breathing as tenuous as it was, it was risky moving him at all, let alone putting him in some kind of cross-shoulder grip.

//Okay, genius,// he projected into the dark, unfocused space of Rush's consciousness, //last stretch.//

He clenched his jaw and pulled Rush off the floor, letting the other man's head fall back over his arm, trying to keep his airway as open as possible as he stood in an awkward deadlift.

"Let's go," Young whispered between clenched teeth.

They crossed the final expanse of corridor until they found themselves outside the sealed infirmary doors.

Chloe rapped pale knuckles against the metal, Eli's arm over her shoulder.

"TJ," she said quietly, her mouth close to the door, trying to call through the metal with her low, melodic projection. "It's *us*. It's Chloe. Open the door."

Eli reached out and gave a shave and a haircut rap for good measure.

Rush was slipping out of his grip, and with a blaze of agony, Young readjusted his hold, leaning back, his hand curling around Rush's shoulder.

A complicated series of knocks came back, which Young recognized as Morse code.

*Please confirm.*

Chloe looked at him uncertainly.

"It's Morse code," he said, grimacing as he again adjusted Rush in his grip, the scientist's head heavy against his shoulder. "Tap back S.O.S."

Chloe did so.

After a few seconds, the door opened to reveal TJ, standing with an assault rifle in hand, her hair blue-white in the dimness. When she saw them, she immediately lowered her weapon, stepping aside.

"Oh god," TJ murmured quietly, her eyes sweeping over Rush, before her gaze slid sideways to take in Eli and Chloe. "All of you to the back. What *happened*? Was he injured?" Her tone was quick and sharp as she rapidly wound her way through several civilian crew members who were seated on cots, waiting out the fighting as she guided them toward the back of the infirmary.

"Long story, but no, he wasn't physically hurt," Young said hoarsely, nearly buckling under the strain of carrying Rush. "He was drugged though. Telford gave him

something that he snagged from your med bag in the gate room. Look, TJ, he's stopped breathing," Young turned back to Eli, "how many times now?"

"Four," Eli answered, the word thick, muffled by his sleeve as he slid behind a computer terminal. "Four times."

"*Four*," Young repeated for emphasis.

"Something he got from *my* bag?" TJ asked, as they rounded a corner, passing into one of the back rooms. "Do you know what it was?"

"Ativan, I think."

"Well, that could do it," TJ said quietly. "It's a respiratory depressant, and he's been pretty sensitive to sedatives in the past."

"Yeah, he also inhaled a bunch of tear gas."

"Any coughing?" TJ asked with a frown as she grabbed her stethoscope from a table.

"No," Young replied.

He carefully laid Rush out on the gurney she indicated and staggered back, taking a deep breath.

Chloe appeared at his elbow, steadying him.

Together they watched TJ hook up monitors, start an IV, start oxygen, take vitals—

"Is there anything I can do?" Chloe asked softly.

"You could grab me some blankets," TJ murmured.

Chloe vanished.

"Are you okay?" TJ asked quietly, looking up at him with shadowed eyes. "There's blood all over your jacket."

"Mostly," Young said. "I took a dart a few hours ago, and—well you know that, you pulled it out of my back. I'm mostly okay."

"Mostly," TJ repeated skeptically, watching him carefully.

"Yeah, look, I'll explain later, but I'm fine for now. I've got to go—"

"You're going *nowhere* until I clear you," TJ said.

"TJ this is a *foothold* situation. I can't stay here. I won't. I just want to know—" he broke off, gesturing toward Rush.

She pursed her lips, clearly unhappy. "He's got a fever," she said quietly, "and I've seen his vitals look better. He's not breathing very well, and his blood pressure is too low."

"Bottom line?" Young asked her.

"Bottom line is that he's not stable."

"Well *make* him stable then," Young snapped.

TJ looked up at him, her eyes wide the dim light.

He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. "Look, I've got to go."

"I think you should stay," TJ said quietly. "You're in no shape to go, and Rush needs you here. Let someone else—"

"There *is* no one else, TJ. Telford is taking the bridge, the rest of the crew is in the mess, but Brody and Volker are out there with *no* support. They're *civilians*. Someone's got to go get them and there's *no one else* available, all right? You think I *want* to do this? This is the *last* thing I want to do. But I'm sure as *hell* not going to let Brody and Volker be *killed* because fucking *Rush* needs me to hold his fucking *hand*. Are we clear on that?"

TJ looked at him in shock.

He realized that he was leaning forward into her personal space and she had stepped back, away from the gurney, her hands open, her expression briefly pained before closing down into something unreadable.

"We're clear, sir," she said, her tone neutral, her face nearly expressionless.

It was her best defense—the only one she ever permitted herself, and he knew it well—that face, that voice.

He pulled back, taking a deep breath, pressing a shaking hand to his forehead. "I'm sorry, TJ. I am. But right now I have to *go*."

"Hey." The word was sharp, snapping across the dim air, and Young had to look away from TJ over to the doorway to identify the speaker.

It was Eli.

"Don't worry about it," Eli said. "I brought the internal sensors online. Volker and Brody made it to the mess through the bulkheads." His voice was flat, nearly unrecognizable.

Chloe hovered next to him, gingerly draping a blanket over his shoulders.

"You brought the sensors online?" Young asked. "Was that a good idea?"

"I didn't open ship-wide access, they're ported to the infirmary console. I cleared them earlier." Eli said shortly, "in the CI room, before they—" his throat closed briefly. "Before they broke through. Telford's regrouping at the armory nearest the bridge."

"Okay," Young said quietly.

"So you're going to stay?" Eli asked.

Young had to make an effort not to snap at him.

He took another deep breath, trying to relax, trying to shove back the slow, subtle creep of Rush's personality into his own.

It was easier when he was calm.

"Yeah," he managed finally. "For now, at least."

"Great," Eli said, his tone sarcastic as he turned. "I'll be twenty feet in this direction."

Chloe looked worriedly after him before coming forward to pile several blankets on the foot of Rush's gurney.

"Do you," she asked nervously, looking at Young, angling her chin subtly upward. "Do you want me to go back out there?"

Young considered it.

"I could—take the lifesigns detector."

She had been incredibly useful.

"I could back up Telford's team."

She was also a *kid* with no training to speak of, who had been compromised repeatedly and profoundly by the Nakai, and who, even now, was so *afraid* of what she was offering that she was trembling, subtly, all over.

"No, kiddo," Young said quietly. "You're done for the day, I hope. Stay with Eli—he could use some company. Maybe you can give him a hand."

Her entire stance relaxed.

"Crazy alien math skills do not translate to writing computer code in Ancient," Chloe said ruefully. "But sure. I'll do what I can."

Against his will he turned back to TJ and Rush.

TJ was leaning over the scientist penlight in hand as she pulled up first one eyelid, then the other.

"Help me with his jacket, will you?" she asked, as she started to ease it off his shoulders.

Young slowly walked over to the edge of the bed, lifting Rush's shoulders slightly as she pulled the material out from under him, leaving him in his thin cotton T-shirt.

This was wrong.

*Wrong.*

Injured, semi-conscious, mostly dead, Rush had always, *always* fought him. Fought *everyone*. But now—this terrible, *prolonged* stillness—it was too much for him to take. It added to the feeling that instead of the person he knew, he was looking at someone who had been—

Ruined.

Expertly, TJ started an IV, taping the flexible cannula in place, hanging a drip from a hook behind the bed.

"So why the Ativan?" TJ asked, her voice clipped, professional.

"What?" Young snapped, distracted.

"Why did they give him Ativan?" she repeated, the words slower, as soothing as she could make them.

He *hated* that tone of voice. Hated the implication that he was brittle, that he was about to snap.

"To protect his mind from the computer virus," he replied carefully. "He um, he gave it to himself, actually."

"I have a hard time picturing *that*," TJ murmured, absently smoothing Rush's hair back from his forehead. "So do we need to keep him under? Until the virus is out of the CPU?" It was clear from the way she asked the question that this would be her preference.

"I don't know," Young said, shutting his eyes, driving the heel of one hand into his eye socket. "I'm not sure. I mean, he's *already* completely out of it—can you really give him anything else? Safely?"

"Yeah," TJ said quietly. "We can put him on something with a short half-life. If we run into any problems we just take him off the drip and he comes out of it within a few minutes."

"All right," Young said. "Let's do that. For now."

"I'm going to go mix it up," TJ said quietly. "You want to sit with him for a minute, then I'll take a look at your back?"

"Sure," Young said. He paced over to stand beside Rush as she vanished around the corner.

He looked down.

Fuck.

*Fuck.*

He looked away.

Everything was going to be fine.

It was.

He looked back. Rush's hair was fanned out over the pillow, his skin terrifyingly pale in the dim blue light, his hair and eyelashes a dark contrast with the pallor of his skin, with the whiteness of the sheets. His hands—his hands were still and open.

Who was he kidding?

There was no way, *no way*, he could stay here right now.

He turned away abruptly, leaving Rush alone.

The man was hooked up to the monitors. He would be fine. They would know if he wasn't.

He walked back into the main room. TJ glanced over at him but said nothing. Eli shot him a guarded, quiet look from bloodied eyes.

Young tried to calm his breathing, tried to unwind, tried to control the terrible *restive* feeling in his hands and just—relax.

It wasn't working.

Rush was coming forward again in his mind. He wasn't sure *why* exactly, but it seemed likely to be a combination of things. First of all, it was now extremely obvious to Young that when Rush had repaired his mind, whether he had intended to or not, he'd left a lot more in Young's consciousness than simple neural architecture. Second, it seemed likely that Rush had been *actively* doing something to prevent his less charming personality traits from completely overrunning Young's mind. Now that he was out of commission, they were becoming increasingly difficult to resist. Certainly the AI/Rush combination had helped him out for a time but there was still an element of bleed-over. Third, Young suspected that even though he didn't intend to do so, he was probably subconsciously pulling the other man's thought patterns forward.

He couldn't help it.



He *missed* him.

Young sat down near Eli and Chloe, watching them work.

"Take your shirt off," TJ said shortly as she walked past him to the rear of the room, carrying another IV bag. "I need to look at your back."

Slowly, gingerly, Young complied.

Chloe got up to help him, easing the shreds of Volker's shirtsleeves off the still bleeding injury, assisting him with his undershirt, hissing quietly between her teeth in sympathy.

After a few minutes of work they got it off, and Young shivered in the cool air of the infirmary as he waited for TJ, his bloody, ruined jacket and bloody, ruined undershirt balled in his hands in front of him.

TJ returned with a suture kit and a bottle of ethanol. When she saw his forearms she stopped short.

"What did you *do* to your *arms*?" she asked, horrified.

"I had to pull out of some restraints," Young said tiredly, feeling more than a little lightheaded.

"Ah," she said, walking forward to set the suture kit on the table next to Young. "I can see that." After inspecting his back for a few moments she began to carefully clean and disinfect the small puncture wound just beneath his shoulder blade while Chloe held the sterile suture tray, quietly assisting.

They were only a few feet from Eli, who was now wrapped in a blanket, hunched in front of one of the monitors in the infirmary. His hands shook slightly as he slowly worked his way through a bottle of TJ's electrolyte solution while scanning through lines of code. He had the same intensity of focus he'd displayed earlier in the gateroom, except this time he wasn't wearing his headphones.

He also wasn't talking.

At all.

No commentary, no banter, no occasional references to obscure science fiction films.

Nothing.

Young knew by the way TJ's hands kept periodically stilling on his back that she, too, was watching the younger man.

"Eli," TJ said finally, her fingers careful and cool over Young's shoulder. "Do you want some chocolate? I think we got some from—"

"No."

"Okay," TJ whispered.

Young winced as he felt her put a single stitch in the small wound in his back before reapplying a sterile pressure dressing that she wrapped tightly, and then securely taped in a complicated pattern over his shoulder. She came around his side, her gaze dropping to the mess of Young's abraded, bruised forearms. "This is going to really hurt."

"Yeah," Young said. "I know."

She shook her head. "Would you consider—"

"No," he said quietly. "Do what you've gotta do."

He watched her pull out a bottle of Brody's ultrapure ethanol and a stack of bandages and gauze.

Eli sniffed quietly, and Young's eyes flicked over in time to see him press a piece of bloody gauze to his nose. TJ watched him as well for a few seconds longer before looking back and twisting the top off the bottle of ethanol.

She grabbed Young's right hand, holding it in hers.

Young stopped her before she could start dousing his arm in the stuff, with his hand on her wrist.

"He's out, right? Really, *really* out?" his voice was barely audible.

She nodded. "He shouldn't feel a thing. I just started him on the anesthetic from Earth, plus he's still got a lot of Ativan on board."

"I don't want him feeling this. I don't want it to confuse him."

"He's not feeling *anything* right now." TJ's voice was equally quiet.

"Okay," Young said smiling wanly at her. "Do your worst."

He watched in horrified fascination as she poured the clear, cool liquid over his forearm, turning it quickly, covering every centimeter of abraded skin. For an instant, there was no pain and *then—*

He stopped breathing, his eyes tearing with the intensity of it. Surely there was *nothing* that hurt this much that he could ever remember experiencing except for maybe trying

to pull Rush out of the ship when it *really* didn't fucking want to let him go, nothing that he could remember being this *acute* for this *long*—

"Breathe," TJ said, her voice low and quiet, and then, for god's *sake*, she was *rubbing* at the deeper cuts, working the alcohol into the abraded skin and it was really a mistake to *watch* this, what had he been *thinking*—

"*Breathe*," TJ said louder, right in his ear, unscrewing the top from a tube of antibiotic gel and liberally covering his forearm with it before rapidly wrapping his arm in gauze.

And then, it was over, a clean, white bandage covering the mess that he'd made of his right arm.

"Shit," Young breathed shakily. "Let's uh—hold off on the other one. Do it later. What do you say?"

"Sorry Colonel," she murmured. "No deal."

"I'll give you my share of the potato chips."

She smiled, reaching out to take his left hand in hers.

"My fruit ration. For a *month*."

"Sorry," she said, grimacing as she dumped the ethanol over the other arm. Again there was the brief image of clear liquid pouring over injuries with no pain, and then—

He opened his eyes to find himself slumped forward over the table, his head resting against his right bicep and, *mercifully*, looking at a finished bandaging job. TJ was rubbing his back.

"Hey," she said quietly. "You okay?"

"Yeah," he said, his voice hoarse. "Fine. Sorry."

"I keep some spare uniforms in the back," she said quietly. "One second."

Young watched Eli, who was squinting at the monitor in front of him with pained, bloodshot eyes.

After a few moments, Young's radio crackled, causing both him and Eli to start in surprise. He raised his eyebrows at the first break in radio silence for hours.

"This is Telford. We have taken the bridge. I repeat, the bridge is secure. Twelve Nakai remain on the ship, located near the starboard FTL drive. We are currently in pursuit."

Young grabbed the radio, a shock of pain reverberating up both arms as he did so. "This is Young," he said, broadcasting on all channels. "All personnel are ordered to remain where they are unless already in pursuit of the Nakai."

"Thank god," TJ whispered as she returned, shirt and jacket in hand. "I expect I'm going to be getting a lot of wounded?"

Young nodded shortly. "From what I saw, Reynolds, Wray, and Barnes were the worst, but there may be more."

"We've been lucky so far," TJ murmured, "all things considered—"

Eli froze for a moment then continued typing.

The break in his motion was not lost on Young or TJ.

"Eli," TJ said quietly, "do you want—"

"No," he snapped, rounding on her with his terrible, bloodshot eyes. "I do not *want* anything right now, all right? I'm fine. I need to work so just—leave me *alone*." He turned back to the monitor.

"Eli," Chloe whispered.

TJ's expression cracked briefly, her hand coming to her mouth as she turned her head away from both Eli and Young. After a few seconds, she turned back with a deep breath, her face calm and composed.

"I'm going to go prep for—" she broke off with a vague hand gesture and compressed lips as she turned away from them, heading over to the pharmacy, beginning to pull IV bags off the shelves, piling them in easy reach on a small table.

Young watched her for a moment before turning back to Eli.

"Something on your mind?" he asked, making a concerted effort to keep his voice mild.

Eli stopped working again, turning to look at him in overt incredulity.

"What the *fuck* are you doing?" Eli asked.

Chloe looked up from her own monitor abruptly, then just as quickly dropped her eyes.

Young raised his eyebrows. "I'm not sure what you mean," he replied carefully.

"What the hell are you *sitting here with me* for?"

"I'm—"

"No. You know what? I don't want to hear it."

"Eli," Chloe said again, her voice low.

"Don't talk to me."

"*Eli.*" Young snapped. "Come on. This isn't you. What happened?"

"This *isn't me*? What, you think that at heart I'm some kind of happy-go-lucky *idiot* who just—"

"No," Young growled, cutting him off. "At heart, I think you're a *nice, perceptive kid*. So. What. Happened."

"Nothing. Look. It's just bothering me to have you here, so can you please stop watching me—"

"Eli. Look. I'll lay it out for you. You were tortured. You can't expect—"

"Yeah. My point, since you're *just not getting it*, is that I'm really not the person you should be sitting with right now."

Young felt his expression close off. "Rush?" he asked guardedly.

"Yes," Eli said, his voice cracking with strain. "*Rush*. Go sit with Rush."

"I don't think that's the best use of my time at the moment," Young said, forcing his face into a neutral expression, the muscles of his jaw clenching.

"Big surprise there," Eli said. "Do you have any idea, *any idea at all* what happened in that room?" By the end of the sentence, his voice had dropped to a pained whisper.

"Eli—I know you were tortured—"

"No," Eli snapped coldly. "Before that. *Before* they came through."

Young felt a sudden surge of surprise, and struggled not to let it show on his face. "I saw some of it," he replied, taping his temple with two fingers. "I know you convinced him to put himself under."

"Before that." Eli looked away. "Before he started talking to you out loud, if that's even what that was. How much did you see?"

"None of it," Young answered. "You want to—tell me about it?" He tried to force down his own dread as much as possible. He did *not* want to hear this right now. But he had the feeling that Eli—

That Eli needed to say it.

Beside Eli, Chloe was entirely still, her eyes down, her mouth pressed into a thin line.

"He just—" Eli said, looking away. "He really—"

Eli stopped.

Young stayed quiet.

"Telford told me to run, you know? But when I looked back, no one was following me. I could see Greer and Rush in the hall, and I could tell that Greer was having a hard time with him, so I— I went back. Rush was fighting him, trying to get back to the gate room." Eli took a deep breath, bringing his voice back under control.

"Then the Nakai started to come through. I could tell because Telford was firing and yelling at us to go, but Rush—*still* wouldn't stop, and then he started *screaming* in Ancient and they, they couldn't tell what he was saying, but I—I could. I knew."

"What was he saying?" Young asked.

"Your name," Eli whispered. "Over and over and *over* again, the pronunciation is different, but it was—unmistakable. And when Telford shut the door, trapping you in the gate room he—"

Maddeningly, Eli stopped there.

"He what?" Young murmured quietly.

"He *lost* his *shit*. Before, he had just been trying to get *away* from Greer but he started *attacking* him, attacking Telford, and the Nakai were prying open the door, but he—just wouldn't come with us. They had to *restrain* him. With those plastic things that you guys carry. In the middle of the hall. And the Nakai were opening the door—but he just—*did not get it*. He wouldn't stop. Telford and Greer had to *carry* him to the CI room. He fought them the entire way."

Young leaned forward against the table, one hand coming up to grip his temples. He didn't want to look at Eli. Didn't want to see his horrible, bloodshot eyes in his chalk-pale face.

"And *then*—" Eli continued, his voice breaking, "when we got to the room, it took Telford and Greer *together* half an hour to talk him down. *Half an hour* just to get him to stop screaming and fighting the restraints, and another fifteen minutes before he said *anything* to us that we could understand."

"Eli—"

"And you know what he said?" Eli asked. "He looked straight at *Telford* and he said, 'I apologize. Please don't sedate me, David. I can still help you'." Eli paused. "How *fucked up* is that?"

"Eli, I don't think—"

"I mean, how do you think he knew? Do you think the AI could have told him that Telford had the drug? Do you think he just *guessed*? The entire time he just seemed so *out* of it and then he comes up with *that*? From fucking *nowhere*? God."

"Look," Young said, the words grinding out of him like gravel, "Eli—"

"And *then*," Eli continued relentlessly, "Greer cuts him free and they get him up so that he can help me and he just looks over my shoulder at these lines of code I'm going through and starts saying shit that *doesn't make sense*. Just single words as I'm scrolling. Weapons. Hydroponics. Dialing. Sensors. And so I ask him what he's doing and *he can't tell me*. It's only later that I realize that he was *naming the systems that I was clearing*. Naming *them* by looking at nearly featureless lines of Ancient code. So *we could bring them online*. But Telford made him leave me alone. Dragged him across the room and put him in front of a monitor. But he didn't know what to do with it."

"Yeah," Young said weakly.

"And so *then* when you woke up, he was clearly just so *relieved*—"

"Eli," Young said. "Right now I just *can't*—" he broke off, holding up a hand, looking away.

"Yeah," Eli whispered. "I can't either. So if you really want to help me, colonel, you can go back there, and you can fucking hold his hand for twenty minutes because even though it won't do a damn thing for *him*, it will just—make *me* feel better."

"Okay," Young whispered, getting to his feet, looking down at Eli with his red-rimmed, shadowed eyes. "I can do that."

Eli nodded, his eyes already back on the screen in front of him.

Young squeezed his shoulder through the blanket as he turned, heading for the back room of the infirmary.

For a moment, he leaned against the door frame, pressing his aching temple to cool metal. He grabbed a chair, ignoring the pain in his forearms as he lifted it and carried it a few steps over to the side of Rush's bed.

He sat.

He shouldn't be here.

He should out helping Telford, or transporting wounded from the mess, or—any one of a thousand things that would be *useful and* that would help bring this god-awful situation to a *close*.

The room was oppressively quiet.

He didn't *want* to be here.

He didn't want to look at Rush like this, quiet and pale and shut down and split apart by fucking firewalls and chemically locked down—

"Hey genius," he said quietly, his wavering voice cutting off his own spiraling thoughts. He wrapped his hand around Rush's slack fingers. They felt unnaturally warm beneath his grip, and he pressed a hand to Rush's forehead. "Yup," he said. "That's all you need, isn't it? A fucking fever."

He sat there for a moment, tracing two fingers over the ring of bruises that braceletted Rush's wrist. It looked like Greer and Telford had done it properly, with the restraints over his jacket and tight, right at the joint.

"We match," Young murmured. "But yours are a bit more understated than mine."

The talking was lifting the oppressive quiet in the room, so he continued.

"Two things," he murmured, unnecessarily smoothing Rush's hair back. "You're not going to like either one, so be prepared."

He continued to run his fingers gently through Rush's hair, carefully working out subtle tangles.

"Number one, you're on medical leave, effective immediately. I know you hate that, but you can just deal with it."

"Number two, you were so full of shit about that whole 'people kiss each other all the time' thing, because your abnormally well-adjusted computational alter ego, or whoever he was, *definitely* tried to put the moves on me, and he was only *thirty percent* you. So I'm figuring you must like me. A lot, actually."

The room was silent.

"I said no, though," Young continued conversationally. "Even though he is, arguably, better looking than you. And more informative. And nicer." He closed his hands around Rush's left hand and wrist. "Well, to be fair, it's not that he's better looking, he's just more like—you on a really good day. And healthy. With better clothes. Though, presumably, you'd choose those same clothes, if you could."

Young chewed on the inside of his lip, looking away, looking down.

"So you're going to be fine, you know? Eli is—" he broke off briefly. "Eli is going to find this virus and get rid of it, and then we're going to put you in the chair, and Destiny's



going to fix you, or maybe *you're* going to fix you—I was kind of unclear on that part. And *then*—”

He broke off briefly as his throat closed.

“Then after that, I'm going to finally let Eli put on that movie night that he wanted to do. I think it was going to be Star Wars, or Star Trek 4, *or something*, and then I'm going to *make you go* and I'm going to just enjoy the hell out of watching you be a complete jerk about it and refuse to eat popcorn on principle for the first hour of the thing.”

“Also, on principle, I'm going to force you to *stay* on medical leave for longer than is actually medically necessary, and you're just going to be viciously irritated by the entire thing and make TJ *miserable*. And you're going to help Brody make a ring for Chloe but you're going to pretend that you don't want to. And you're just going to intimidate the *hell* out of Chloe and Eli when you start going over their quantum mechanics homework, but secretly you're going to be happy about it. And we're going to have no battles for at least a week. And Telford's going to stay in his goddamned quarters. And the AI is going to leave everyone alone.”

He ran his fingers over the white sheets, smoothing away small creases in the fabric.

“That's the plan. Don't mess it up.”

He looked away, shutting his eyes against the shimmering in his vision.

“So,” Young said quietly, when he could speak again, “sorry, genius, but you're just going to have to stay like this until we get everything secured, and locked down, and squared away, and scanned, and uninfected. Then we'll try to put you back together.”

Young spent the next ten hours assisting with the mopping up of the last few Nakai, the manual sweep of the ship for any tampering by enemy forces, transporting the wounded to the infirmary, and the coordination of the science team into shifts that would be assisting Eli as he continued to work on purging the virus. Twenty hundred hours found him on the bridge with Park and Volker.

By his count, he hadn't slept for the last thirty-six hours.

He'd been drinking TJ's electrolytes and he'd had an MRE at some point, which had helped a bit, but he was going to crash soon, and crash hard.

“So,” Park said, breaking the silence, directing her comment more at Volker than at Young. “I heard that we didn't lose anyone.”

"That's what I heard too," Volker replied. "Thank god. Although Barnes and Reynolds are in pretty bad shape. I heard that TJ gave Scott a blood transfusion." His eyes flicked surreptitiously back to Young.

Young pretended not to notice.

"Any word on—" Park's voice dropped to nothing, and she glanced back at him as well.

"Come on, Park," Young drawled tiredly. "Just ask."

"Ah—any word on Rush, colonel?"

"He's sedated until Eli can get the virus out of the mainframe."

"I talked to Brody before I came on shift," Volker said quietly. "He said they're making good progress. They've got a code to search for anomalies that Eli is finally satisfied with, apparently, and they're running it now."

"Yeah," Young said tiredly, rubbing his jaw. "It's going to take six hours and some change to run, or so I hear."

"The mainframe is a big place," Volker said quietly.

"Yeah," Young murmured.

"Colonel," Park said quietly. "You look about ready to drop. Nothing's going on at the moment. Why don't you go get some rest?"

Young was about to reply when the door to the bridge hissed open. Telford entered, his appearance sharp. He'd changed his uniform, and looked at least marginally rested, though his eyes were still red-rimmed from the tear gas earlier in the day. Night. Whatever.

"Everett," he said. "Hey. You look like shit."

"David," Young replied neutrally. "You look better."

"Yeah. I'm here to relieve you. TJ sent me. She respectfully *requests* you to report to the infirmary."

Young sighed, and pushed himself to his feet, swaying slightly as he did so. Telford stepped in to steady him.

"We need to talk," Telford said as he grabbed Young's elbow, his voice low next to Young's ear, too quiet to be picked up by Volker or Park, "about what the *hell* is going on between you and Rush."

Young pulled away. "Not now," he said quietly.

"Later then," Telford said, his tone low, but his voice hard.

"Later," Young confirmed.

He made his way to the infirmary in a half-daze of exhaustion. When he got there, TJ was busy with Barnes, so he headed toward the back room, noting with relief that many fewer beds were occupied now than had been earlier in the day.

He gave Scott and Chloe a half-hearted wave as he passed them.

As he came through the doorway into the back room, he stopped short, raising his eyebrows. Wray was curled in the chair that that Young had moved next to Rush's bed. She was holding an iPod with white headphones snaking out from it. One earbud was in her right ear and the other was in Rush's left. Her eyes were closed, but even from the doorway he could see the red rims beneath her eyelashes. She had one hand outstretched on Rush's forearm.

Young wondered if she had fallen asleep.

She opened her eyes.

It was hard to look at her.

"Hey," he said quietly.

"Hey," she whispered.

"What are you listening to?"

"Satie. Gymnopedie number one."

"Ah."

"It's my contribution," she said, her eyes closing.

"Your contribution?" he echoed. "To what?"

She her lips curved into a faint, trembling smile. Her eyes stayed closed. "If you don't already know, I'll let Eli tell you."

"Do I *want* to know?" he asked wryly, crossing his arms.

"It's very nice," she said, her eyes opening briefly and then closing again, her tone carrying a shadow of admonishment that seemed to break apart on the last word.

"You'll like it," she whispered.

They were quiet for a moment, and Young pushed away from the doorframe, coming forward to sit on the end of Wray's empty gurney.

"Do you think he can hear it?" she asked, the muscles of her face quivering subtly as she tried to hold on to her neutral expression.

No.

"Maybe," he said. "TJ's got him pretty snowed though."

"Good," Wray whispered, a tear leaking out of one closed eye. Quickly, she brought a hand up to brush it away, back into her hair, as if it had never been. "That's good."

"Yeah," Young replied quietly.

"You should sleep," Wray said, looking at him, turning her horrible, bloodshot eyes straight at him. "I'll sit with him. I'm not tired."

Young tried to suppress a shiver at her ghastly appearance. "I'm good," he said.

"Liar," Wray said faintly, but there was a smile in her voice. She turned back to Rush, closing her eyes, as if she could tell that they bothered him. "I'll wake you."

It was almost impossible to resist lying down now that he was already *sitting* on a bed. He half collapsed onto his side, his eyes shutting against his will. It felt odd, going to sleep separated from Rush by a few feet of empty air. He opened their link as wide as it would go, but picked up only darkness from Rush's mind.

He left the link open anyway as he faded into unconsciousness.

# Cultural Sensitivity

February 12, 2011

It is late, and Greer has just finished what began as an eight-hour shift, but turned into a thirty-six hour shift.

From hell.

And by 'from hell,' he means that it was a shift that included *aliens*.

Telepathic aliens.

Telepathic aliens with *guns*.

Telepathic aliens with guns and darts, and little metal devices that—whatever.

*Then* he'd done the cleanup, with the creeping through darkened hallways, hunting down the last of them, carrying the wounded, looking for evidence of compromised systems—alone, in the dark, without—

And yeah, Lisa is on shift right now and he *really* doesn't feel like going back to his cold, empty quarters alone.

Which explains, partly, why he is here.

Partly.

"Chapter five," Greer says, raising his eyebrows in Rush's direction, emphasizing the coming title. "*Redefining terms of accord: when allies become enemies*. Seriously. What's with these titles? I want to meet this—" he flips to the cover of the manual. "This 'Daniel Jackson' guy."

No response.

Greer swallows and looks back down at the page.

"Okay. Here we go. *As an active participant in gate travel, or as a member of a starship crew, or as a valued staff member at any of Stargate Command's military outposts, you may find yourself in a situation in which a previously well-intentioned individual, community—oh wait. There's a footnote. What do you think, Doc, should we look that up?*"

No response.

"You're right. Sounds like a waste of time. Continuing. —community, military organization, or state government takes hostile action against you. Please see box 5.1 for a narrative example. In most cases, such reversals of fortune are due not to legitimately hostile attitudes, but stem from misunderstandings between peoples of different backgrounds." Greer breaks off, rolling his eyes. "Thank you for that, Dr. J. That was very helpful."

Greer looks over at Rush, absently thumbing the pages of the thick, absolutely useless, "pocket" manual Telford had given him three hours ago and insisted he familiarize himself with.

Greer is under no illusions as to why he's being required to memorize every god damned checklist in *Cultural Sensitivity: your guide to minimizing violent conflict in the field*.

It's spite.

Pure and simple.

The book is a piece of garbage. He wishes Rush were awake, just so Greer could see his expression at some of these lines.

The Doc does utter disdain like no one Greer has ever met.

"You know what? I'm thinking we skip chapter five entirely. Because to have allies become enemies, you need to first have allies. Any allies *at all*."

Greer flips back to the table of contents until he finds likely looking chapter. "Chapter nine. *Peaceful solutions to hostage scenarios: escaping through empathy*. That's what we'll do next time, Doc. We'll ask the Nakai about their god damn *problems*. What do you think?"

No response.

"Yeah, I agree," Greer says. "That *is* the fucking stupidest thing I've ever heard. Okay. Here we go again. *The empathy application checklist. One: make eye contact, unless culturally inappropriate. Two: maintain a neutral facial expression, unless culturally inappropriate. Three: engage enemy in conversation and attempt to elicit personal or cultural information (to be applied in step six). Four: elicit short-term goals of enemy. Five: elicit long-term goals of enemy. Six: draw parallels between yourself and your enemy. Consider personal, societal, socioeconomic—*"

From behind him comes the sound of someone clearing his throat.

Unfortunately, Greer is almost certain that it's Colonel Young.

He turns, only to have his suspicions confirmed. The colonel is leaning in the doorway, his hands in his pockets, eyebrows raised. He's got a sort of twist to his mouth that Greer has always interpreted as a suppressed smile. Greer gets that one a lot, but he doesn't let it go to his head.

He pulls his feet off Rush's gurney and sits up.

"Colonel," Greer says, managing to keep his voice even.

He is not embarrassed to be found reading a cultural sensitivity manual to an unconscious Nicholas Rush.

He is not.

At all.

Embarrassed.

"What the hell *is* that thing?" Young asks, indicating the book with his eyes, his expression strained, drawn. He looks like he has a headache.

Greer heard from Scott, who heard from TJ, that the colonel had basically passed out last night in *Wray's* gurney. TJ had apparently put an IV into him without waking him up.

Either TJ's really good with needles, or the man had been *really* fucking tired.

Or not even tired—just unconscious.

"One of those Dr. Jackson manuals. *Colonel Telford*," he says, doing his best to turn the man's name and title into an insult, "has ordered me to memorize every checklist in the damn thing."

"Can I see it?" Young asks, reaching forward.

"Be my guest."

Young flips through it quickly, a brief flash of amusement flickering across his features.

"Poor Jackson."

"Poor *Jackson*?" Greer says. "Poor *everyone else*. There are seventy-four checklists in there."

"There's no way Jackson made these checklists." Young says, stopping somewhere in the middle of the book. "They're just based on his reports. They must be. No way does Jackson have enough time to write something like this. And if he did write it himself, I feel like it would not be in checklist form."

"You've met the guy?"

"Yeah." Young's eyes flick briefly over to Rush, his expression darkening slightly. "He's kind of like Rush, except *exactly opposite* in terms of personal style, if that makes sense."

"Um, no."

"You know," Young says, shrugging, "really good at getting shit accomplished, except he's just—extremely *nice*, and scrupulously honest and pretty much universally adored. Even *Rush* likes him, for god's sake."

"I don't know," Greer says, looking skeptically at the manual as he takes it back. "Between this guy," he shakes the book slightly, "and Rush, I think I'd choose Rush."

"Then I think it's safe to say that you're the only person on the planet who prefers *Rush* to *Jackson*," Young says, his mouth twisting again.

Greer lifts an eyebrow, watching as Young comes around the back of his chair to perch on the gurney across from Rush. He crosses his arms, looking down at the scientist with an expression that Greer has a difficult time interpreting.

"You want my chair?" Greer asks quietly.

"Can I ask you something?" Young says, still looking at Rush.

"Sure," Greer replies, his voice as gentle as he can make it.

For a long time, Young says nothing.

When he starts, he doesn't lead with a question.

"Rush is integrating with the ship," Young says, glancing at Greer. "A lot more—a lot more *fully* than anyone realized before Destiny got hit with this virus."

*Rush twisting desperately in his grip, trying to get out, trying to get away, not responding to him, not talking, just screaming—*

"Yeah," Greer says, and something in his voice must give him away because the colonel looks up at him sharply. "I—got that impression."

"Thirty percent of his cognitive capacity is now stored on the CPU, and he and the AI are—occasionally *merging*."

"*Merging*?" Greer echoes.

"Yeah," Young murmurs.

For a brief interval, they are silent.



"I've been wondering," Young says slowly, "what's going to happen to him when we go back to Earth. I've been wondering if, hypothetically, we established a stable wormhole back home—if I could shut off the CPU and then—take him back through the gate."

Oh *god*.

That sounds like a terrible idea to Greer.

"What would happen to the AI?" Greer asks quietly.

"Does it matter?" Young snaps, looking away, like he knows that it does.

"I don't know about all of these ethical questions of personhood, and—stuff," Greer says slowly, waving a hand in the air, "but I think it would matter a lot, a *whole* lot, to Rush."

"He would never forgive me," Young says quietly, "but he would be *alive*."

"Um," Greer says, but the colonel is not finished.

"And it seems like right now, with the CPU down and the AI walled off in the neural interface, maybe it would be a good idea to test what happens. To wake him up and see what he's like without that thirty percent. He might be almost normal."

"He *might* be," Greer says.

Something in his tone makes Young look up at him.

"It seems like if I'm really committed to bringing him back to Earth, I should do this. I should see what he—" Young trails off, looking like he'd rather cut off his own hand than do what he's suggesting.

Greer doesn't blame him. Something in his gut tells him that waking Rush up would be —

Horrific.

"Well," Greer says quietly, when the colonel doesn't continue. "Correct me if I'm wrong here, sir, but Rush was affected by a computer virus which came very close to—" Greer tries to find a way to say what he wants to say without it sounding too glib or too frightening. "A virus that clearly affected his thinking. He was then drugged, during which time he was cut off from the CPU and AI entirely, and then, *while unconscious*, he was interrogated by the Nakai. Any *one* of those things—"

"Yeah," Young says, looking like someone is cutting out his heart with a butter knife.

"He told us himself that he's not good with the temporal sequencing, and he was having more trouble than usual understanding the context of what was going on

before we put him out. So I think if you wake him up and he's not only cut off from the ship, but missing thirty percent of his normal—" Greer trails off, waving a hand again, letting his words fade into the silence between them.

The colonel says nothing.

"I think that when we wake him up, it should be under the most ideal circumstances that we can come up with," Greer murmurs. "And that—that's not *giving up* on the chance of getting him back to Earth, that's just giving him the best shot we can to come out of this—and be normal. As normal as he ever gets, anyway."

"He's never going to let me cut him off from the ship," Young whispers. "This might be my only chance to know if I can take him back."

"Yeah," Greer says, an edge coming into his voice, "it might be. But you might also *fuck him up for good* if you wake him without Destiny." Greer pauses and then tacks on a, "sir," for good measure.

The colonel looks up at him, smiling faintly, a real smile this time. "You talk to Telford with that mouth?"

"Always," Greer replies, smiling back.

"I spoke with Eli," Young says quietly. "He told me what happened while I was in the gateroom." The colonel's expression is locked down, but he's pale and he looks—

Miserable.

Miserable and, maybe, afraid.

"Yeah," Greer says, trying to keep his voice calm. "Yeah, it was a bit rough. But you know Eli—he's a sensitive kid."

*Rush's back arching, his muscles clenching under unbelievable tension, a wild, inhuman, continuous struggle to break free at all costs. The ceaseless, merciless, pained screaming, as if Greer and Telford were tearing him apart—*

Young looks up at him, something open, hopeful in his expression, and Greer continues.

"Yeah, I mean, I've never met anyone who can do hysterical like the Doc, but we calmed him down."

Greer has to look away so that Young can't see his eyes.

"Eli said you had to restrain him in the *hallway*."

*Telford kneeling on Rush, his full weight pressing down into Rush's back, while Eli holds his shoulders, talking to him, fast and quiet and afraid—the continuous battle to hold his arms still enough that Greer can get the plastic restraints around his wrists, trying to position them over his jacket so they won't cut him, then moving to his feet, and who would have thought that it would take three guys, each of whom outweighed Rush by at least forty pounds to hold him down and they are barely managing because he is fighting them so goddamn hard, while a grating sound comes from the door controls to the gateroom—*

"You know how he gets," Greer says mildly.

"Eli also said that it took you half an hour to talk him down."

*"Doc," Greer says, kneeling in front of Rush, "You're okay." Rush is lying on his side on the floor of the control interface room, his hands bound behind him, his ankles bound together. Greer has one hand on his shoulder and with the other he is trying to still the restless twisting of Rush's fingers, the horrible flexing of his wrists into the plastic. "You're okay." But Rush is not okay, not even remotely okay, he's writhing on the floor, unrelentingly fighting against the restraints, against Greer's hands and Telford's hands and if they left him alone he would just tear himself apart against his own body, against the unyielding plastic that keeps him from getting up.*

*"Nick," Telford murmurs, his eyes horrified. "Come on. We need you. You have to try and help Eli. We need you."*

*Rush continues to scream in Ancient. Every so often he stops briefly and there's a nervous tic motion of his head to the left, as his eyes rake the empty air over their shoulders.*

"Yeah," Greer says. "He kept looking for the AI, but I don't think it was appearing to him regularly. Without either of you he went off the deep end a bit, but, like I said, we got him back."

Young looks at him skeptically, but something in his posture has relaxed. "Eli said it took a long time."

*Finally, after longer than Greer would have thought humanly possible, Rush stops screaming. He's blown out his voice, but he's still talking steadily, hoarse and wet, like his vocal cords are bleeding. He's got an entire quiet monologue going now, like he's trying to work something out, or explain something—maybe to himself, maybe to something or someone that Greer can't see. Greer wishes he understood Ancient.*

*He looks over, but Eli has his headphones in.*

*Telford is standing over the kid's shoulder.*

*Greer and Rush are alone on the floor.*

*"Want to speak English, Doc?" Greer asks him quietly, at a break in the monologue, rubbing up and down his arm, steady and predictable, not too rough, not too hard.*

*"No," Rush says miserably, and it's the first time he's responded verbally to Greer since before they dragged him out of the gateroom.*

*"Aw come on," Greer says. "Eli's busy, and you know I hate talking to Telford."*

*Rush curls into himself and makes a noise in the back of his throat that could be a desperate sort of laugh, or maybe a sob. Greer isn't sure, but because he thinks he can get away with it, he moves in and pulls Rush up so the man is lying halfway in his lap. Rush is too exhausted to fight him off.*

*"I don't like the feel of their minds," Rush whispers quietly.*

*"The Nakai?" Greer asks quietly.*

*"Yes," Rush says after a long pause. "There are so many of them."*

*Greer's blood runs icy at that statement. "You're—hearing them, Doc?"*

*Rush says something in Ancient.*

*"Mmmm," Greer says. "And how about in English?"*

*"Their thoughts are painful."*

*Greer isn't sure what to say to that, so he just stays quiet, rubbing Rush's upper arm. He's watching Eli and Telford hover over the computers and when Rush speaks again, it surprises him.*

*"Greer," Rush murmurs quietly.*

*"Yeah Doc?"*

*"I'm tired."*

*Greer shuts his eyes. "I bet," he says quietly. "I bet you are. How about I cut you loose? What do you think? You gonna stay here? Not go tearing off back to the gateroom?"*

*He feels Rush's muscles flex, trembling slightly against the restraints. "Yes," he says his voice oddly intense, "yes, I'll stay. Cut me free."*

*"Let's wait five more minutes," Greer says carefully.*

*Rush shakes, and then, like he can't help it, jerks once, viciously against the wrist and ankle restraints before relaxing again with a shudder.*

Greer takes a deep breath, looking up at Young, trying to open his posture, trying to meet Young's gaze.

"Yeah," he says, keeping his posture relaxed, his expression open. "Sure. It took a while. The man was pretty worked up, but eventually we cut him loose, and he started helping Eli."

He's said a lot of things to Young.

Not one of them's a lie.

"I guess I'm just trying to get a feel for what kind of shape he was in before he put himself under. What he was *like*? What did he seem like to you?"

"Well," Greer says, "he had plenty of fight left in him, I'll tell you that."

Greer actually sees Young's shoulders relax in relief.

The colonel smiles slightly. "Gave you hell, I guess."

"Yeah, he did," Greer smiles uncertainly back at him.

He can't take much more of this.

He doesn't want to think about what happened in the control interface room.

Not any of it.

His dark, empty quarters seem suddenly a bit more inviting. "You want to sit with him for a while?"

Young shakes his head, looking at his watch. "I'm going to go check in with Eli. They're about to reboot the mainframe. They think they've cleared the virus, so they want to see how the system behaves, let it run for a little while before—" he gestures at Rush.

"Nice," Greer says.

"I'll see you later, sergeant," Young murmurs, glancing at Rush as he disappears from the doorway.

Greer looks over at Rush.

"You're an asshole anyway," Greer says, gently kicking the bed frame, "making everyone worry about you. You'd better damn well wake up."

He looks at Rush for a moment.

*"Greer," Rush whispers.*

*"Yeah Doc," Greer murmurs, still watching Telford as he hovers over Eli across the room.*

*"Do you think I'm insane?"*

*"Nah. You're just having a really bad day."*

Greer looks back down at his ridiculous book and clears his throat. "Back to '*escaping through empathy*'. Where were we?"

## Chapter Thirty Five

It was nearly twenty three hundred hours. Young sat alone in the mess, waiting for Telford, sipping his daily allotment of decaffeinated tea.

He'd been adamant about not letting any caffeine back on board when they got supplies from Earth. He'd also been very specific about no nicotine either, and he was fairly certain that the pack of cigarettes he still had in his pocket was the only pack on board—unless Telford had a stash somewhere.

Which was possible.

Young hissed as he accidentally rested his forearms against the edge of the table. They were healing as well as could be expected, but he still had a ways to go before he was back to baseline.

Finally, the door hissed open.

"Hey," Telford said, approaching Young with his usual fast clip. "How's Rush?"

"The same," Young replied. "TJ's going to try waking him up tomorrow."

Telford nodded as he slid into a seat across from Young. "No problems with any systems?"

"Nope," Young said shortly. "The CPU is performing up to its usual standards."

"What about the code that defines the AI?" Telford asked.

"Still locked in the neural interface at the moment," Young said.

"Why not bring it online now?"

"It's—" he paused, giving Telford a measured look. "It's pretty integrated with Rush. We're going to bring them both up at once."

Telford nodded shortly, leaning back in his chair, saying nothing.

"So," Young said finally, trying to remember not to rest his arms against the side of the table, "you requested this meeting—" he gestured for Telford to go ahead.

He knew why Telford was here, but he certainly wasn't going to do the man any favors.

Telford's expression gave nothing away. "You haven't been completely frank with me or with Homeworld Command about what's going on here, Everett."

No kidding.

"You're going to have to be more specific, *David*."

The quiet in the mess was oppressive.

"When Rush was shutting down the gate as they attempted to dial in—you *collapsed*, which ultimately resulted in capture and significant injury to you *and* Lieutenant Scott.

"It had been a long day," Young said evenly.

"I watched you stay on your feet for a solid twelve hours after not only significant blood loss, but also being hit with a dart that released an anesthetic and an anticoagulant into your system."

Young raised his eyebrows.

"Most importantly," Telford said, leaning forward, "I know what you're *like*, Everett. You don't just *pass out* in the middle of a progressing foothold situation. So *what happened?*"

Young said nothing.

"Issues of transparency aside, if I'm going to be a part of the chain of command on this ship then I need to know what's going on. Unless you just plan to cut me out entirely."

Telford did have a point, but Young wasn't about to give an inch. He'd had several days to think about how he was going to handle this conversation.

Unfortunately, so had Telford.

He was going to have to give up some information to the other man or risk him opening an IOA backed investigation. But he was *damned* if he wasn't going to *get* something in return.

"You want to be a team player?" he said mildly. "Is *that* what you're saying?"

"Yes," Telford said, from between gritted teeth.

"Fine. Then tell me what happened on Anubis' off world base," he said quietly.

"That's not *relevant* here," Telford said.

"You're going to tell me what happened, or you get *nothing* from me. I'm under no obligation to explain anything to you. That's how the chain of command *works*, colonel."

"You *barely* outrank me," Telford hissed. "This command would have been mine but for a quirk of circumstance. If you don't watch your step it could *still* be mine."

"One more statement like that and you'll be confined to quarters under guard," Young growled.



"On what charge?"

"Mutiny."

"You have no—"

"I don't need it," Young said. "Get that into your head. You give me so much as *remotely* probable cause and I will cut you off from Earth. I will confine you for the duration of this mission. And *that* could be a very long time."

Telford looked at him, his eyes hard.

Young leaned back in his chair, letting a few seconds tick by. "So," he said. "Anubis' off world base."

"I was under the impression that Rush already told you everything you needed to know," Telford said. "You two seem to be getting along pretty well these days." He paused, watching Young carefully. "I don't know what kind of hold you think you have over him, but in the end, he'll get what he wants, and you'll get *screwed*. I can guarantee you that much."

"Somehow, I don't think he *wanted* this," Young snapped.

"You don't think so?" Telford murmured, looking him straight in the eye.

"Talk," Young said.

"What do you want to know?" Telford's expression was guarded, difficult to read.

"Why you tried to kill him. That would be a good start," Young growled.

"That's a pretty crass way to frame an attempt to modify the bounds of human consciousness."

"Thanks for setting me straight on that one."

"Look," Telford said, leaning forward. "We were trying to modify his thought patterns and to do *that*, apparently, you need two things. One, you have to induce the changes," he said, counting off on one hand, "and *two*, you need to make them stick."

Young fought to keep his expression neutral.

"Anubis figured out how to do *both*. He used an electrical impulse to induce the changes and then he used—" Telford broke off, swallowing convulsively. "In order to make the changes permanent, you have to really let go of your previous patterns of thought and you have to give it time to let it take hold. To remake your mind. Can you see him being able to do that? On his own? No. No one can. Or, rather, it's very difficult. So—" Telford made an empty hand gesture. "I helped him."

Young had to look away.

He took a deep breath.

And then another.

"Explain to me how that worked," Young said.

"There was—this—gel. It was a part of the device. He thought—and Amanda Perry thought—that it was to promote the electrical conductance. And it was, it just also—had another purpose."

"Which was?"

"It was a paralytic and an anesthetic. It essentially put your body in stasis, leaving your mind untethered. Supposedly, it allowed you to 'let go', in that it simulated death for a short period of time."

"And you found this out from whom?"

Telford's eyes slid away briefly. "Kiva. The Lucian Alliance."

"And you let him *go ahead* with this? You told *no one* at Homeworld Command?"

"They never figured out that it was a part of the device. It initiated automatically after the electrophysiological adjustment."

"You could have stopped it."

"He knew the risks," Telford said quietly. "He volunteered."

"You *could have stopped it*."

"We *all* knew the risks. Even Jackson. Jackson warned him *explicitly* that there might be something like this built into the device's protocol. But he went ahead *anyway*."

"Don't you *dare* try to lay this on *him*."

"I'm not," Telford snapped back, his hands open. "Yes. I could have prevented it. If I'd been in my *right mind* at the time, I would have. God, Everett. You know me. You were *so sure* that I wouldn't betray Homeworld Command that you nearly killed Rush *yourself* to prove that I had been brainwashed. Come on. Get off your damn high horse."

Young reached up, rubbing his jaw.

"Look. If it makes any difference to you, maybe it doesn't, but—I was with him. He wasn't alone. I wouldn't have left him to—" Telford stopped, his throat closing, his gaze falling away.

"You were with him," Young repeated quietly, almost peripherally.

Telford unconsciously straightened as he recognized the danger in Young's tone.

"You were *with* him?" Young repeated again, his voice rising. "You *held him under*."

Telford's eyes widened subtly in surprise as he looked away, one hand coming up to rake through his hair. "It was easier. And we—we were on a timetable."

"A timetable?" Young hissed.

"It was a perfect opportunity," Telford murmured. "To turn him over."

"To the Lucian Alliance?"

Telford nodded shortly, looking away. "The LA attacked the Daedalus while we were planetside, as planned. They began broadcasting an interference pattern that would prevent the ship from beaming out either myself or Rush. They sent a cloaked shuttle down to the planet."

"What went wrong?" Young asked quietly.

"Dr. Perry," Telford said. "She reprogramed the transporter. She really was—" Telford paused, his eyes flicking down to the table. "She really was brilliant. She cared a lot about Nick, and she was suspicious of my motives. Rightly so, it turned out."

"And what happened to Rush?" Young asked.

"He was beamed straight out of the gel. He was supposed to be in the stuff for at least an hour. He was there for something like thirty minutes. I'm guessing that's why, afterwards—he just wasn't quite the same."

Young raised his eyebrows, prompting Telford to elaborate.

"More volatile, more panicky, less methodical, but—faster. At everything. More intuitive. That's what I heard. I didn't talk to him until I saw him later on Icarus. But that's why—I'm almost certain that's why he couldn't do what Eli was able to do."

Young nodded.

They were quiet for a long time.

"He told you about it?" Telford asked finally. "I tried, once, to get him to talk to me about what happened on the planet, but he—" the other man broke off, taking a deep breath, "said he didn't remember. That's what he told Jackson and O'Neill. I wasn't—I was never *sure*. You can't tell with him. He's got this way of—lying to himself, as well as everyone else. I'm still not convinced that he didn't *want* exactly what happened. Even if he didn't know—"

"Yeah," Young snapped, as his temper got the better of him. "Just keep digging yourself in."

"Where do you get *off*?" Telford snapped right back. "Who fucking appointed you his *protector*? You've nearly killed him *yourself* how many times? It's an open secret that you fucking *left him for dead* and the Nakai got ahold of him and fucking *tortured* him and implanted a transmitter in his *heart*, which you then ordered him to remove, *against his will*. You're not speaking from any kind of position of strength."

"I didn't try to kill him with my bare, fucking *hands*."

"Well *neither did I*," Telford hissed, leaning forward across the table. "And what the *fuck* is going on *now*, Everett? I answered your questions, now answer me *that*."

He'd had a lot of time to think about how he would proceed.

Based on what Telford had seen, what he knew already, and what he and his team would likely find when they had the chance to search the Ancient database—

"I'm linked to Rush," Young said. "As in—mentally."

Telford stared at him, his eyes, his features, giving nothing away.

"Mentally." Telford repeated flatly. "What the *hell* does that mean?"

Young shrugged. "Destiny pulls on his mind, I pull back. As for the details, isn't that what you're here to look into? I'm sure I'm not aware of all of the repercussions myself."

Telford was looking straight back at him. "I'm sure," he said, a dark undertone to his words. "So exactly how far does this 'link' go?" Telford asked. "Do you—" he broke off, as if he wasn't sure he could believe what he was about to ask. "Do you hear his thoughts? Feel what he feels?"

"His thoughts are absolutely uninterpretable to me," Young said, taking a page out of Rush's book and going with a truthful if deliberately misleading statement. "I just keep the ship from pulling him in so that he can stay functional."

Mostly functional.

"So when you collapsed in the gateroom—"

"You think it was easy to keep him out of the ship when he had to manipulate the power grid like that? No. It takes significant effort."

Telford was looking at him like he was certain that Young wasn't giving him the entire story.

Young stared back, his expression as closed as Telford's was.

"You don't think this compromises your ability to command?"

Young opened his hands, raising his eyebrows. "Do I seem compromised to you? Clearly I'm capable of operating independently from him, as he's currently unconscious, and has been for *days*."

"True," Telford said, his tone neutral. "But—"

They were interrupted by a crackle from Young's radio. "Scott to Young. Please come in." As he moved to pick up the device, he surreptitiously glanced at his watch.

The lieutenant was right on time.

"Go ahead, Scott," Young said.

"Sorry to bother you, sir," Scott's voice emanated from the radio, "but we've got something of a situation down here. Volker and Brody turned on a piece of equipment in one of the labs—"

"*Again?*" Young snapped.

"Um, yeah, like I said, sorry to bother you, sir, it's just not entirely clear what it does, and last time—"

Young glanced over at Telford. The other man's expression had darkened.

"Lieutenant, are you aware that I'm off-shift at the moment? You really should be directing this to Colonel Telford."

There was a brief silence from the radio, and Telford sat back looking somewhat mollified. "I—apologize sir," Scott said. "I'm not used to having two senior officers and the duty roster—"

"No need to apologize lieutenant," Young said. "Colonel Telford happens to be with me at the moment. I'll send him your way. What's your location?"

"We're in the room across from the machine shop. It's one of those small rooms with lots of monitors?"

"All right," Young said. "You want Eli down there?"

"Eli's in the infirmary at the moment. I already tried to get him, but TJ says not unless the ship is about to explode."

"Okay," Young replied. "Telford will be there shortly."

Telford looked over at him steadily. "We're not done with this conversation, Everett."

"I suspect that we won't ever be," Young said flatly. "Look, let me know if this thing that Brody and Volker turned on looks like it's going to explode or displace us through time or something. Otherwise? I need to get some sleep."

Telford nodded, clearly not happy, but willing to table the discussion for the time being. They both got to their feet and crossed the mess, parting ways at the door. "Good luck," Young murmured.

"Thanks," Telford said dryly.

Young turned to walk unhurriedly in the direction of his quarters. He gave Telford a good two minutes of lead-time and then he turned abruptly, picking up his pace.

He headed back in the direction he had come.

He tried to fight down his anxiety, tried to subdue the restive feeling in his hands, tried to relieve the tightness in his chest as he considered what he was about to do.

What *they* were about to do.

This had to work.

It *had to*.

Eli was confident that he'd purged the virus completely.

The rest of the science team had double-checked his work.

They hadn't had a systems glitch for days.

Young rounded the corner, coming upon the hallway that lead to the chair room.

No one was in sight.

His eyes swept the corridor, looking for stray kinos. There were none.

Young stopped in front of the door and palmed the door controls.

They didn't open.

Quietly he rapped on the metal, tapping two letters in Morse code.

*TJ.*

The door slid open to reveal Greer, standing with his assault rifle slung over his shoulder, one hand loosely curled around the weapon. "Right on time, sir," he said, as he stepped back to let Young inside.

Young raised his eyebrows at the other man. "An assault rifle?" he asked quietly, trying to project a sense of assurance that he didn't feel. "Is that really necessary?"

"It's better to be prepared," Greer said mildly, his voice equally quiet. "Any trouble on your end?"

"Nope," Young said. "Telford's with Volker, Brody, and Scott. Presumably his team is in bed at the moment. If everything goes according to plan, we should have about eight hours until anyone misses us."

"As long as there aren't any medical emergencies," TJ whispered, from where she was kneeling next to Rush.

They had him lying on the floor near the chair, both on top of and covered by blankets. TJ was adjusting the IV lines that were keeping the scientist both hydrated and unconscious.

Eli was standing next to her, hunched in his gray sweatshirt as he held the bags of fluids, looking slightly out of his depth.

His eyes had lost the bloodied cast they'd had immediately after his interrogation by the Nakai, but they were still rimmed with red and lined with a lacy network of capillaries.

"You okay, Eli?" Young asked. He knew how little sleep the young man had had in the past few days.

"I'll be better when this is *over*," Eli said quietly. "But, yeah. I'm fine. The hard part is done. Well—" he paused, looking at Young. "For *me*, that is."

"Thanks for being here," Young said quietly. "I know it's been pretty rough on you."

"Oh you know me," Eli said wanly, "IT guy by day, um—" he halfheartedly lifted the IV bags he was holding. "I don't know—nurse I guess, by night."

TJ looked up at him with a half smile. "Nurse?" she said skeptically. "In my dreams. More like IV pole replacement."

"Hey," Eli said, playing along without any real enthusiasm. "This is skilled labor here." He looked nervously at Young.

"This will work," Young said quietly. "It will."

"Yeah," Eli said, a quick, pained smile flashing across his features. "I know."

"So," TJ said, rocking back on her heels. "What's the final verdict? Do we keep him sedated while he's in the interface?"

"No," Young said, itching to get started. "Pull it out."

"You'll only have a few minutes before he starts to wake up," TJ said, glancing up at him. "Are you ready?"

Young walked over a few paces and dropped down opposite her, on Rush's left side. "Yeah," he said quietly. "Pull the lines. Let's do this."

"Okay," she murmured, and with a quick, deft motion, she pulled both IV lines. She taped down a wad of gauze in the crook of both his elbows, then moved out of the way so that Greer could kneel opposite Young.

They scooped Rush off the floor, blankets and all.

In the back of his mind, he could feel the pressure of Rush's consciousness beginning to engage.

"I've got him," Young murmured, as they approached the chair.

Greer backed off, and Young winced as the scientist's full weight pressed against his injured forearms.

In the back of his mind, the pressure turned into a seething headache. Images were starting to come together, disorganized and bright and searing.

He didn't have much time.

Gently, he lowered Rush down into the chair, moving quickly to position his hands and feet. Restraints snapped into place one by one.

Rush's hands flexed.

Young tipped his head back.

*He's alone, on an alien world. Without water. Without food. The dust, stirred up by the wind, is choking him, but he gets to his feet anyway, because fuck them, fuck all of them—*

The flashback was cut off by the crack of the neural interface bolts engaging. Rush's mind was pulled away from his, down into the darkness of Destiny where, this time, Young was not permitted to follow.

Young looked down at the scientist, locked into the neural interface, blue lights at his temples where the bolts shot electrodes deep beneath the skin. His hair brushed over the metal, and Young reached out to smooth it back. He adjusted the blankets over Rush's threadbare T-shirt.

TJ came to stand beside him. "I figured I'd better put him back in his clothes," TJ murmured. "At least mostly. Otherwise—" she broke off. "Well, I could see him being—annoyed when he woke up."



"'Annoyed' is one way of putting it," Young flashed her a wry, uncertain smile before turning back to Eli. "How's it looking?"

Eli was staring up at the transparent projections being thrown into midair by the monitors. "Not sure," he said quietly. "But—" he broke off, his expression tightening briefly. "There's a lot of information transfer going on. Both ways."

"That seems like a *good* thing," Young said.

"Yeah," Eli said quietly. "Yeah, I guess. If his mind can handle that. I mean, we still don't really understand what happened to Dr. Franklin."

"That's not going to happen to Rush," Young said.

"I hope not," Eli said quietly.

"It won't," Young replied.

The four of them gathered around the midair displays, watching Rush's vitals, watching the flickering pattern of voltage fluctuations in his brain, watching representations of data transfer flowing both ways, waxing and waning through the open connection.

After five minutes, Greer shifted restlessly.

"How long is this going to take?" the sergeant asked.

"I don't know," Eli replied, "but, maybe—maybe a long time."

It took almost seven hours.

Finally, however, informational flux faded to zero and the panel released from the side of the interface.

As soon as they heard it, their heads all snapped around, staring at the chair.

Young stepped forward immediately, but TJ, who was standing at his elbow, pulled him back. He turned to look at her, eyebrows raised.

"I just want you to keep in mind," she murmured, "that it might take him some time to adjust, so—don't read too much into it if he's not entirely cogent."

"Yeah," he said, starting forward again.

She pulled him back.

"I just don't want—"

"Yeah, TJ, I *get* it." He pulled away, starting forward again.

"Everett," she snapped at him, using his name for the first time in—he couldn't even *remember* how long.

He turned to look back at her.

"Don't upset him." She walked forward a few paces, dropping her voice, one hand coming to rest on his shoulder. "I know how you can be. Just—whatever happens, stay calm."

He nodded at her shortly and turned, striding forward to slide his right hand onto the cool, smooth surface of the touch screen.

The room faded out and he looked into the darkness of the ship.

It was easy to locate Rush's mind, easy to separate him from the pulse and fade of firing circuitry. As if the ship, or the AI, or the device recognized Young and just—released.

As the neural interface device disengaged, restraints opening with a simultaneous snap, Rush crashed into his mind with the subtlety of a wrecking ball. For several seconds Young couldn't separate himself from the drowning flood of discordant, disorganized images that swept into his mind—nor could he separate himself from the pain.

The headache was unendurable.

His eyes began to water.

He pulled back marginally, enough to regain his own equilibrium, enough to see through blinding pain, enough to move, enough to step around to the front of the chair.

He dropped to his knees and looked up at Rush.

The man's eyes were open but unfocused.

He hadn't moved.

"Rush," Young whispered, bringing one hand up to cover the scientist's right hand.

Rush looked down at him, shaking his head.

They flinched at the spike in their headache.

Rush blinked slowly in a second attempt to physically clarify the psychic mess of his thoughts. He brought his left hand to his forehead, squinting at Young.

"Quid tibi accidit?" Rush whispered.

"Um," Young replied, squinting back. "Want to try that one again in English?"

"Quid? Quid iterum dicitis?"

"Uh oh," Eli said quietly from behind Young.

"English, Rush. You're not speaking *English*," he said, trying to keep a lid on his anxiety, his impatience. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Young felt a sudden surge of adrenalin spike through Rush's system, his heart rate increasing as he sat forward, his right hand tearing away from the grip Young had on it and coming to rest against Young's temple, his eyes narrowing.

Young's headache intensified. He jerked his head back and grabbed Rush's hand, pulling it away from his head.

Rush immediately tried the same maneuver with his other hand, and Young grabbed that one as well.

Rush gave him an alarmed look and, despite his exhausted appearance, began to speak Ancient extremely rapidly. "Vultus, ego adiuvi te. Non intelligit quod extiterunt. Aliquid est nefas vobis—non proprie loquendo." He tried to jerk his right hand out of Young's grip. "Dimitte me statim. Quid facis?"

Rush was clearly starting to work himself up.

"Calm down," Young said quietly, trying to make his voice as soothing as possible, knowing from experience that it was very unlikely to have any effect.

"Ne dicatis. Asinus."

Rush was trying to get to his feet. Young shoved him back.

"Hang on," Eli murmured to Young, coming to kneel next to him in front of Rush, his hands open. "Ut intelligas me?" he asked Rush.

Rush stared at him and then he was off, speaking extremely quickly, clearly upset, trying to pull out of Young's grip. When he failed to free himself, Young could feel the rhythm of Rush's speech through his hands as he muted the other man's instinctive gestures.

"Whoa," Eli said. "Loquimini tardius—" he broke off as Rush plowed over him.

"What's he saying?" Young demanded, speaking over Rush's increasingly frustrated monologue.

"He thinks there's something wrong with *you*. He thinks he's speaking English. I can't —"

Rush stopped abruptly as he took in the exchange between Young and Eli.

"Oh wait—maybe—" Eli broke off as Rush collapsed back into the chair, most of the tension leaving his frame, his expression full of disgust. With one quick motion he managed to extricate his right hand from Young's grip and brought it up, his elbow resting on the arm of the neural interface chair, his temple resting against the heel of his hand.

He said something in Ancient. One word.

"Yeah, he gets it," Eli said quietly. "I'm pretty sure he just said 'fuck', actually."

Young smiled faintly, still maintaining his grip on Rush's left hand.

Eli said something back to Rush, his hands open, his tone regaining the subtle, friendly quality that it had been missing for days.

Rush said something in return that just sounded—exhausted.

Young looked at Eli, his eyebrows raised.

"He feels terrible," Eli said quietly, "and he wants to know what happened."

"Tell him you'll explain later," Young murmured, "but that right now we have to get him out of here." He motioned Greer over with his head as Eli talked to Rush.

"Hey Doc," Greer said, appearing beside Eli.

"Hey," Rush repeated, his normal accent completely gone, replaced with the curious inflection of the Ancient language.

They all looked at each other.

"Nice," Greer said, grinning at Rush.

Rush, his energy clearly flagging, fired off a sarcastic-sounding sentence at Eli.

"Um, he says the ability to copy monosyllabic utterances is nothing to be *happy* about."

"God, you're such a killjoy," Greer said, still smiling.

Young sighed, trying to summon up even a fraction of the relief that Greer was evidently feeling. "Let's get him up."

"Careful," TJ said, hovering behind Greer. "His pressure is pretty low and he hasn't been on his feet for days. If he stands too quickly he's very likely to pass out."

"Do you think he'll let us carry him back?" Greer asked.

"Only if he's unconscious," Young said dryly. "Look, whenever he starts to go down, we'll just sweep his legs and pick him up."

"Got it," Greer replied.

Rush was watching the exchange between himself and Greer through half-lidded eyes. Young reached over, detangling him from the blankets he was wrapped in.

"He really shouldn't be walking *at all* without shoes," TJ said. "His feet have finally started to heal now that he's spent some time off them—"

"What do you say I just go for it?" Greer murmured. "If I'm quick about it, I think he might let me do it. He looks pretty damn tired."

Young frowned, reaching out to bring the back of his hand against Rush's forehead. The scientist didn't react. Beneath Young's hand, his skin was hot and dry. He brushed his hair back, fighting the pain of the increasing headache, looking at the other man's thoughts, which were a vivid, feverish swirl. As soon as Young's mind moved in on his, Rush jerked away weakly, one hand coming up reflexively.

"Give it a shot," Young said quietly.

In one swift, smooth motion, Greer bent down and picked Rush up, lifting him out of the chair, turning rapidly toward the door and making for it at a fast clip. Young was hit with a wave of disorientation from Rush as he struggled to interpret what had just happened.

Eli grabbed Young's elbow to steady him.

//You're okay,// Young projected, knowing that Rush wasn't going to understand the words, but hoping that he would at least pick up on the intent behind them.

He got back a wave of surprised, exhausted irritation and then the distinct sense of Rush mentally *pushing* him away.

Young frowned.

Greer paused next to the door, waiting while TJ and Eli made short work of packing up the medical supplies and laptops they had brought with them to the chair room. Young walked over to stand next to Greer, watching Rush, who had closed his eyes against the vertigo and was leaning his head against Greer's shoulder.

"Hey," Eli said quietly, appearing at Young's elbow with his laptop tucked under one arm. "Are you okay? You look like you're about to fall over."

"Yeah, I'm fine," Young said, squinting through the headache. "I feel like shit, but—it's not really me."

"I don't think that necessarily translates into you being *fine*," Eli said dubiously.

Young shrugged. "What time is it?"

"A bit before six in the morning," Eli said.

Young nodded tiredly. "We should get going then. Don't want to meet anyone in the hallways."

TJ joined them, her medical bag over her shoulder.

"Does he seem—off to you?" Young asked Greer quietly.

"Compared to *what*?" Greer replied.

"Never mind."

Without being asked, Eli jogged ahead of them, scouting out their path.

"I hate this cloak and dagger stuff," TJ whispered, as Eli vanished around a corner.

"It'll be fine," Greer murmured. "The only person we give a damn about is Telford, and Scott and James are keeping tabs on his location."

In the back of Young's mind images formed, crystalized, shattered, and reformed as Rush attempted to exert some kind of control over his chaotic thoughts. He was working toward *something*, sifting through memories that weren't his own, as if he could determine the content of a disassembled puzzle simply by examining the pieces.

Maybe he could.

"Still," TJ whispered, "I don't like it."

"Oh come on," Greer murmured. "All things considered this is—"

*The memory slams into him with the shock of a slap—and his hands are suddenly wrenching into a foreign keyboard in the darkness of the ship, as if unfamiliar glyphs in an unfamiliar layout could save him. His nails pry away from his fingers as he is yanked backward away from the monitors that were just beginning to open to him and into the dark. The dark. If he had just been paying attention, maybe he would have heard them coming, but they're strangely quiet, their movements have the beating sound of wings struggling against the air, and he hasn't even gotten a good look at them but likely this is their ship, likely they—*

Young reached into his mind and snapped him out of the flashback into—

*The grass is cold and wet beneath them as they lie in the dark of the back yard, looking up at the night sky.*

"You're such a jackass, Luke," he says to his brother.

"You'd better not let mom hear you swear like that." Erik is laughing, Luke always cracks him up.

*Jerks.*

*"Don't let him get to you," JD says, though even he sounds amused. "He's just pissed because you're smarter than he is." JD reaches over to mess up his hair. He hates it when they do that—*

Rush jerked suddenly in Greer's grip, muscles tensing, his head coming up, eyes opening abruptly, and *again* Young felt a sense of pressure as Rush mentally tried to push him away.

Unbelievably, his headache only *increased* in intensity.

"Shit," Greer murmured, his hands tightening on Rush, his pace slowing. He watched the scientist guardedly for a moment, then turned to look back at Young. "What was *that?*" he asked quietly.

"Flashback," Young said shortly. "He's okay now."

"You can just stop being such a pain in the ass all the time, Doc," Greer said, resuming his normal pace.

In the back of his mind he could feel Rush again start sifting through images.

//Not a good idea,// Young projected at him, trying to convey a sense of warning. He was fairly certain that Rush either didn't understand or didn't agree because he pulled away from Young as much as he could and continued his intensive examination of the disorganized array of images that filled his consciousness. His control was wavering in an out, and Young was more than a little concerned that if he triggered the wrong memory here in the hallway—

It would not be a good scene, and it would not be low profile.

//Rush,// he projected again, insistently. //Stop it.//

//Efutue.// Rush projected back at him, his control fluttering with exhaustion.

He was fairly sure from the tone that was Ancient for 'fuck off.'

Unbelievable.

They were nearly at the infirmary, the emergency lighting near the deck plating flaring as they passed, when, again, Young had a brief sense of the Nakai coming up in Rush's thoughts and then—

*They're in his mind, he knows they are but it's so difficult to hang onto that when he sees Destiny disintegrating around him the crew, which here in this simulation are all somehow pale and cold with icy eyes, and even though he knows it's not real, he's still tempted to*

*give something away, to go for the neural interface because he regrets, he regrets that he never dared to unlock Destiny and it wouldn't have taken him long—if he could just have brief, unprotected apposition of his mind with the ship he could—but he can't, he must not think of that, not here, not now, not ever, but especially not now while they're screaming, pressing down into his mind and if only there was some release from the pressure and he imagines vessels tearing open in his brain and he tries to make it happen. He can't scream, he can't even scream, he's struggling in the water, but it slows his movements, preventing injury, except— Yes except. Can he? Yes. Yes. Yes he can—and the pressure of their minds leaves him and the pain is gone because they didn't think that he would be able to act with intent, didn't think he would be able to reach up, to rip the breathing apparatus off his face and there is a way out and he has found it and when he pulls the water into his lungs it's a victory, a victory. Just let them fucking try to get him out in time—*

Young stopped, suddenly unbalanced, dropping unsteadily into a crouch, as Rush jerked in Greer's grip. Again, he snapped Rush's mind sideways.

*He grabs JD's arm as it extends down into the water and he's being hauled up, dragged out from under the ice, winter clothes and skates and all, and his brother's torso is almost completely submerged, but Luke has JD by the ankles and he breaks the surface with a gasp, the cold air warm against his colder skin.*

With a jolt of panic Rush shoved Young's mind back, retreating further, his thoughts shattering into a glittering mess.

"Easy, Doc," Greer said quietly. "Come on man, keep it together, just a little longer."

TJ dropped down to her knees beside him. "Colonel," she said quietly. "We're almost there." Her hand was on his shoulder.

"I'm okay, TJ," he murmured, but he let her help him to his feet.

Mercilessly, he could feel Rush resume his desperate attempt to do—something.

God *damn* it.

*//I can't believe I missed you, you jackass, //* Young projected, his tone as soothing as he could make it. *//Please stop this.//* His eyes were watering from the intensifying pain of the headache.

Ahead, in the hallway, he could see Eli watching them from where he was stationed, immediately outside the infirmary. Young waved him back with one hand.

"Eli," Young said, wincing as a particularly spectacular scene of carnage burst across Rush's consciousness, this time from somewhere in Destiny's memory banks. "Can you



talk to him? He's doing something—" Young waved a hand before pressing it against his aching temple. "I don't know *what* he's doing but it's not good."

Eli took up a position next to Greer and asked Rush a question in a conversational tone.

This seemed to distract the scientist.

Thank fucking *god*.

Rush murmured something to back to Eli, who frowned, asking another question.

"What did he say?" Young demanded.

Eli looked back over his shoulder, meeting Young's gaze with worried, red-rimmed eyes. "Um, he said he's trying to figure out what's happening, since no one will freaking explain it to him, and then I asked him the last thing he remembers and um—he said he doesn't know."

"That's fine," Young said, squinting back at him.

"That's *fine*?" Eli echoed.

"Just give him the gist of what's going on," Young said, rubbing his hand across his forehead.

TJ's fingers tightened on his elbow as they rounded the infirmary doors. They went straight through to the back, passing Barnes, who watched them with quiet eyes from the gurney nearest TJ's office.

Greer carefully set Rush down on the gurney that Young had started to think of as 'his,' while Eli continued to talk to him.

Rush brought a shaky hand up to his temple, pressing it against his head as if that could steady him. He was clearly having a hard time even staying sitting.

Young reached forward to press him back, but TJ stopped him.

He's *got* to eat," she murmured. "He hasn't eaten in almost three days and he needs to start right now." She vanished around the corner.

Eli seemed to finish his description of what happened, and Rush looked up at him, slowly pulling his right foot beneath him until he was sitting in a half cross-legged position. His left arm was wrapped around his chest, his right hand at his temple.

"Sanus es?" he asked Eli quietly, his entire attention focusing down on the young man.

"Yeah," Eli said quietly. "I mean, sic ego."

"Yeah?" Rush repeated, clearly skeptical.

"Yeah," Eli murmured back, giving Rush a wan smile.

Rush finally looked over at Young and Greer and asked a question.

Eli smirked slightly as he turned to them. "He wants to know why out of all the military personnel, only Lieutenant Scott has made any effort at all to learn Ancient. We're freaking living on an Ancient ship, after all."

"Did he say 'freaking'?" Greer asked skeptically.

"Um, no."

Rush was glaring at them.

Young smiled faintly, opening his hands. "Hey. We just carry the guns."

Greer gently kicked the metal frame of the gurney, shaking the bed slightly. "Asshole," he said.

TJ came back in, carrying a bowl of protein mush, her expression lifted, her eyes less troubled than Young had seen them in days. "God you two, be *nice* to him," she snapped, clearly trying to hide a smile. She handed the bowl to Rush, who looked at it disbelievingly.

He asked her a question, which was obviously something along the lines of, "what the hell is this?"

"What?" she said defensively. "It's good for you. If you eat this and you keep it down you can have an MRE later."

Rush picked up the spoon with an air of resignation, looking at Eli.

"Postea potes habere—um, MRE?" Eli translated uncertainly.

"MRE?" Rush repeated, his terribly altered accent causing Young to wince involuntarily.

"Um, crap," Eli said. "Kind of like, praeparato farinae?"

"Quidquid," Rush sighed.

Eli smiled incredulously, the first real smile that Young had seen from him in days, as he rubbed a hand across tired eyes. "I think he just said '*whatever*'."

"And on that note," Greer said, looking at his watch, "I've gotta go. I'm on shift in five minutes. I'll see you later, Doc."

TJ produced a bottle of electrolytes and four pills, which she placed on the table next to Rush. "Tylenol and antivirals," she murmured. "Hopefully that should help with the fever and the headache."

Rush looked at them for a moment as Eli translated what TJ said. His eyes swept the room, settled on Young, and then flicked back to the pills. After hesitating for a few seconds, he took them, then turned to Eli and snapped something at him, too fast for Young to catch.

"Um, he says that he doesn't really want three people standing around watching him eat."

"I don't blame you," TJ murmured at him. "I'm going to catch a few hours of sleep in one of the beds out there," she said, looking at Young. "Don't hesitate to wake me up if you need me." She looked over at Eli. "You should get some sleep as well. You're on medical leave for the rest of the day, so don't let anyone trap you into anything. Go to your quarters and *hide*." She smiled at him.

"Oh, they'll find me," Eli said. "They always do." He looked over at Young. "You want me to stay so you can talk to him? Eli glanced at Rush.

"I don't think he's going to be awake for much longer," Young said quietly. "I think I can manage. Probably."

Eli said something to Rush, who nodded tiredly at him.

TJ fiddled around in the back for about three minutes, checking Rush's blood pressure again, making sure the monitors were set to alarm properly before finally leaving them alone.

Young sat down next to Rush on the gurney.

"Hey, genius," he said quietly.

"Hey," Rush replied, pushing his bowl of protein mush toward Young.

"Nope," Young said, pushing it back toward him. "You still have to eat that, even if TJ's not here."

Rush said something that sounded simultaneously resigned and disdainful.

"Yeah, tell me about it," Young said quietly, fighting a wave of exhaustion and a wave of relief so profound that it seemed to carry away the last of his energy with it. "You have no idea what kind of hell you put me through, do you?"

Rush looked up, his eyes dark and glazed with exhaustion and fever. He set his bowl of protein down on the table next to him, and then reached out laying a hand on Young's upper arm.

"Hey," he said quietly.

"You're being unusually nice," Young said in a whisper, his voice fading into nothing in the air.

"Yeah?" Rush murmured, his hand starting rub rhythmically up and down Young's upper arm.

"Yeah. You're also getting a hell of a lot of mileage out of two words," Young said, half smiling at him. He tried to hang on to his expression, tried to meet Rush's gaze, curious and intent despite the fever and exhaustion.

Try though he might, he failed to suppress the horrible suspicion that had been growing in his mind ever since Rush let Greer pick him up out of the chair. "The thing is," Young continued, his smile twisting into something unrecognizable as his eyes slid down and away, "is that I met you—a different version of you—when I sat in the neural interface chair, and I know you're not going to like this, but I really, *really*, want to make sure that the person we got back out of the chair—" he broke off.

Rush was looking at him uncertainly.

"I just want to make sure it's really *you*."

"Vellem intellegere te possit."

"But in order to do that, I have to look at your mind, genius, and you don't seem to want to let me. Which, you have to understand, just makes me more suspicious."

Young leaned forward, bringing a hand up to the side of Rush's head.

The scientist's reaction was immediate. He jerked sideways, away from Young, one hand coming up to close painfully around Young's raw, abraded forearm as the green glow of his heartbeat on the monitors behind him broke into a fast wave.

"Fuck off," Rush said, his voice wavering, and through their link Young could feel the familiar, terrible urge to *move*—

He hissed in pain as Rush's hand tightened around his arm.

His reaction seemed to derail Rush's building panic and the other man let go of his arm immediately.

"Quid accidit?" Rush demanded, unsnapping the cuff of Young's jacket to pull the sleeve up, exposing the white bandage beneath.

"Long story," Young murmured, pulling his hand back. "You remembered how to say 'fuck'. That's a good sign, I guess."

Rush looked at him steadily.

Again, more slowly this time, Young lifted his hand. Again, Rush flinched back, his heart rate rising, his breathing fast and shallow. "Noli facere," he whispered. "Quaeso." "I'm not going to hurt you," Young said quietly. "I just need to check. If you'd had my week, you'd understand." Slowly he inched his hand toward Rush, changing the angle, bringing it to rest on the other man's shoulder, projecting a sense of calm for all he was worth.

Beneath his hand he could feel tiny tremors tearing through the muscles in Rush's back. The scientist was looking down, and Young *could feel* the effort he was putting into holding still.

This was *stupid*.

It was also intolerable.

"Okay," he said, giving in, with an acute flare of guilt. "Maybe you're just really fucking tired of people tearing into your mind right now," he whispered. "Maybe it doesn't mean anything."

Under his grip, Rush continued to subtly shake, his head angled down and away.

"Okay," Young murmured again, running his hand down over Rush's shoulder, carefully starting to rub his back. "I'm sorry. We don't have to do this right now." Rush didn't look up at him and Young finally pulled away, giving the other man some space, hoping that would be enough to help him calm down.

Young stared at the floor for a moment, then shut his eyes.

He was so tired of all of this *shit*.

"Aegre fero," Rush murmured, his voice tight and miserable.

"Tell me about it," Young whispered, not opening his eyes.

"Yeah," Rush whispered back, his voice so quiet that Young could imagine that his inflection wasn't off, that he actually *understood*—

He felt Rush's hand close on his upper arm and he looked up.

Rush was looking at him, trying to project a wave of reassurance. It was poorly controlled, and exhausted, and it wavered in and out, but it was there.

"Hey," Rush said quietly, and pulled him forward. His arms came up, wrapping around Young's shoulders. "You're okay." The inflection, the emphasis was all wrong.

Young wrapped his arms around Rush, drawing him in. "I hope you're really you," he murmured, his voice a cracked whisper.

Rush didn't say anything, but managed to pull Young down with him as he laid back against the bed, until Young was half on top of him.

"Vos dormitis," Rush murmured, his eyes barely open, one hand in Young's hair.

"Yeah," Young said. "Quidquid."

"Mm," Rush agreed, sounding amused, the fingers of his right hand combing through Young's hair.

"Go to sleep, genius," Young murmured.

It was less than a minute before Rush's hand stilled, coming to rest heavily on the back of his neck. Young felt the scientist's mind transition over into sleep, losing what little order it had. He looked closer, examining the swirling mix of images and concepts, trying to detect any hint of the AI.

It was useless.

He needed Rush to open his mind to him completely, and that, at least for now, was not happening.

Young knew he shouldn't stay.

People would be looking for him. He was supposed to finish his report on the foothold situation by early afternoon so that Scott could start learning the key points for his briefing via the stones tomorrow morning. Telford was expecting Young to contact him regarding the attempt to wake Rush up.

Young *knew* he shouldn't stay.

But, instead he kicked off his boots, pulled the blankets over the both of them, and he stayed anyway.

## Chapter Thirty Six

"Colonel."

He had a vicious headache, and it felt very much like his eyelids were made of lead.

"Colonel Young."

He'd barely had any sleep at all in the past three days, as he was fairly sure unconsciousness did not count as sleeping. He was damned if he was getting up. He didn't hear any alarms, or weapons fire, or—

"Colonel *Young*," it was a woman's voice, quiet and urgent and very close to him.

He felt a hand close around his shoulder.

"Colonel Young, *wake up*."

It was Wray.

He dragged his eyelids open and the room came slowly into focus, all bright lines and angles and glaring white sheets. He felt like he was moving through water, every motion a battle against invisible drag. His head seemed to have encountered an icepick at some point. His vision was blurring, his back ached with the persistent, dull throb that had been with him for days now and—

Shit.

*Shit.*

He had fallen asleep.

With *Rush*.

*In the infirmary.*

Wray, *Wray for god's sake*, was shaking him awake, her still-bloodshot eyes wide, her expression frozen into a neutral mask.

"Shit," he said, "Camile, I—"

"Shh." The utterance was barely audible even though she was about six inches from his face. She had one finger to her lips. "Quietly," she mouthed, tipping her head back, indicating the open doorway.

Young froze.

"And *I'm* telling *you* that you *can't go back there*," TJ said, her voice sharp.

"You don't have that authority," Telford snapped. "My team was supposed to be involved in any attempt to wake up Dr. Rush. Colonel Young confirmed it. If you've gone outside the chain of command on this one, TJ, I will court martial you faster than you can spell your fucking nickname."

Telford sounded *pissed*.

Young carefully extricated himself from Rush's grip and stood. Almost immediately he felt the blood leave his head and his vision started to grey out, but Wray was there, pulling him down towards the floor, pushing his head down, then helping him kneel.

"Medical decisions are the purview of the chief medical officer," TJ snapped back, her voice coolly professional.

"This isn't just a medical decision," Telford snapped. "Dr. Rush is integral to the functioning of the ship which makes this, *primarily*, a tactical call."

Wray was crouching beside him, her face hidden by the dark sweep of her hair as she turned away, unfolding as she reached out along the floor to drag his boots over within reach. She set them silently in front of him and then touched his shoulder, meeting his eyes with obvious concern.

He nodded at her, shifting his position to start pulling his boots on. She stood, reaching out toward Rush's gurney, straightening the sheets, smoothing out the blankets, before dropping back down in front of him. She began deftly lacing up his right boot as he pulled on the left one.

"A tactical call," TJ snapped back, her voice low and grim. "*A tactical call?* I wonder if General O'Neill would agree with you on that one, colonel. With the ship currently in *no obvious danger*—"

"The Nakai are *tracking us*, lieutenant, they *must be*. This ship is *constantly* in danger and its functional status something that it's critical to ascertain, so *move out of the way*."

"No, sir."

Wray had finished lacing up his second boot. Her hands reached out and up, rapidly smoothing down Young's hair and then she was pulling him to his feet—but slowly. Very slowly.

"That was a direct order, *lieutenant*, or wasn't that clear?"

"My authority here supersedes yours, *colonel*." TJ's voice was icy.

Young leaned against Rush's gurney, crossing his arms, trying to strike a casual pose. Wray dropped down in the chair next to the bed, looking nearly as exhausted as Young



felt. They heard a soft clatter from around the corner, and they locked eyes before looking up at the doorway.

Telford rounded the frame of the door, his expression dark. He stopped short as he took in Young and Wray.

TJ appeared behind Telford almost immediately, her expression harassed.

"Did you just *shove aside* my chief medical officer, colonel?" Young growled, trying not to give any indication of how unsteady he felt.

"I stepped past her," Telford said, his tone suddenly guarded, the volume of his voice dropping as his eyes flicked over to take in Rush. "Lieutenant Johansen tells me that she woke him up this morning," Telford said grimly. "I was under the impression that my team was going to be involved in any attempt—"

Young held up a hand, cutting him off. "Did you give her a chance to explain why it was medically necessary to wake him?" he asked, hoping that TJ would be able to manufacture something on the spot if she hadn't already. "Or did you just try to charge in here?"

Telford looked at TJ with narrowed eyes. She stared back at him with perfect equanimity.

"Go ahead, lieutenant," Young said, keeping his voice mild.

"He was beginning to develop an allergy to the anesthetic we were using," TJ said smoothly. "I had to take him off immediately."

Telford swung his gaze back to Young.

"So, did you talk to him?" Telford asked. "Is he—" Telford made a circular gesture with one hand.

"He was pretty out of it," Young said, which was partially true. "I'm not sure yet if there are going to be any long term effects from this."

"His functional status should have been assessed *immediately*," Telford said. "He's integral to the functioning of the ship, making this is a tactical *requirement*."

"No." Wray's voice was cold.

Young and Telford both turned to look at her.

"Dr. Rush is a *civilian* member of this crew and is not subject to your orders—something that most of the military personnel on this ship seem to *forget*." She eyed both of them. "He is under *my* jurisdiction, and the balance between his rights as an individual

versus the effect that his status has on the safety of the crew is *mine* to weigh. Not yours. Not *either* of yours. Not until this ship comes under attack." She stood up, her low black pumps echoing as she took a few steps forward. "And right now, *no one* is waking him up. The man has been unconscious for three days and he needs time to recover. To the extent that I can, I intend on giving it to him. So I want both of you out of here. Right now."

Young and Telford stared at her.

"I said," Wray repeated, "*right. Now.*"

"Fair enough," Young said quietly, motioning Telford to precede him out of the room. As he followed, still a bit unsteady on his feet, he turned, looking at Wray over his shoulder. She gave him a small smile.

"Thanks," he mouthed at her.

She gave him a subtle thumbs-up.

After leaving the infirmary, Young and Telford parted ways almost immediately.

He barely managed to make it around the corner before leaning against a bulkhead and sliding down the wall.

He felt *wretched*.

He had held up pretty well for the past three days if one didn't count the twelve hours of unconsciousness somewhere in the middle, but the headache that had slammed into his mind the second he'd pulled Rush off that monitor bank had stayed with him for the entire time.

At the moment, it was god damned *excruciating*.

He'd barely been able to sleep and he hadn't been eating regularly, not by design—he'd just, lost his sense of time.

This was certainly Rush's fault.

It was either *coming* from him or *caused* by him, and it didn't even really fucking matter *which* was the case, because there was no way, *no way* that Young would even consider blocking the other man out of his mind.

If it even was Rush.

Maybe that was the problem.

God, he wanted to know.

He wanted to know *so badly* that he could feel it everywhere, from his mind to his nail beds.

Rush had never been like this—he's *always* been able to understand English. He'd *always* been able to snap back into speaking it almost immediately. He'd *always* fought Young every inch of the way, about everything, through their entire relationship—it was a part of who he was.

What if they'd gotten something back out of the chair that wasn't—

Why hadn't he just pulled the answer out of Rush's mind when he had the chance?

Then he would *know*.

He could have done it—could have forced his way past Rush's iterative defenses, he could have destroyed them in the wrecked, disorganized state that they were in and if he had done so, he wouldn't have to sit here, *wondering* whether that was Rush in there, or some—some *thing*.

A *thing* with his eyes and his hands and his mannerisms—

A thing.

A thing that had looked sadly out over the sea toward the edge of the world.

A *thing*.

He was just—so tired.

James rounded the corner, her jacket unfastened, her hair down, clearly off-shift.

"Colonel," she said in surprise, as her pace picked up. He watched her boots transition to a fast walk and then to a jog as she approached his position. She dropped into a crouch, already reaching for her radio.

He stopped her, one hand reaching out to close around her wrist. He shook his head and she froze, looking at him with wide, dark eyes.

"Sir—"

"I'm fine, lieutenant," he said quietly. "I just—needed a minute."

"Yes sir," she murmured, watching him skeptically. "How did things go last night?"

"I don't know," Young murmured, rubbing a hand over his face. "He woke up, but—" he broke off.

James reached out, resting a hand on his shoulder. As she moved, her jacket shifted, revealing a ring of bruises at the base of her neck.

"But he can't speak English, he's only speaking Ancient, and I just—I just get the feeling that he's not quite right."

"In what way?" she asked quietly, looking a bit out of her depth.

"He's just—not being a complete bastard, amongst other things."

James smiled briefly at him. "Well," she said, "I'm sure you know him better than I do, sir, but I'd say there's at least some evidence that, at baseline, Rush actually *isn't* a *complete* bastard." She smiled at him again—a brief flash that didn't reach her eyes. "Plus, you look pretty terrible at the moment. Maybe he was feeling sorry for you."

"Maybe," Young said.

"Besides," James said quietly. "Think about all the energy it takes to achieve Doc-level bastard-ism. It's got to be just ridiculous. Running around, yelling at people *all* the time. Maybe he's just tired."

"Maybe," Young said, smiling wanly at her.

"Are you on shift right now?" James asked him.

"Yeah," Young said. "Technically, although I just slept through—" he broke off to look down at his watch, "almost the first two hours of it."

"Well," James said. "Your secret is safe with me. Any way you can sleep through the rest of it? With respect, sir, you look like you need it."

Young shook his head. "I don't think so, lieutenant."

"Yeah," James said quietly, giving him a sympathetic look. "I guess not." She looked at her watch and shrugged. "Only six hours to go. For you? That's nothin'." She smiled at him again. "You want a hand?"

He could see why Rush liked her.

She grabbed his elbow and hauled him to his feet with surprising strength.

"How's the neck?" he asked her.

"Fine," she replied, looking away. "Which way are you headed?"

"Um," Young said, trying to get a handle on his mental to-do list. "I need to find Lieutenant Scott, go over what he's going to report to Earth."

"Last I saw him, he was on the bridge," she fell into step beside him. "Anything I can do to help you out, sir?"

"You're off-shift, lieutenant," Young said.

"Eh. What else am I going to do with my time? It's no problem."

"If you could just—go hang out in the infirmary, and make sure none of Telford's team comes by to harass Rush, that would be great. TJ and Wray have pretty much got things covered, but they could use some backup."

"Sure," James said. "No problem."

They parted ways at the door to the bridge.

"Thanks, lieutenant," he said.

She waved him off.

Young spent most of the day finishing his report for Homeworld Command. He dropped by the infirmary to pick up his second dose of Tylenol for the day around seventeen hundred hours and ate an early dinner with TJ and Wray.

Rush was still dead to the world, so he headed back out to finish up bureaucratic odds and ends. Sometime around nineteen hundred hours he felt Rush wake up—the random array of images that had been running in the back of his mind all day becoming a bit more distressed—a bit more directed.

Chloe was with him.

Briefly, Young brushed against his thoughts only to feel Rush, again, reflexively pull away.

Fine.

He could keep himself busy.

When he walked back into the infirmary a bit after twenty-two hundred hours, he noticed that Reynolds had been released, leaving only Barnes in the main room.

She gave him an uncertain smile as he passed, and he slowed his pace, walking over to stand next to her bedside.

"How's the side, corporal?" he asked her, squinting even in the dim, evening lights.

"It's fine, sir," she said, her face pale. "TJ tells me I'm going to have a kick-ass scar, so—hey. That's something."

He flashed a smile at the tough-guy attitude.

"When are you supposed to be up and around?" he asked her, leaning against her gurney.

"TJ says I can be out of here day after tomorrow if there aren't any problems with infection," she replied.

"Well," he said, "see that there aren't."

"Yes sir," she said. "How's Dr. Rush, sir?"

Young looked away, toward the back of the infirmary. The lights were completely turned down. "Not sure, corporal," he said quietly.

"Can I ask what happened to him?" she said, looking like she wasn't sure if she was overstepping her bounds.

"You can ask, corporal," he murmured, trailing off.

"Understood. There are just a lot of rumors—"

He raised his eyebrows at her, prompting her to elaborate.

"He's been in the infirmary for three days but no one saw him take a hit—there's a rumor that the Nakai—that they interrogated him and he's not waking up. Other people say that Colonel Telford—well. It's a small crew. Everyone's worried."

"What about Colonel Telford?" he asked her quietly.

"It's ridiculous," she said, her tone brusque. "I'm sure it's not true."

"Corporal," his voice was sharp.

Her eyes met his steadily.

"I heard that Eli and Telford had an argument outside the mess early this afternoon, and Eli said something indicating Telford was somehow responsible for Rush's current condition. That being said, I'm stuck in here and hearing this at least third hand, so—"

Young nodded. "Eli's had a rough time of it."

Barnes nodded back at him. "I know. I heard that too. It's just—" she broke off. "A lot of the guys, I mean, the military personnel, have really warmed up to the Doc. Greer's always talking him up." She shrugged. "He's getting a bit of a rep."

"A 'rep'?" Young asked, amused.

"As a badass motherfucker," Barnes said, "if you'll pardon the expression, sir."

That surprised a short laugh out of Young. "Yeah," he said. "Don't tell him I said this, but—I'd say that assessment isn't *too* far off base, corporal."

"Yes sir," she smiled, a quick, infectious flash of teeth.

"I'll see you later," he said, pushing away from her gurney.

"Tell the Doc I say hi," she murmured.

Young nodded at her, slightly bemused.

He wouldn't have been surprised to learn that Rush and Barnes had never exchanged more than ten words.

*God.* If it even *was* Rush back there.

Young passed TJ's office where yellow light spilled out of the doorway into the darkened infirmary. Her eyes flashed up at him as he appeared in the doorway. She gave him a quick nod and then returned to the report she was typing.

He rounded the corner at the back of the infirmary, pausing briefly to let his eyes adjust to the dark.

He froze in surprise at the sight in front of him.

Chloe was lying on Rush's gurney, shoulder to shoulder with him. They had a laptop open on their laps on which some kind of period movie featuring girls in long dresses was playing.

Rush looked up at him as he came in and gave him a small shrug, subtly rolling his eyes.

"Wait no, *watch*," Chloe said, elbowing him, her eyes glued to the screen. "This is the best part. Colin Firth is going to jump in the pond. Oh my god. I almost died the first time I saw this."

"Pessimae sunt signis," Rush said, his eyes half-closed.

"My standards are *not* low," Chloe snapped indignantly.

Young cleared his throat and Chloe jumped.

"Colonel," she said, propping herself up on one elbow. "Hi. Sorry. We were just—"

Young crossed his arms, trying to hide his amusement. "What are you watching?" he asked.

"Um, it's the A&E version of *Pride and Prejudice*."

"Dicite ei quod sex horarum," Rush said, glancing at her.

"Actually, why don't *you* tell him?" Chloe looked up at Young. "He's getting his English back really fast. I figured watching movies would help things along. His comprehension is much better than it was."

Young looked at Rush, raising his eyebrows, trying to shake his sense of *wrongness*, but failing entirely.

"What?" Rush snapped at him, his accent still off.

"I thought you wanted to tell me something," Young said mildly, opening his hands.

"It is six hours long," Rush said carefully.

"Oh my god," Chloe said. "That sounded obscene. Just—try to say it more like Mr. Darcy would. You know—it's six hours long," Chloe modeled some sort of generic British-sounding accent.

"It's six hours long," Rush repeated, narrowing his eyes at Chloe. It was an improvement, but still not remotely normal.

"What's six hours long?" Young asked.

Rush reached over and picked up the DVD case that was lying on the table next to the bed and shook it vaguely at him.

"The movie?" Young said. "How can it be six hours long?"

"It's actually more like a mini-series," Chloe said. "I may have not been entirely forthright about that. But it's not *six hours*."

"How long *is* it?" Young asked, feeling somewhat out of his depth.

"*Five* hours," Chloe said primly.

"Potestis eripere me?" Rush asked Young.

"Oh stop," Chloe said. "It's been helpful. You know it has. We're finishing the rest of it later."

"What did he say?" Young asked, watching Chloe disentangle herself from the computer wires and sit up.

"Nothing," she said, rolling her eyes.

Young looked at Rush. "You know, Barnes was just out there telling me that everyone thinks you're a badass motherfucker, and then I come in and you're watching a five hour version of *Pride and Prejudice*? That's not really very badass."

Rush narrowed his eyes. "Badass?"

"Kind of like awesome meets scary," Chloe said, "though I believe the term the colonel is looking for is BAMF."

Rush stared at her.



"Oh fine, that was pretty colloquial," she said, then fired off a line of Ancient at him as she clicked her laptop shut and grabbed the DVD cover out of Rush's hand.

"When did you learn Ancient?" Young asked her, raising his eyebrows.

"I've got a fair amount of time on my hands," Chloe murmured. "Plus, it's basically a requirement if you're going to be a part of the science team."

Rush murmured something at Young, which sounded distinctly disapproving.

"Yeah, yeah," Young said, rolling his eyes at the other man. "So teach me some Ancient, why don't you?"

Rush just looked at him.

Chloe watched them for a few seconds, then cleared her throat. "I'm um, I'm going to go, unless you need any translating. But like I said, he's getting better really rapidly." Without waiting for an answer, she disappeared around the corner.

"So," Young said, coming to sit on the edge of Rush's gurney. "Impress me with these new English skills of yours."

Rush shrugged at him, looking away.

"Come on," Young said, bringing a hand up to massage his temples.

"No," Rush murmured quietly.

"No?" Young repeated, sighing. "You're a lot of work. You know that? Come on. Talk to me."

"You don't like it," Rush said carefully. "I can tell."

It was true.

Young *didn't* like it.

"I'm worried," Young murmured into the darkness, "that's all."

"Why?" Rush whispered.

"Because, genius," Young said, his voice cracking. "I think you might not be you anymore."

Rush looked at him, his eyes dark and unreadable.

Young wasn't sure if he'd understood.

"I need to look at your mind," Young said, lifting a hand toward Rush's temple. "Really look."

"No," Rush said, tensing immediately, half coming up onto his elbows.

Young had been afraid of this.

"Why *not*?" he asked him, unable to entirely keep the misery out of his tone.

"I don't want that you would see it," Rush said, his phrasing slightly awkward, his accent still altered. He was sliding backward, inching away from Young.

"I have to," Young whispered. "Don't you understand? I *have* to."

"No," Rush said emphatically. "*You* do not fix *me*. I fix *you*. Later. Not now."

"I don't think you're quite grasping the nature of the problem," Young whispered, holding up both hands. "But that's okay," he murmured. "That's okay."

Rush stopped inching back.

"That's okay?" Rush repeated uncertainly.

"Yeah," Young said, reaching out carefully to touch his upper arm. "I have a different plan. Don't worry about it. It's a little bit underhanded. You know that word? Underhanded?" Young was projecting calm for all he was worth.

"Define underhanded," Rush said.

"Why don't you sit up for a minute," Young murmured, ignoring Rush's demand.

"Sit?"

"Yeah," Young said easily, managing to slide a few inches forward as he pulled Rush up.

"Why sit?" Rush asked, his tone suspicious. "Headache."

"Yeah, I know, genius, but here's the thing. You won't let me look in your head, right, and that's pretty much imperative. So I need to get you to do something else."

"Non intelligere te possit. Ut aliis verbis," Rush said quietly.

"Yeah," Young said, trying to keep his thoughts and hands steady. "Confused? You know that one?"

"What are you doing?" Rush whispered.

They were inches apart. The room was dark, lit only by the light that spilled from TJ's open door and from the base of the walls, where the emergency lights glowed a faint blue.

"Well, to put it colloquially, I'm trying to get you to make out with me, genius."

"Define 'make out,'" Rush whispered suspiciously, his eyes black in the darkness, his thoughts an unreadable swirl. His hair picked up the blue highlights from the lights that ran the perimeter of the room.

Young pulled him forward the last few inches, kissing him gently, his hands immediately loosening where they had closed around Rush's upper arms.

The scientist jerked back, surprised, his eyes flicking between Young's hands and the doorway in an anxious iteration of shifting gaze.

"Make out," Rush said wryly, his voice low and immediate.

"Yeah," Young said, giving him a half smile.

"Bad idea," Rush whispered. "For *you*."

"So you've said," Young murmured, "but you haven't convinced me. Or yourself either, I don't think."

"Define convinced," Rush murmured, his eyes wide and dark, the restlessness of his gaze slowing under the weight of Young's undemanding, sustained attention.

Young said nothing, watching Rush track the slow progression of his hands as he closed the space that separated them.

"Convinced is going to be you, in about thirty seconds," Young said, pulling him into a kiss made circumspect by the open, unconfining press of his hands over Rush's biceps.

After an interval of indecision, Rush brought both hands up, one coming around the back of Young's neck, pulling him in, weaving through his hair, the other resting over Young's collarbone, as if retaining the option of shoving him away.

Rush's thoughts coiled in waiting resistance, but Young gave him nothing to set himself against. He kept his hands and his thoughts open as he matched the scientist's cautious kiss with an undemanding reflection of effort.

He was trying not to scare the hell out of the other man.

So far, it seemed to be working.

When he felt Rush relax marginally, some of the tension bleeding from his shoulders and neck, Young slid his hands down until he had hooked his fingers into the belt loops of Rush's borrowed BDUs. He yanked the other man forward abruptly, sliding him over sheets and over blankets until no space remained between them.

Rush made a quiet, surprised noise in the back of his throat that dissolved beneath the pressure of Young's projected reassurance.

Slowly, he brought one hand up, his palm flat against Rush's back, feeling the rapid, repetitive beat of his heart.

And there, he waited.

He waited until he had managed to pull Rush half into his lap.

He waited until he could feel the tension draining out of the other man's shoulders, his back.

He waited until Rush's mouth was consistently opening under his own, letting him in, *letting* him—

Without warning all of Rush's mental resistance folded, and Young could see into his mind.

He had been prepared to encounter the AI, but instead—

God.

This was *not* the AI.

This was—

A wreck.

A pained, shattered *wreck* held together only by processing power and a strong, clear sense of self. There was no order, there was no context—comprehension was only occurring through force of will, but already, *already*, Rush was beginning to *rebuild* it, and Young understood that he had done this before.

He had done it after Anubis' device had shattered his mind.

Then he had done it again when Young had left him to die and the Nakai had taken him.

And now, he was doing it for a *third* time, and he—he just didn't want Young to see.

Young poured his presence through their link, providing energy, providing a sense of order, of temporal sequencing, and within the scientist's mind he was able to pull forward what was *Rush* and shove back what had come from Destiny. As he did so, the other man stilled under his hands, his heart rate slowing, his eyelids fluttering as his head tipped back, his awareness fading as Young flooded his entire mental landscape —

Ordering it.

Forcing *Rush* to order it.

After a few moments, Young carefully withdrew, trying to imitate the way that Rush had pulled out of his mind on other occasions—like rain, draining gently away, like the tide receding, with nothing left behind except a sense of calm.

The room shifted back into dark focus, the low lighting glinting to a painful edge where it reflected off the monitors and the curved metal of the walls. Young adjusted his grip to deal with the slow inevitability of Rush's unbalancing, one hand over his back, the other guiding the scientist's head down to his shoulder.

"Sorry genius," he whispered, but even as he said it, it did nothing to blunt the intensity of his relief.

It had told him the truth.

That thing in the chair.

Thank *god*.

"Hey," he murmured quietly into Rush's hair. "Are you okay?"

Rush sent him a vague sense of exhausted assent through their link, and, taking that as an invitation, Young snapped together with the scientist, shocked to feel how much his efforts had exhausted the other man.

"That tire you out, genius?" he whispered absently, running his fingers through the hair at the base of Rush's neck.

"No," the scientist murmured, his eyes shut, collapsed bonelessly against Young.

"You don't have even a remote idea of what I just did, do you?" Young whispered, soothingly, continuing to run his right hand through Rush's hair.

"Make out," Rush murmured against his shoulder.

"Yeah," Young whispered. "Close enough. I'll tell you later. Come on, genius. You need to lie down."

Young pressed him back, coming forward himself until he was lying halfway on top of Rush.

"Define close enough," Rush murmured.

"I'll tell you later," Young said propping himself up on one elbow to look down at the scientist.

"Mendacity," Rush murmured listlessly.

"*Mendacity*?" Young repeated incredulously. "That's at least a five dollar word. Are you calling me a liar? That's a bit hypocritical, don't you think?"

Rush stared at him for a minute, and Young was fairly sure he hadn't gotten much of that, but then he cocked his head and said, "Yes. Deceitful. Define hypocritical."

"God," Young said, "um, characteristic of being a hypocrite."

"Not helpful," Rush murmured.

"You. You're a hypocrite."

"You're bad at English," Rush replied, clearly annoyed. "I cannot be all these things."

"All what things?" Young asked him.

"Pain in the ass, genius, idiot, doc, hot mess, badass, convinced, tired, hypocrite."

"Yes you can. Who called you a 'hot mess'?"

"Chloe is better than you," Rush murmured, ignoring his question.

"Better at what?" Young said indignantly.

"English."

"Go to sleep," Young growled at him.

"Not tired," Rush murmured, his eyes mostly shut.

"Incorrect," Young said.

"Unlikely," Rush replied, smiling faintly at him.

"You're a lot of work."

"Link fixed," Rush murmured.

"*Our* link *is* fixed," Young corrected. "But yes, it is, fortunately."

"Stay anyway?"

"You're getting awfully lazy with your verbs and pronouns there, genius."

"You learn Ancient then. One day. Four hours awake *only*. Also? Very tired. You do something. No explaining." Rush narrowed his eyes.

"Okay," Young said dropping his head down to rest on Rush's shoulder. "You have a point there, I suppose."

"Staying?" Rush breathed.

"Obviously."

"Define 'obviously'." Rush seemed to be *trying* to keep himself awake.

Young frowned.

"It means yes, but like, really obviously yes."

"Worst definition. All day."

"Oh stop," Young murmured. "Something obvious is something you can clearly see. This is obviously an infirmary. I am obviously staying, because you can see that I am."

"Better," Rush said. "Marginally."

"Thanks," Young said dryly.

They were quiet for a minute, and Young could feel Rush struggling against sleep, still trying to order his mind.

"Talk," Rush murmured quietly.

"Go to *sleep*."

"*Talk*," Rush said insistently.

"You *never* want to talk."

"You talk."

Young sighed. "You are *incredibly* tired. Don't fight this, genius—"

*He inhales, pulling the stuff into his lungs. It's thick and viscous and heavy and choking him and even though he knows this is a part of it, he can't stop fighting. He thinks it would help if 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. God, he hopes it's Ancient, please, please let it be Ancient. But he suspects that it's not—their technology has always been kinder than this, crystals and delicate midair displays and beautifully redundant systems and demanding, yes, certainly, but not this way, not this way, and the sensation is horrible, terrifying, and he thinks of Gloria, Gloria, struggling to breathe, waiting for him. They all—all of them, they wait for him and he always comes too late. His hands come up to close around Telford's wrists, but that's all they do. He's going still.*

*It's silver.*

*And it's quiet.*

*His hair fans around him as his muscles relax and his head falls back. He feels Telford adjust his grip, finding his hands, interlacing their fingers—*

And *shit*, this one was Young's fault. No question about that.

The motion familiar by now, Young snapped his thoughts to the side, into—

"Son of a bitch," he Mitchell growls as Young tackles him to the grass. They go down hard, harder than Young intended, and he looks up just in time to see Telford field the interception, his outline dark against the pale blue sky. "That is what I'm talking about," Sheppard says, suddenly behind him, yanking Young to his feet, clapping him once on the back as he looks down at Mitchell, who's still lying there, eyes shut. After a moment Mitchell raises his head to glare at Jackson. "Jackson, what the hell was that? You threw it right to the guy." Telford opens his hands in an artless who-me type gesture and Sheppard smiles lazily. "This is somehow your fault," Mitchell says to Sheppard. "How come you always get the former football players and I always get the aliens?" Young reaches a hand down to Mitchell and pulls him to his feet with a grin. "You got first pick, Cam," Sheppard says mildly. "Stop choosing them." Mitchell smiles wryly. "You would think Teal'c would be awesome at this game. And Ronon? Come on. Don't you guys play football on Atlantis?" Sheppard cocks his head, running a hand through hair that's always a bit too long. "Nah. We mostly play golf, actually."

"Sorry," Young said, as Rush tensed, jerking subtly beneath him. "Sorry, that was my fault."

"Yes," Rush snapped, sounding awake, sounding *upset*. "So talk."

"What should I talk about?" Young asked, looking out into the darkness.

"Talk. *Idiot*."

"So. Pride and Prejudice? Are you kidding me? That is the most chick-flick of all chick flicks."

"For girls?" Rush murmured.

"You got it."

"Chloe is a girl."

"True. What I'm saying though is that it's *nice* of you to put up with such a boring movie."

"Too much killing," Rush murmured pensively.

Young raised his eyebrows.

"Um, too much *killing*? Which version were you guys *watching*? I'm pretty sure that last time I checked there was *no* killing in Pride and Prejudice."

"Too much killing *for Chloe*," Rush snapped disdainfully. "Not today. *Before*."

"Ah," Young said, "right."



He was *not* embarrassed.

"Idiot."

"Look, in my defense, you're being awfully vague, you know. But yeah. Chloe did take down a lot of Nakai."

"Not good." Rush sighed.

"I guess not. But on the upside, she's got some nice things coming her way. I think she might get proposed to at some point in the near future."

"Define proposed to."

"Um, married? Engaged?"

"Lieutenant Scott?" Rush asked.

"Yeah. He's the one."

Rush made a disapproving noise in the back of his throat.

"What's wrong with Scott?" Young asked defensively.

"Nothing." Rush shrugged without much energy. "Grad school is better."

"Just because they get married doesn't mean she won't go to graduate school."

"Maybe."

"Look you. I already told Scott that you were going to help Brody make an engagement ring."

"Presumptive."

Young snorted. "You have other plans?"

"Very busy," Rush said, looking up at him with dark eyes. "Tomorrow. Day after. Day after that. Fix ship."

"Come on. This is getting ridiculous, what are you, some kind of intergalactic refugee? Tomorrow, *I will be* very busy. I will be fixing the ship."

Rush sighed, his eyes flickering closed briefly. "Tomorrow I will be very busy fixing the ship."

"Good. But actually, you *won't* be, because you're on medical leave."

"You define medical leave," Rush said, and Young could *hear* him narrowing his eyes.

"No 'you.' Just 'define medical leave, please.' Please would be nice. Anyway, medical leave is where you sleep all day, watch movies, make engagement rings, no doing work. Like a sick day."

"No," Rush said. "I do not have medical leave."

"Yes you do."

"No."

"Yes."

"No."

"Um, yes. You're not winning this one. Pick something else to argue about."

"Fuck off," Rush said without much ire.

"How the hell are you ever going to go to sleep if you just keep pissing yourself off? Just try to think about nice things. *Nice*. Like where you grew up."

"It's not nice there," Rush murmured, clearly making more of an effort to speak in sentences after Young's 'intergalactic refugee' comment.

"Fine. I grew up somewhere nice. Six miles south of the North Platte River, actually."

"Where's that?"

"The intermountain west," Young said, unnecessarily smoothing Rush's hair back.

"Not the coast?"

"No. Not the coast. Are you just practicing your vocab or are you going somewhere with this?"

"I don't make out with Americans not from the coast. Policy. I have that as a policy."

"Too late," Young smirked at him.

"Not my fault," Rush murmured.

"You should have asked. Anyway, the west is nice. Very rugged terrain, lots of scenery and bears and pine forests and snow and outdoor sports. Hockey is very popular."

"Hockey?" His eyes were shut.

"Hockey in the winter, football in the fall, and baseball in the spring and summer," Young said quietly.

"Mmm," Rush said, managing to sound exhausted and unsurprised and a little bit disdainful at the same time.

"I know. A bit of overkill to play them all, right? But eventually I just stuck with the hockey. It can get quite vicious, you know. You'd probably be good at it. Unfortunately you don't have the right physique. You're built more like a sprinter—track and field kind of guy. Maybe a soccer player. Maybe. Maybe just captain of the math team."

Rush didn't answer.

"Are you asleep? *Finally?*" Young whispered.

No answer.

He gently brushed against Rush's thoughts, careful not to disturb the fading, disorganized patterns of the other man's dreams.

"Thank god." Young reached over carefully to grab Rush's mobile phone from the bedside table. He flipped it open to check the alarm settings and then rolled his eyes when he saw that it was set to go off at five hundred hours.

"Nice try, genius," Young murmured. He switched the phone to vibrate, reset the alarm, and then pocketed it.

TJ would see them at some point, but—she would understand.

He hoped.

# Alloy

February 20th, 2011

Brody frowns and looks critically at the hue of the metal.

It looks pretty uninspired.

It's more of a muddy brown than the golden color he'd been aiming for.

The pure copper had extracted from their spare wiring is *not* meshing well with the small piece of naquada-laced wreckage from the desert obelisk planet that he's currently melting in Destiny's machine shop.

This is terrible.

"That looks pretty great," Scott says, sounding impressed.

Scott is as bad as Park sometimes.

"It looks like crap," Brody replies.

"What do you mean? It's kinda lacy looking, you know? That's nice." Scott sounds encouraging.

"Nice if you're queen of the spiders," Brody says.

He waits a beat, then remembers that Volker is not here to make a counter-observation.

It's weird to be without him—they get paired up so much.

But Scott wanted to keep numbers to a minimum.

So it's just Scott and Brody.

And Rush.

And Greer.

Rush got invited because he's good at everything.

Greer got invited because he's going to be the best man if Chloe says yes, and he's also been assigned Rush-detail.

Or so it seems.

Everyone stares at Brody in silence.

Then, "queen of the *spiders*?" Greer echoes, looking at Rush.

Rush rolls his eyes.

Brody's not sure what to make of the Rush/Greer dynamic.

"It needs to be brighter," Brody clarifies. "More luster."

Volker would have gotten it.

"Let me see," Rush commands.

The scientist's feet are propped on one of the pieces of equipment that litters the room. He extends his hand in Brody's direction, palm up, but he's looking away. His other hand is welded to his temple, like he doesn't trust himself to stay steady on his chair if he does something as complicated as hold out his hand and focus on a moving target.

Brody would like to know how someone who's feeling as terrible as Rush *clearly* is, can manage to pull off a demeanor that's so dictatorial.

Yep.

Somehow, Rush manages to take the sick-and-injured thing and run with it, giving it a superior, highhanded, math-genius type bent.

Brody's sure that if he himself were, *right now*, made intergalactic-emperor-for-life he would *still* not be able to pull off imperious as well as Rush does—sick and exhausted and barely there as he is.

Also, what's the deal with that accent?

Maybe Eli will know.

Actually, Eli hasn't been in the best mood lately.

Maybe Park will know. Greer talks to her.

"Sure," he says, and he walks over to Rush and puts the fledgling, pulled-out piece of metal into his outstretched hand.

Rush looks at it for few seconds, turning it over.

"Zinc," he says, looking up at Brody as he hands the piece back to him. "Maybe zinc."

His sentences are much shorter than usual. Occasionally he turns a phrase a bit oddly. After listening to Rush struggle with it for the past half hour, Brody is pretty sure the guy is thinking in Ancient. He's thinking in Ancient and he's trying to pattern his speech based on what he's hearing, which is mostly a bunch of Americans.

The end result is a little strange.

Colonel Young told the science team explicitly that they were *not* to address Rush in anything other than English.

"Yeah," Brody says shortly, speaking in Ancient. "You're probably right."

Rush looks up at him with an expression that's so relieved it's worth Greer's requisite glower.

"If you can interleave the metals it might give it a very unique look," Rush says, speaking in Ancient, the words flowing easily, like they haven't in days, his expression clearing as he speaks. "I can't promise it will be aesthetically appealing, necessarily, but I think it's worth the attempt. You might lose some ductility, but that's hard to predict."

"It would suck if it shattered," Brody replies, still speaking in Ancient.

Rush glances sideways at Greer, who's watching him with an expression that's difficult for Brody to interpret.

But—Greer's not saying anything.

That's interesting.

"How's the attempt to locate the Nakai tracking device progressing?" Rush murmurs, holding the ring up to the light, as if he's still talking about the metal. "Colonel Young won't tell me a fucking thing."

Greer narrows his eyes.

Brody wonders if he recognized the word for Nakai.

Or, maybe, Young's name.

"We haven't found anything yet," Brody replies, still in Ancient, but now starting to feel guilty about it.

Rush is still on medical leave.

Colonel Young had been pretty intense about driving that one home.

"We're still in the brainstorming stages," Brody continued. "I think it's going to be affixed to the exterior of the hull, because they've been tracking the ship since before we got here and we know they never got on board."

"Oh," Rush says quietly, "they got on board. Early on. Very early on."

Something about the way he says it sends chills down Brody's spine.

"Doc," Greer snaps, as if he can tell from Rush's tone that something isn't right. "English. Come on."

"Fuck off," Rush says, but his tone falls far short of angry and ends up squarely in misery.

Greer just reaches over and claps him on the shoulder.

Rush looks awful.

He's pale, and he looks like he's lost weight in just these past few days, and he's got that fever-glazed look, and why he's *here* and not in the infirmary is beyond Brody.

Hopefully whatever he has is not contagious.

Brody starts melting the zinc he'd liberated from a sacrificed battery.

"You sure you want to be here?" Greer asks quietly from where he's leaning against a table, just a few feet from Rush, looking like he's poised to step in if Rush suddenly starts to pitch straight into the floor.

Rush sighs, like the sergeant has asked him that too many times. Then he fixes Scott with a penetrating look and says, "is it not *obvious* to you that Chloe should go to graduate school."

And whoa, there's an example of a turn of phrase that came out as pretty aggressive, but Brody's sure, well, *pretty* sure that Rush didn't mean it that way.

Unless he did.

Scott looks like he has no idea how to respond.

Brody can sympathize.

Is it a trick question?

Is it *even* a question?

It sounded more like a statement.

What's the correct answer?

Agree?

Disagree?

Maybe this is the Nicholas Rush version of the hey-nice-choice-for-your-future-spouse talk.

Or *maybe* it's the Nicholas Rush version of the you're-not-good-enough-for-Chloe talk.

"It's kind of a moot point at the moment, Doc," Scott says.

That's a good move.

Skirt the issue *and* join with the Greer-trend of calling Rush 'Doc.'

It makes things seem more—friendly.

"What do you mean?" Rush replies, bafflingly.

"Well, we're not on Earth, so—"

"Right," Rush says, *like he's forgotten*. "Well, after you get back, just keep in mind that she's extremely talented and it would be a *waste*—" he breaks off, like he's not sure how to complete the phrase he just started, and Brody can sympathize; in Ancient he's snarled himself up into a tangle of subordinate clauses. "Don't drag her to a military installation in the middle of nowhere," Rush finishes, backing out and rephrasing.

Everyone is slightly uncomfortable.

'After *you* get back?'

The significance of Rush's pronoun choice is not lost on Brody.

In fact, it seems lost on no one except for Rush himself.

Brody is glad the colonel is not here.

The metals are beginning to soften and blend together beneath his hands.

Scott is quiet for a moment as he looks at Rush.

"Maybe you can write her a letter," Scott says. "If she wants to go."

"Obviously," Rush says. "Obviously I'll write one for her."

Some of the tension seems to go out of Greer, and Scott smiles.

Like Rush's earlier statement was nothing more than an odd turn of phrase.

Like Rush has admitted that he plans on going back to Earth as well.

Rush and Brody lock eyes.

Rush has already written the letter.

He borrowed some paper and a pen from Brody to do it. Weeks ago.

Brody looks back down at the molten metal. He coaxes it out, drawing it again into a thin wire, setting it aside to cool so they can inspect the color.



Things have been weird between him and Rush ever since they found out that in an alternate timeline Brody founded a society that ultimately adopted the scientist as their deity.

Volker is never going to let him live that one down.

The thing is though, Brody has always admired Rush, with his confident, genius-je-ne-sais-quoi attitude, and his ability to code, and his Fields medal, and his ability to intimidate everyone in his path.

It makes whatever is happening to him that much more difficult for Brody to watch.

He wishes he understood it.

He wishes that he knew Rush or the colonel well enough to ask what the hell is going on between them—to ask what the hell is going on between Rush and the ship.

But he doesn't.

So he keeps working, trying to do what he can.

"Any advice?" Scott asks Rush, smiling, looking over in that disarming way he has.

Rush doesn't respond for a moment, and then he looks up at Scott. "Have a July wedding," he says.

That's oddly specific.

"July?" Scott echoes. "Why July? What does it matter on a starship?"

Rush looks at him for a moment. "That's my advice," he says. "July is nice."

"Um, okay," Scott says, guardedly, like he's not sure whether he's being insulted or not.

Greer is looking at Rush, his head tipped toward the floor, his arms crossed over his chest.

Rush gives the sergeant a one-shouldered shrug.

Brody looks away from them, carefully inspecting his handiwork. The metal is a multicolored, imperfectly blended alloy of the three materials, which swirl together unpredictably.

"Not bad," he says, picking up the nascent ring with pliers and showing it to Scott.

"That looks *awesome*," Scott says.

"Well shit," Greer says.

Rush just nods at him.

## Chapter Thirty Eight

The lighting illuminated Destiny's corridors and rooms with its usual yellow glow. The hum of the FTL drive vibrated under Young's feet as he made his way toward the control interface room.

In the back of his mind, Young could feel Rush's thoughts swirling with irritation, which, upon inspection, seemed to be primarily directed at TJ.

Carefully, he withdrew, fairly sure that Rush hadn't detected his intrusion.

That seemed to be happening more and more.

When he rounded the doorway to the CI room, Eli and Brody were sitting side by side behind one of the monitor banks, in the midst of what looked to be an intense, quiet conversation.

"I see what you're saying," Eli said, his tone low and barely carrying the twelve feet that separated him from Young. Eli gave Brody a significant look from under his eyebrows. "But if it's true that the Nakai had been on board Destiny *a long time ago*, then one—why did they leave? And two—why didn't they, or *couldn't* they subsequently reboard? I'm just a bit—I don't know, I guess skeptical is the word. What *exactly* did he say to you?"

"It was one of those pronouncement-type things that he does, and then Greer—" Brody broke off abruptly as he saw Young standing in the doorway. "Colonel. Hi."

"Hi," Young said, narrowing his eyes.

Brody seemed nervous.

"Oh hey," Eli said, relaxing his shoulders, deliberately opening his posture. "We were just talking about the Nakai tracking device that we have yet to get the heck off this ship. Can we talk to Rush about this soon? He's going crazy with this enforced medical leave *anyway*, as you may have noticed."

Eli *also* seemed nervous.

"Rush can go back on duty when his fever breaks and not before, unless there's some kind of emergency," Young replied, his tone mild.

"Yeah," Eli said, drawing out the word, "and what are the chances of us having an *emergency* any time soon? Basically zero. Track record be damned. That's what I say." He gave Young a wry smile.

Brody reached out to rap his knuckles against the console. "Knock on wood," he said, looking up at the ceiling.

"That's not wood," Eli pointed out.

"Do you see any wood around here?" Brody asked shortly.

"Um, no, not really."

"Seriously guys," Young said, sharpening his tone. "I don't want to bring Rush in on this until we have to. He puts on a good show, mostly, but—" Young broke off, waving his hand.

"I heard that you let Telford talk to him this morning," Eli said. "How did *that* go?"

"About like you might expect," Young said, feeling drained just *recalling* the event. "Certain parties getting frustrated, certain parties getting pissed off, certain parties pushing really goddamn hard, and then third parties not being happy about that."

"Sounds fun," Eli said dryly.

"Yeah. Really fun." Young reached up to rub his jaw. "But it was also pretty obvious that despite all the bitching he's doing at the moment, he's exhausted and sick as hell. Maybe you guys can put something together and then run it by him? Much as he's demanding his laptop, I really can't see him putting in more than half an hour of actual work at this point."

"Yeah," Eli said, hesitating, "I'm sure we *can*, it just seems like—" he broke off, looking at Brody, and then plowed ahead. "It seems like he might, *possibly*, have some information about this tracking device."

"If he knew *anything* about it, don't you think he would have *told*—" Young broke off, dropping his head forward, reaching up to press his fingers into his temple out of habit.

He sighed, then walked forward, pulling up a stool to sit with the pair of them.

They watched him silently. Like they were waiting for an explosion.

"So. Of course he knows something about it. Of *course* he does." Young opened his hand and waved it at Brody and Eli in a loose circular motion. "What. Just tell me."

"Um," Brody said, his expression somewhat alarmed, "I don't think it's as bad as all that. Yesterday I happened to see him when we were doing that thing for Lieutenant Scott,

and he happened to ask me how the search for the tracking device was going." Brody stopped there.

"And then?" Young finally prompted him.

"And then I said that we were focusing on the exterior of the hull, because that's likely where the Nakai would have been able to access historically, because they never got on board the ship prior to our arrival, and they were *already* tracking it." Brody paused again.

"And *then*?" Young growled.

"And then he said that they *had* gotten on board, early in Destiny's mission."

Young stared at him. "You're kidding me."

"Um, no?"

"Anything *else*?" Young growled.

"Nope, that was it. I didn't get to ask any follow-up questions."

"When were you guys going to tell *me* this?"

"Hey, don't look at me, I just heard about it five minutes ago," Eli said, his hands open.

"I, um," Brody broke off, clearly uncomfortable. "I figured you already knew. Probably"

"That's great. That's just *great*," Young said, more to himself than anyone else.

"Hey," Eli snapped, his voice suddenly sharp. "There's no indication he knows anything about the tracking device. All he knows is that the Nakai boarded Destiny at some point in the past, which is information he *probably* got from the ship's memory banks, and might not have even been consciously *aware* of until Brody said something. I'm pretty damn sure that he doesn't have some kind of *secret, pro-Nakai agenda*." Eli's eyes were narrowed.

"I wasn't suggesting that he did," Young said evenly. "I just wish he'd *talk* to me sometimes. Is that *all right* with you?"

"Yeah," Eli said, his voice suddenly smooth with a forced nonchalance as he pushed back from the table abruptly. "Yeah, of course," he shrugged, but his eyes skittered away, out into the room.

Young looked at him steadily, then got to his feet.

"Let's take a walk," he said to Eli.

"Kinda busy right now," Eli said, still not looking at him.

"Eli," Young said quietly.

"Okay," Eli said finally. He shut his laptop and tucked it under one arm. "See you later," he murmured to Brody as they left.

For a moment they walked in silence and Eli fidgeted with his pen, clicking it a few times. Every so often he reached up to rub his eyes, which were nearly back to normal, though still a faint red.

"Do they still hurt?" Young asked him.

"The eyes?" Eli paused. "No, not really. They're itchy mainly. It feels like I have something in them pretty much constantly, which is super annoying. I think they're on the mend though. It's about time, after five days." He paused again. "How's all your—stuff? Injuries and whatnot?"

"My back is pretty much fine," Young said. "The arms still hurt like hell though."

"Yeah, seriously. That was disgusting."

"Um," Young said, amused. "Thanks."

"Just, you know. Telling it like it is. Or was. Whatever."

Young turned onto the observation deck, which was, to his relief, empty. He shut the door behind them.

"Oh crap," Eli said, giving him a smile that was probably intended to come out as dry, but instead, just looked raw. "Observation deck? That's like—the conversational big guns. That's like a 'sit down, Luke, the girl you've been crushing on is actually your twin sister' type of conversational venue."

Young raised his eyebrows.

"Oh please," Eli said. "Don't give me that. I distinctly heard you make a Star Trek reference to Wray last year, so you can just stop pretending you're not a closet nerd."

Young snorted. "Sit down, Luke."

Eli flashed him a quick, nervous smile, but sat, holding his computer to his chest reflexively for a moment before he seemed to realize what he was doing, and slowly lowered it to the floor.

Young sat beside him.

For a moment they looked out at the blur of stars at FTL.

"So," Eli said, unable to stand the quiet for more than fifteen seconds. "Am I getting The Talk?"

"*The* talk?" Young asked. "Nah. I save things like that for Rush. He gets *The* Talk about once a week these days. You're just getting *a* talk. I've been giving them out like candy lately."

Eli smiled briefly, and Young watched as his shoulders started to lose some of their tension.

"So," Young said quietly, "you're doing a fantastic job. In pretty much every arena."

He left it at that and looked away from Eli, out at the blurring stars.

After a moment, Eli spoke.

"Um, that's *it*? That's the talk? No stop-snapping-at-people-like-you-have-PTSD-to-the-max conversation? No help-the-lazy-gamer-cope-with-torture speech? No describe-what-it-was-like-to-have-something-tear-through-your-mind demi counseling session?"

Young shrugged. "One," he said counting off on his fingers, "snap away. Two, you're not a lazy gamer, you're an experienced intergalactic explorer who would be an asset to any SG team. Three, you don't need to describe it unless you want to, though I hear it can be helpful."

He looked back out at the stars.

"Experienced intergalactic explorer, eh?" Eli said. "I like the sound of that."

Young smiled faintly.

They sat in silence for a few moments.

Then he spoke again.

"Eli," he said. "There are some things in life that get easier as you go along. That benefit from experience. Some things that—after you survive them, make you a stronger person. They make you who you are."

Eli said nothing.

"And then there are the other kinds of things. The kinds of things that get harder as you go. The things that break you down, instead of making you stronger. The things that erode who you are. The mistakes that you make that you can't undo. That follow you. That never let you go. The things that—that will never be done. That will never be finished."

"Yeah," Eli said. "I know about those things. Maybe better than you think."

"Actually," Young replied. "I have no doubt that you understand them very well."

"They just—poison the rest of it," Eli said quietly.

"Yeah," Young replied. "Anything in particular on your mind?"

"A few things," Eli said thickly. "Ginn, for one. She was—she was really—" He exhaled, one long, shuddering breath.

"Yeah," Young said quietly. "She seemed smart. Smart, and decisive, and brave."

"And um—" Eli said, his voice wavering. "She liked me. She like—*liked* me, liked me. Do you know how *rare* that is?"

"I can't imagine it's *that* rare," Young said, feeling his mouth twist as he suppressed a smile.

"Oh trust me," Eli said, looking away, his eyes glittering. "It's rare."

"You're what? Like *twenty*?" Young said dubiously.

"Um, *twenty-five*. But that's not the point. She was—she was different. And she didn't deserve what happened to her. She didn't deserve to be murdered and she didn't deserve to be locked away. Probably—probably forever."

Young nodded.

"She's not even dead," Eli whispered. "Somehow, that makes it worse. Do I mourn her and move on? That seems like giving up. That would be giving up. But at the same time, how the *hell* are we supposed to find her another *body*? It seems impossible."

"Yeah," Young said quietly.

"So instead she just haunts me all my life? Not alive, not dead, just waiting. *Waiting* for me. For always. Knowing that, knowing *that*—how could I *ever* be with *anyone* else?"

"I don't know," Young whispered.

"And then there's the other stuff," Eli said. "You know."

Oh, Young knew.

"The guilt is the worst part," Eli murmured.

"Eli," Young said firmly. "You have nothing to feel guilty about. *Nothing*. You got that?"

"Easy to say," Eli whispered. "Easy to rationalize, on a good day, when nothing is trying to kill us, when no one is dying. But, um, *less* easy to rationalize when you spend twenty minutes, twenty goddamn *minutes* being tortured for information and it seems like a *lifetime*, like every second might be the one that finally kills you—and you remember that they had him for a week. For over a *week*, oh *fuck*—" Eli broke off, his

throat closing off, his eyes squeezing shut, his hands curling around the edge of the bench on the observation deck in a white-knuckled grip.

"Yup," Young said shortly, shutting his own eyes. "I know, Eli. But—that wasn't your fault, okay? That was my fault. *Entirely* my fault." After a moment, he reached over, one hand gently closing around Eli's shoulder.

"It was all of our faults," Eli said. "You. Rush. Me."

"It was between *me and Rush*, Eli," Young said insistently. "You had nothing to do with it. *Nothing*."

"Like it or not," Eli murmured, "I was a part of it, if only because I knew *everything*. He was trying to undermine your authority in a horrible, callous way," Eli whispered. "But I kept it quiet." He paused, taking a deep breath. "And then, I *let* you leave him there. I was the only one, the *only* one who could have prevented it. And I did *nothing*. I *said* nothing."

Young looked down.

"Because I thought he deserved it," Eli said, "for doing that to you. And I thought it would be *better*. One of those tough command decisions that people are always talking about." He smiled unhappily. "Well, I was fucking wrong about that one, wasn't I?"

Young said nothing.

"Because, as it turns out, no matter what they do, no one really deserves to be left for dead—to die of dehydration or exposure or *whatever*. No one deserves to be *tortured*. No one deserves to be surgically implanted with a fucking transmitter. And then—what happened after. Chloe. The endless *attacks*."

Young said nothing.

"And you know what the worst part is? The part I really *can't stand* is how he seems to not think of it as a big deal. Have you *noticed* this? It drives me *insane*. I let you leave him, and not only that, I *found* the evidence that he'd erased and I *gave* it to you and I told *no one*—and *he doesn't care*. He treats me the same as ever. Not only that, but I'm pretty sure, I'm *certain* actually, that he cares about us. After all of that. He gives a damn. In his way. Oh fuck. Not even in 'his way'—in the normal human way."

They looked out at the stars.

"Eli," Young said quietly, "he treats you the same because he doesn't blame you. Not at all. In fact, it wouldn't surprise me if he liked *you more* for the role you played, which



was *only* to find evidence of wrongdoing and turn it over to your commanding officer. Furthermore, I never told you explicitly ahead of time what I was going to do, and then afterwards—you couldn't have done anything about it anyway. This is between Rush and myself, and we've worked past it. Mostly. True, the consequences keep showing up to bite us in the ass, but that's the nature of consequence. It's inescapable."

Eli looked over at him, expression tight, eyes red. "It's a pretty good act," he whispered. "But I can't even *imagine* how difficult this is for you. You care about him. I *know* you do. Everyone knows."

"Yeah, he's sort of an acquired taste," Young said with some difficulty, managing to diffuse the tension, gently deflecting Eli's observation.

"Is he getting better?" Eli asked, mercifully changing the subject.

Young shrugged. "His English is improving, it's mostly back to normal. He still has a fever. He still feels like shit. His mind is a wreck, but he's fixing it."

"What do you mean his *mind* is a *wreck*?"

"I don't know how to describe it—it's just disorganized, more so than usual, and he's having just, really horrific full-on Technicolor flashbacks."

"Join the club," Eli said wryly.

"Yeah," Young murmured. "Unfortunately, he has more than just his own memories to flash back to."

"Oh. Great. That must be fun."

"Yup," Young said dryly.

They were quiet for a few seconds, then Young spoke again. "There's something I've been meaning to ask you," he said, watching the flickering light play off Eli's face. "Did you ever come across anything in the database about the person who sits in the chair combining with the AI?"

"You mean like, how he sometimes links up with the ship to do stuff?" Eli asked, narrowing his eyes, clearly uncertain.

"No. The AI itself. Two personalities merging into one."

"No," Eli said, drawing out the word. "I don't understand how that would even be possible." He paused. "I suppose it is true that in a lot of ways, the existence of a person who can sit in the neural interface chair and run the ship ends up having a lot of *overlap* with the role of the AI. The AI kept Destiny going while we weren't here, and it could take over again, to some degree, if something happened to Rush—but its role is

not well defined in the context of having someone like Rush on board. But that overlap is more like—in terms of job description. Not cognitive overlap."

"Interesting," Young said.

"They probably intended the AI to run in the background, keep doing some of the day-to-day stuff, and then take over if necessary. That's my best guess. I haven't seen it around much for the past month or so."

"It appears to you?" Young asked, surprised.

"What? Oh—no. Not as a person or anything, just in the systems of the ship. By this point it's surrendered almost everything over to us."

"Not everything," Young said, looking back out at the stars.

"So I'm getting the feeling that you're asking me about this for a reason."

"The AI and I have been clashing lately. Over Rush."

"The AI is probably not something you want to 'clash' with," Eli said, making scare quotes, looking at him in concern. "It's got a lot of latitude in terms of what it can do, and—"

"I know," Young said, holding up a hand. "Believe me, I know. But ever since we put Rush in the chair two days ago, I haven't seen it. It should be out and about by now and I just find its absence, generally—concerning."

"Hmm," Eli said. "Well, from my end, I would say it *should* be out and about again. It's reintegrated fully with the ship. What does Rush have to say about it?"

"He hasn't said anything to me about it, and I haven't asked him."

"Didn't he freak out last time it went missing?"

"Yeah—though I don't know that he so much personally freaked out as Destiny and or the AI itself managed to dump a shit ton of dopamine or whatever into his brain to make him really *want* to sit in the chair."

"Um, *why*?"

"It was trying to do some in-depth counseling, I think."

"Counseling."

"Yeah."

"Like, *psychological* counseling?"

"Yeah. It was pretty invasive and weird and kind of traumatizing."

"Right. You got snapped in on that one."

"Yeah, I think it wanted both of us."

"I'm just—really glad that I'm not you guys. Either of you. God. So—what was it trying to *achieve*?"

"It was trying to convince him that his wife forgave him for the fact that he wasn't there for her when she died."

Eli leaned forward, elbows on knees, dropping his face into his hands. "That is messed up. *Messed up*."

"Somehow it was both extremely realistic and extremely transparent. Sophisticated and naïve."

"Kind of like the AI itself, it sounds like," Eli murmured.

"Yeah. He saw through it right away."

"He would," Eli said dryly. "So hence the drinking that night?"

"Hence the drinking."

They were quiet for a moment.

Eli sighed. "I'll look into this combining thing. As far as why you haven't seen the AI around—I can't say for sure."

"But you have a theory?" Young prompted.

"Just a hunch. Not a theory."

"Let's have it then."

"Well, maybe it's letting us put him back together. Without interference."

"Maybe," Young said quietly.

They were silent for half a minute before Eli fidgeted and spoke again. "In the meantime, though, I have a campaign contribution for you." He reached down to grab his laptop and ejected the disc that was inside.

"What's this '*campaign*' I keep hearing about?" Young asked him.

"Well," Eli said, "there are two campaigns, actually. This little item is courtesy of my Colonel-Young-is-an-idiot-and-requested-nothing-from-Earth campaign." He passed Young the disc.

"What?" Young asked.

"Not to be confused with the almost as popular increase-the-cultural-literacy-of-Nicholas-Rush campaign."

"*What?*"

Eli smiled. "So it *is* true. Neither of you *ever* set foot in the rec room. I always suspected, but—"

"We have a rec room?"

"Um, yeah, it's basically an empty room with a deck of cards in it, but people hang out there. Now that we have some ping-pong balls, things have finally gotten interesting. You know who's surprisingly good at ping-pong? Volker. Weird, right? But you can kinda see it. *Anyway*, there was a sign-up sheet for people to donate some of their five-pounds of personal items to either one of you."

Young stared at him, entirely unsure of what to say. He looked down at the disc he was holding. It was a burned DVD, labeled in Eli's scrawling hand.

"Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid? I love this movie." He smiled faintly.

"Well," Eli said, smiling in return, "you're not the only one. After what, two and a half *years* of trying to engage Rush in conversation about basically every form of media invented by humanity, this was the single piece of information that he ever gave up to me, and only after I asked him about something he *quoted*."

"The time loop device," Young said, remembering with a quick smile.

"Yeah," Eli said. "It was really only when *you* called him Cassidy that I realized he'd *quoted* something. As you're not typically one for fun nicknames. Anyway, I heard TJ's letting him out of the infirmary today because he's driving her crazy, so you're going to need something to convince him to stay lying down."

"True," Young said faintly.

"So go. Have your date night."

"Eli. We do not have *date nights*."

Eli looked at his watch. "Dinner and a movie? Sounds like a date to me."

When Young opened the door to his quarters, he was fully expecting to find Rush, based on his instinctive sense of the other man's location.

What he was *not* expecting, however, was to find TJ *and* Varro *both* in his quarters as well.

They were sitting together in front of the couch where Rush was lying.

Apparently—

Watching a movie?

"Oh hey, colonel," TJ said, from where she was seated on the floor next to the couch.

"Popcorn?" She held the bowl out toward him.

//What the *hell*?// Young projected in Rush's direction.

//How uncomfortable *you* feel about this is matched only by how uncomfortable *I* feel about this,// Rush projected with some difficulty, his thoughts wavering painfully as his eyes flicked up toward Young.

"Um sure, thanks, TJ," he said, walking forward slowly. "What are you guys doing?"

"Watching a movie," TJ said.

The popcorn was unbelievably delicious.

"I know, it's good, right?" TJ murmured, watching his face.

//This is *bizarre*. Why are TJ and Varro having a *date* in *my* quarters? With *you*.//

//I think this is less a 'date' and more a function of Tamara's preference for continuous oversight. She didn't trust me not to *leave immediately*, which I would have done, by the way.//

//But then—why is *Varro* here?//

"What movie are you watching?" Young asked, trying to keep his voice neutral.

//Probably because he doesn't want to leave her alone with me,// Rush replied, the strength of his projection waning a bit.

"Inception," TJ said.

"I've never heard of it," Young replied. "Is that even really a word?"

//Why? What does he think *you're* going to do to *TJ*?// Young projected, his eyes flicking back to Rush.

//I don't know. You must admit that I did relentlessly hunt down and then cold-bloodedly kill one of his people. Plus—// Rush broke off, flipping instinctively to regular speech as the effort of projecting became too much. "Plus, You can't really blame him. I seem somewhat—" he broke off waving a hand vaguely, searching for the appropriate word, and then just going with, "insane."

Everyone stared at him.

"Well, yeah, *now* you do," Young replied acidly.

Varro looked up at Young, clearly extremely uncomfortable. "Are you and he—"

"Yeah," Young said, not waiting for the other man to finish his question. "It's a long story. But he's *mostly* not crazy, and he's not going to murder TJ, if that's what you're thinking."

"Thanks for the ringing endorsement there," Rush snapped, his accent starting to resurface along with his irritation.

"Um, great," Varro said, looking not at all reassured.

Everyone was silent for a moment, looking at each other.

On the laptop screen, the movie continued to play.

"So Inception is a *new* movie," TJ said into the awkward silence. "That's why you haven't heard of it."

"It's fucking terrible," Rush added.

"What are you talking about?" Varro said. "This is *amazing*. I've never seen anything like it."

"That's because you've never seen a fucking film in your life. I fucking *despise* it," Rush snapped, and for some reason his thoughts were starting to spiral into something distressed and panicky.

Young wasn't sure exactly what it was that was setting him off.

TJ reached forward and shut the laptop, her expression freezing in distress.

//Hey,// Young projected as much calm as he could in Rush's direction. //It's just a stupid movie.//

"Yes," Rush said, bringing both hands to his face and then forcing himself abruptly into a seated position. "Scio. Vultus, discedant volo ego solus."

"That wasn't English," Young snapped.

"You're not fucking English."

"Um, as insults go, I've heard you do better," Young said, watching in surprise as Rush managed to launch himself into a standing position.

He swayed unsteadily and TJ shot to her feet as Young stepped in to grab his elbow, steadying him.

Immediately, Rush pulled away.

"Don't touch me," Rush hissed. "Don't fucking *touch* me."

"Fine," Young said mildly, putting a hand out to stop TJ from reaching forward.

He could feel Rush making a huge effort to rein in his rising panic.

They watched Rush as he backed away unsteadily and then turned to duck into the bathroom.

Young was fairly certain that he'd locked the door behind him.

"Okay," TJ said into the silence, drawing out the word. "No Inception. Got it."

"Not your fault, TJ," Young said.

"You going to be able to talk him down?" TJ asked quietly, bending gracefully to pick up her laptop.

Young and Varro watched her for a moment, and then, as if by some sixth sense, their eyes snapped to each other, narrowing slightly.

"Yeah," Young said, breaking his gaze away from Varro to look back at TJ, "But—" he looked at his watch. "Maybe not before dinner ends. Can you send someone by with —"

"Already taken care of," TJ said, indicating a bag at the foot of the coffee table with her eyes.

"Thanks," Young said quietly.

"Make sure he eats," TJ murmured, her expression unhappy. "His meds are in there too. And um," she lowered her voice, glancing at the bathroom. "His laptop is at the bottom of the bag. I took it away from him this morning, but I didn't have the heart to keep it."

Young rolled his eyes. "Yeah. I know how you feel."

He watched them walk away, TJ angling her head toward Varro as he bent to say something to her. She smiled, and Young turned away, letting the door close.

He rested his forehead against the cool metal for a moment, resisting the urge to sigh.

In the back of his mind, Rush's headache dug into him tenaciously.

He turned and shucked off his jacket, draping it over the back of the couch. He set his radio down on the table and pulled his boots off, keeping in faint contact with Rush's thoughts.

He gave the other man fifteen minutes on principle, then knocked on the bathroom door.

No answer.

He turned around, leaning back against the door. After a moment, he bent his knees, sliding down to the floor, where he sat, looking out into the room.

//You know,// Young projected conversationally through the door, //Mostly it's *teenage girls* that lock themselves in bathrooms, or so I hear.//

//You're misinformed. It's the general privilege of the mentally unsound.//

//You're not mentally unsound,// Young replied, trying to conceal any uncertainty in his own thoughts.

//That's nice of you to say,// Rush projected back, his thoughts fading out with the effort of focusing and directing his consciousness. //It's difficult to control something as complicated as a human mind from the top down.//

//I'll bet it is,// Young projected back at him. //And speaking of which, want to open the door? You're exhausting yourself with all this projecting.//

//Infinitus est vis mea.//

//English, please.//

//My energy is limitless.//

//Are you quoting? You're getting awfully abstract there, genius. Plus, you'll forgive me if I'm somewhat skeptical of that statement, seeing as you're currently splayed out on my bathmat.//

Rush sent him a wave of misery.

//Come on. What do you say about opening the door?//

//Fine.//

The door abruptly slid open directly behind him, and Young fell back into the bathroom.

"God, *Rush*. A little warning would have been nice."

"You said 'let me in,' and I said 'fine.' What more warning do you *want*?"

Young twisted around to look at him. Rush was curled on the floor, his hands partially tucked into the sleeves of his jacket, his feet bare except for the bandage that still covered the left one. At some point during the day TJ had apparently let him up to shower and shave. His eyes were shut.

"You're a lot of work," he said.



"I know," Rush sighed.

Young sat up, leaning against the wall, and looked down at him.

"Let's go get drunk," Rush murmured without looking at him.

"Yeah, okay," Young said. "That sounds like a fantastic idea. I'll find you some shoes. Let's just go get you completely *trashed*, hmm?" He reached out and tugged gently on a piece of Rush's hair.

"No need to be so sarcastic about it," Rush murmured, smiling faintly.

"You *already* can't walk in a straight line."

"I'm sure I could,"

"I doubt it, genius."

Young reached out, running his fingers over Rush's shoulders.

"Stop being so nice to me," Rush said, sounding defeated.

Young snorted. "Yeah. You definitely don't deserve it. I think you almost made TJ cry, you bastard."

Silence.

"Are you serious?"

"No," Young said quietly. "She's tough. So what the hell is wrong with Inception?"

"Nothing."

"Yeah. I can see how that would make you flip out and lock yourself in the bathroom."

"It's just too much like my life."

"Now I *definitely* have to see this movie," Young said mildly. "Come on. Your life is like A Beautiful Mind, meets, I don't know, fucking Independence Day."

"I haven't seen *either* of those, and also, I'm fairly sure that you're insulting me."

"I thought you didn't want me to be so nice."

"Yes well," Rush murmured, vaguely waving a hand before dropping it back down to the deck plating.

"Let's get off this floor," Young murmured. "What do you say?"

"No. Nisi nos bibere, ego hic maneat."

"Now you're just being lazy. Speak *English*." With that, Young dragged Rush up into a sitting position.

"Are you *sure* we can't go drinking?" Rush murmured, with his eyes still shut.

"Yes. I'm very sure. We can, however, eat dinner."

He pressed the back of his hand against Rush's forehead, feeling the heat that still emanated from his skin.

"Still there," Rush murmured. "These antivirals don't do shit."

"TJ said they might take a while put a dent in your viral load."

"Viral load." His tone was disdainful. "Biologists put on a good show, but it's all fucking guesswork. Have you realized this?" Rush murmured.

"Um, I'm pretty sure *they* don't feel that way about it."

"That's very fucking *diplomatic* of you, *colonel*," Rush said dryly, his normal accent again edging back in as he shot to his feet with a sudden expenditure of energy. He overbalanced immediately, but caught himself on the edge of the sink.

Young looked up at him from where he was still seated on the floor.

"I can't believe you're trying to pick a fight with me about—I don't even know what you'd call that. Biology as a discipline?" Young stood, smiling faintly at him. "I just want to eat dinner."

Rush looked over at him, hands still braced against the sink. His hair was falling into his eyes, and he shook it back, looking over at Young. "I'm not picking a fight with you," he said tiredly. "If I were, you'd know."

"Would I? You're so damn mercurial, it's hard to tell sometimes."

"Yes well. *You're* terribly fucking *reliable*," Rush shot back.

"Was that supposed to be an insult?"

"Oh absolutely," Rush said, looking down, looking away, hiding his twisted smile.

"Come on, genius," Young said, pulling him away from the sink, dragging Rush's arm across his shoulders.

"I can *walk*," Rush said, trying to pull away.

"Yeah, you sure as shit can," Young replied mildly as he pulled right back. "And then you're going to tear open your foot again for what? For the hell of it? Don't you feel crappy enough for something like *five* people already? Just try to take your goddamn weight off it, will you?"

"It doesn't *matter*," Rush said. "I'm just going to tear it open again eventually, possibly even on purpose."

"That's the spirit."

Young dragged Rush over to the bed and then retrieved the dinner that TJ had left for them.

"Oh my god," Young said as he opened the bag. "This looks like actual food." He pulled out two MREs—mac and cheese and spaghetti with meat sauce, as well as potato chips and cookies that incredibly, looked homemade. There was a note with the cookies that read:

*For the Col. Young is an idiot campaign. PERISHABLE. James.*

Wordlessly, he passed the note over to Rush.

Rush glanced at it briefly, then passed it back to Young.

"Interesting," he said, leaning back on one arm, letting his eyes fall shut.

"Interesting?" Young repeated. "*That's* your response?"

"I find it interesting that I can't read English," Rush said mildly.

Young stared at him.

"You're serious," he said finally.

"Yes," Rush murmured with a kind of resigned exhaustion. "Yes I am, actually."

"God *damn* it, Rush," Young snapped, hearing his voice rise.

Rush opened his eyes abruptly, giving Young a somewhat startled look. "I'll get it back. Most likely."

"Most *likely*? Shouldn't you have it back *already*?"

Rush shrugged again. "If I spent five minutes staring at that note I could probably figure out what it says. But why don't you just tell me?" His tone was soothing, as if *he* were trying to calm *Young* down.

Which was, of course, utterly ridiculous.

Young shoved it back at him. "Do it."

Rush's expression flashed briefly into surprised disdain before settling on incredulous. "No."

"You're doing it right now."

"Why?"

"Because I want to know you *can*."

Rush's thoughts, which had been a disorganized swirl briefly crystalized into something hard and determined before shattering apart. The scientist's eyes narrowed.

"I'm not doing it."

"Yes you *are*."

"Un-*fucking*-likely." Again, Young noticed that his original accent had crept back in.

They paused for a moment, looking at each other.

The room was silent other than the low, almost imperceptible hum of the FTL drive.

Young could tell that the scientist was making a concerted effort to stay calm.

"You're afraid," Young snapped, unable to keep the accusation out of his tone. "You're afraid you won't be able to do it."

Silence.

Rush focused on him for a long moment, his thoughts and his breathing beginning to steady—as if something about Young's appearance, or words, or mind had granted the scientist some insight.

"Close," Rush said finally, giving Young a faint smile, his accent stronger than ever, "But you haven't *quite* got it. Not quite."

"*What* then?" Young said quietly.

"I'll do it later with an actual *book*, not some colloquialism-laden, hand-written *scrap*, all right? Let's just eat dinner." With that, Rush reached forward in what was clearly an attempt to diffuse the situation and grabbed the container of cookies, examining it with narrowed eyes. "So who are these from, then?"

"James," Young said, giving in to the change of subject reluctantly.

"Interesting. Have you noticed that people have been *giving* you things recently?" Rush asked, sounding puzzled and annoyed, as he made an effort to deflect and hold Young's attention. He shoved the cookies back in Young's direction without eating one.

"What kind of things have you gotten?" Young asked mildly, trying to let go of his frustration.

"Eli gave me an entire digital array of films, most of which I've never heard of, arranged in the order that he wants me to *watch* them. I find this to be extremely optimistic on his part."

"Anything else?"

"Yes actually, mostly media files of different kinds, though Tamara got me a *shirt* of dubious aesthetic value."

"Yeah, I think those are all campaign contributions," Young said, smiling slightly in spite of himself

"Campaign?" Rush repeated.

"Yeah. Before everyone submitted their requests for personal items from Earth, Eli started a campaign to increase your cultural literacy."

Rush stared at him. "You're joking."

"Nope. In fact, I'm pretty sure he named it the 'Increase-the-cultural-literacy-of-Nicholas-Rush campaign'."

Rush continued to stare at him.

"He likes you," Young said, raising his eyebrows.

"I know," Rush said, his eyes closing briefly. "I can't imagine that there's not some Colonel Young equivalent of—" he broke off waving a hand.

"Yeah," Young sighed. "It's called the 'Colonel-Young-is-an-idiot-and-requested-nothing-from-Earth campaign'."

Rush smirked, looking away as his expression broke into a real smile for a moment.

"The Colonel Young is an idiot campaign," Rush repeated, with evident satisfaction. He raised his eyebrows, looking over at Young. "Aptly named, I must say, but why—" he gestured vaguely at the cookies, like he was looking for the correct word. After a brief interval he seemed to abort and rephrased his question as, "Why didn't you request anything?"

Young shrugged. "Didn't feel like I needed to. I told Camile to use my five pounds for any special requests that might come up."

"How noble of you," Rush said dryly.

"Oh right. And what did you request? Something extremely normal, I'm sure."

"You know what I requested. A textbook for Chloe. And Eli."

"That couldn't have been a personal request. It was twelve pounds and completely unnecessary. You were allowed five pounds of personal items."

"Yes. True."

"So how did you get it through?"

"I'll tell you later."

"The more you evade my question, the more curious it makes me."

"Ask Wray," Rush said airily.

"That's not really a personal item, anyway," Young said.

"Do you know how much my life will personally improve if Eli learns quantum mechanics?" Rush raised his eyebrows at Young. "A great deal."

"Yeah. I'm sure."

Rush smiled wryly.

"What do you want?" Young asked. "Mac and cheese or spaghetti with meat sauce?"

"Pass," Rush said.

"I would give you the mac and cheese out of spite," Young said, "but I'm sure you wouldn't eat it. So here."

Young tossed the package of spaghetti into Rush's lap.

The scientist looked at it listlessly, leaning back on one arm, as if he could distance himself from his dinner.

Young brushed against his thoughts and was rewarded with an intensification of his headache and also a vague feeling of nausea before withdrawing.

"Rush," Young said. "You're eating that entire thing."

"Oh I know," Rush murmured.

"At least it's not paste," Young said, tearing his MRE open.

"The paste doesn't lie about what it is," he said, tipping his head back slightly and closing his eyes.

Young snorted. "Then you have more in common with the MRE."

"Very clever, but I don't look for common ground between myself and my food, thank you."

Young shook his head. "Step one is opening it."

"Are you going to be providing this sort of instructional commentary the entire time?"

"Only if it seems like you need it."

He looked over at Rush to see the scientist had his head turned away. His eyes were shut. Young was hit with an echo of intense nausea.

Shit.

"Hey, are you—"

"I don't think I can eat right now," Rush said faintly, looking like he was about to be sick or pass out. "Maybe later."

This was about to turn into a disaster unless he did something *immediately*.

"Okay," Young said quickly. "Okay. Let's get rid of all this stuff." He wasted no time dumping everything back into the bag and putting it out of sight on the floor.

"*You* should eat," Rush murmured. "You've been on shift all day."

"I'm pretty sure that would not end well for either of us," Young murmured, feeling more than a bit sick himself. "You want some water?"

"No," Rush said shortly, his eyes still shut.

"How long have you—"

"Please don't talk to me right now," Rush said, through clenched teeth. "Just, go do something else."

"Yeah, sure," Young said. He stood, making his way over to the bathroom where he filled a cup from the canteen that contained his daily water ration. After considering for a moment, he soaked his washcloth with what remained of the water in his canteen and shook it out, letting the air cool it.

When he walked back into the room, he saw Rush curled miserably on the bed, a very similar position to the one he'd adopted on the bathroom floor. Young came over and perched next to him.

"Scoot over," he murmured.

"I knew it was too good to be true," Rush whispered.

"What?" Young said.

"You leaving. Can you get out of here? There's approximately an eighty-five percent probability that—"

"Nope," Young murmured, setting down the water on the table next to the bed. "Not going to happen." He pressed the washcloth to the back of Rush's neck. "You're fine."

"Think of ice," Rush murmured, his eyes shut.

"What?" Young asked.

"That's what I used to tell Gloria," he said absently. "To think of ice."

Young shut his eyes.

*White tile and white paint and white porcelain and her hair spread out across the floor as she lies there. He runs his fingers through it carefully, but already it begins to come away under his hand. "Enjoy it while it lasts," she says, a wry amusement in her tone, there only to try and hide the fact that she's been crying, but he knows. Of course he knows.*

"Glaciers," Young murmured, not snapping him out of the memory, just picking out an aspect of it and—

*"Don't think about it," he murmurs, forcing his voice to stay steady. "Just think about something neutral. Like four." She tips her head back toward him. "Four?" she repeats. "As in, the number?" He cocks his head at her. "Name something more neutral than the concept of four." She shuts her eyes briefly against the tears that are threatening, but it just makes them spill over. "You're an odd man," she says, but she's smiling.*

"Fields of glaciers. As far as you can see. Cold and clear and clean," Young said quietly.

*"How about ice?" he asks as she curls her hands shut, riding out another wave of nausea, muscles contracting against the floor. She's long since gotten rid of anything that was in her stomach. "Ice is good," she murmurs when she can speak again.*

Young readjusted the washcloth, shaking it off, cooling it down again and pulling the collar of Rush's jacket back and pressing the cloth against his fevered skin. "Snow," he murmured.

*"Oxygen," he says, going back to stroking her hair, "Oxygen and hydrogen, crystalizing as they give up their kinetic energy in the cold." She smiles again. "You incurable romantic," she whispers. He can't—he can't quite look at her.*

"Frozen lakes," Young said quietly. "Frozen rivers. Frozen waterfalls." He was projecting now, images from his own past—interleaving them with Rush's memory.

"Have you ever seen a frozen waterfall?"

"No," Rush whispered.



"It's bizarre. It doesn't look real. All the motion of a waterfall locked into ice. Very cold. Very hard. Very quiet."

He linked up a bit more fully with Rush, letting his mind flash to the vast snow-covered space of the American west, under the open sky, unconfined, *unconfining*, white, and gray, and cold.

*His boots, cracking through the frozen crust on the snow, the slide of a skate over ice, the feel of tiny frozen shards hitting his face in a frigid wind, the frozen branches of trees and the crack and the fall as wood splits under the weight of the snow—*

Rush was beginning to feel better.

"These are your memories," the scientist murmured, as if he weren't entirely sure.

"Yeah," Young said, still thinking of snow, of long frozen grasses and the rough, dark ice of the North Platte River.

"You have so much control," Rush whispered.

Young wasn't sure what to say to that, so he didn't say anything. He simply continued to hold the washcloth against the back of Rush's neck.

After another five minutes Young realized that Rush was half asleep.

"Oh no you don't," Young said, rubbing his arm gently. "Come on, stay awake. Otherwise you're going to wake up at twenty-three hundred hours and not sleep all night. Plus, TJ was pretty explicit about me getting dinner into you somehow."

No response.

"Rush," Young said, grabbing the scientist's upper arm and shaking him slightly.

Rush jerked back to alertness with a surge of panic, nearly cracking their heads together as he jolted into a half-seated position.

"Easy," Young said, letting him go immediately. "Easy."

"Sorry," Rush murmured, looking slightly disoriented.

"Feel any better?" Young asked.

"Somewhat," Rush murmured.

"Come on," Young said. "Sit up."

"I *cannot* eat right now, I—"

"Oh will you give it a rest?" Young said, propping his pillows against the wall behind the head of the bed. "You're always so negative about everything."

Rush glared at him, slowly uncurling and shifting backward to lean against the wall.

Young fished Rush's laptop out of the bottom of TJ's bag and placed it on the bed.

"You're giving me my *laptop*?" Rush asked.

"Kind of," Young murmured. "We're going to watch a movie."

Rush made an aggrieved sound in the back of his throat, and buried his face in his hands.

"Do you have any idea how many fucking movies I've watched in the past two days?"

"Nope," Young said, surreptitiously dragging the entire bag onto the bed next to where he was planning to sit.

He checked the charge on Rush's laptop battery.

It was entirely full.

TJ must have charged it up for him.

"A lot," Rush snapped. "I watched *five hours* of *Pride and Prejudice* with Chloe, under the guise of improving my accent. I *then* watched fucking *Braveheart* with Barnes. With *Barnes*. I don't even *know* Barnes."

"Well at least the one's *Scottish*," Young said.

"*You're* more fucking Scottish than that fucking film. And *then*, I watched some movie about corrupt law enforcement officials with Greer. I watched *Hackers* with Eli. I watched fucking *Lord of the Rings* with Volker and Brody."

"That one I just cannot picture," Young said, smirking at him.

"No. Me neither. Thank god. I fell asleep about ten minutes in."

"So—that one doesn't count then," Young said.

"Yes, it *absolutely* counts. Look. I don't like people and I don't like movies. I've always been very upfront about *both* of these things."

Young snorted. "That's true." He opened Rush's laptop.

"What are you doing?" Rush demanded.

"What does it *look* like I'm doing?" Young said.

"I don't like other people touching my laptop."

Young turned around to stare at him.

"I just feel—weird about it," Rush said finally.

"You feel *weird* about people touching your *laptop*." Young repeated, fighting a smile.

"Yes."

"Well," he said, sliding the disc Eli had given him into the drive. "Fortunately for you, I'm not 'people'."

"I suppose not," Rush said grudgingly. "What the hell *is* this anyway?"

"You're gonna like it," Young said, sliding in beside him on the bed.

"Unlikely," Rush murmured.

Courtesy of the distraction provided by the two-hour movie, Young managed to get Rush to eat about three quarters of an MRE plus two of James' cookies. In his opinion, this counted as a fabulous success. The fact that Rush fell asleep about fifteen minutes before the movie ended, his head slowly coming to rest on Young's shoulder, was also counted as a success in Young's book.

The ending of the movie, after all, was fairly grim.

Young woke slowly in the middle of the night, disentangling himself from the shredded remains of a dream that had already fled away by the time his conscious mind was able to make a coordinated attempt hold onto it.

He was exhausted, and his ever-present headache pressed out against his tired eyes.

Rush was awake.

The scientist was sitting up in the bed, his mobile phone in one hand, a book in the other. He was hunched forward, eyebrows pushed together, glasses on, his hair falling across his forehead. The light reflecting from the bright surface of the page illuminated his features.

"Fuck," he whispered, his voice barely audible, "*et hoc est?*"

Very carefully, Young reached out, bringing his thoughts and Rush's into closer proximity, until, in the dark, sitting next to Rush on the edge of the bed, he could see the unmistakable outline of Dr. Jackson.

"*Est gerundium. A gerund. In modum 'swimming' or 'walking',*" the AI said.

"*Describitur hic finis?*"

"Yes. 'i-n-g'."

"So," Rush murmured quietly, "The right understanding of any matter and a misunderstanding of the same matter do not wholly exclude each other."

It was slow and pained and barely understandable.

"Item. Quod dirum sonuit. Make it sound like *English*," it said, sounding amused.

"You're barely sentient," Rush snapped at it. "Non etiam viventes."

"You're a jerk," it said, definitely amused.

"Malo alio libro," Rush said.

"Certo scio," the AI said. "But speaking in Ancient isn't helping if you're determined to reacquire this skill. Which, I still maintain that you don't need."

"I'm not going to be fucking *illiterate*. Do you have any idea how much that would undermine my intellectual credibility?"

"We could be using this time for more *important* things," it murmured.

"It's not going to take me very long," Rush whispered. "Just fucking read this so that I know what I'm looking at."

The AI sighed and looked over. "The right understanding of any matter and a misunderstanding of the same matter do not wholly exclude each other."

"You're fucking kidding me."

"No. Why did you not work on this *earlier* with Colonel Young?"

"Because," Rush whispered, his eyes still fixed on the book.

"Because *why*?"

"Because there's only so much one person can take, all right? Just drop it."

"Are you speaking in regards to yourself or to the colonel?"

"Are you making a fucking processing error? What did I *just say*?"

"Nick," the AI said, quiet, pained.

Almost immediately, Rush calmed down.

"Try it again," the AI whispered.

"The right understanding of any matter and a misunderstanding of the same matter do not wholly exclude each other."

"Better," the AI murmured. "Much better."

Young shut his eyes, letting sleep carry him back under.

## Chapter Thirty Nine

Young stood in the doorway of the control interface room, his arms crossed over his chest, as if that could curb his rising irritation.

He was watching Rush as the man tried to stay awake through the end of Volker's status update.

Technically the scientist was supposed to be on light duty, which translated to four hours per day of minimally intensive work. Today was *day one* of his light-duty regimen, and Rush had put in eight.

Eight hours.

How exactly this had happened, Young was not sure.

Certainly in large part it was due to the fact that he himself had been trapped in Telford's tactical briefing regarding the recent Nakai attack and couldn't exactly leave in the middle of the thing to drag Rush out of the lab.

He should be used to this by now.

"Volker," Young growled from the back of the room, interrupting the astrophysicist's presentation, surprising everyone.

Eli dropped his pen.

"Oh hey, colonel," Volker said, "Um—"

"Guys," Young said, a quiet menace in his tone. "Four hours. *Four*. None of you could get him out of here? *None of you?* Where's Chloe?"

"For god's *sake*, I'm sitting *right here*," Rush snapped. He turned slowly to look at Young, clearly extremely irritated and extremely tired. "I gave Chloe the night off."

"Yeah, I'll just bet you did." Young sighed.

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

"It means that you're off duty tomorrow."

"Ridiculous," Rush replied shortly. "We're sweeping the interior of the ship for subspace transponders which is, frankly, going to be—"

"You're ridiculous. No one cleared any plan to go wandering around the ship looking for subspace transponders with *me*, and I want a full briefing before we attempt *anything* of the kind."

"And by 'sweeping' I didn't mean wandering about *aimlessly*, did I? We have internal *sensors*, this isn't the *dark ages*, it's just a matter of modifying the bloody things to pick up foreign technological signatures that belong to the Nakai and don't come from our own *laptops*. I was under the impression that this was a *high priority*. Or do you fancy getting into space battles every other week? Because we're about *due* for one if you hadn't noticed."

"Oh I'm well aware of that," Young growled, "but *you* need to keep in mind that there's more riding on your physical and mental wellbeing than just—"

Young broke off, suddenly acutely aware that the science team was watching their argument.

"Keep going," Volker said mildly. "It was just starting to get good."

Rush's head snapped around. "You, *Volker*, are incredibly *lucky* that—"

Whatever scathing remark that Rush was about to make was cut short by a shrill whistle from the doorway, immediately behind Young, which caused everyone to jump.

Young whirled to find himself face to face with Greer.

"Just came by to let you all know that *Scott just asked Chloe to marry him and she said yes*." Greer grinned at them.

"Oh my *god!! Really?*" Park asked, her voice unusually high, her hands coming up to her throat.

"Nice," Volker commented, high-fiving Brody.

"How did I not *know* about this!?" Eli asked, clearly affronted.

"Party tomorrow night. If—" Greer turned to Young, "if that's okay with you, sir. Wray already okayed it."

"Fine by me," Young said, smiling back at him.

"Gonna go keep spreading the word," Greer said, ducking back out of the doorframe.

"Greer," Rush snapped.

"Yeah Doc?" he asked, turning back.

"Did she like it?"

"Of course she liked it. It looks fucking awesome."

"Like *what*?" Park asked, sounding curious and excited.

"The ring," Rush replied nonchalantly.

"Wait. Wait wait *wait*," Eli said. "You. *You knew* about this. You were *in on it*?"

"I know about *everything*, Eli," Rush said, narrowing his eyes as he shut his laptop and got to his feet. "*Everything*."

He grabbed his crutch, picked up his laptop, and walked straight past Young into the corridor.

"Um, briefing is over I guess," Young heard Volker say from behind him. "That's cool. It's not like the air recirculators are *important* or anything."

"Just keep going," Eli said to Volker as Young left the room. "He doesn't need to deal with this kind of stuff anyway. Not really. We can handle it. Seriously though. Who knew about this? You guys! How could you *not tell me*—" Eli's voice faded out as Young started down the hallway.

He easily caught up with Rush, their boots echoing on the deck plating, the emergency lights at the base of the walls tracking them as they moved through the corridors.

"I don't appreciate that kind of thing," Rush said, his tone icy and dark.

"Well, *maybe* if you would just do what you're *supposed* to do then—"

"You need to learn to pick your battles a bit better," Rush hissed.

"That's *all I do* these days, Rush." Young hissed right back. "*All I do* is pick my battles with you. I'm trying to keep you *alive*. God. Why do you have to be so *difficult*?"

"Save the sensationalism for someone who gives a fuck, will you?" Rush shook his hair back and glared at Young, picking up his pace slightly. "Sitting in the control interface room is hardly going to kill me, a fact of which you're well aware. So you'll excuse me if I don't exactly applaud your choice of where to plant your metaphorical flag."

"My *metaphorical flag*? And what *would* meet with your approval? You want me to force you to tell me what the *fuck* happened to your mind during the most recent attack? Because it's a god-damned wasteland in there. You want to talk about Destiny's mission and have the AI fucking try to annex your brain? You want me to drag your fucking *master plan* out of you? Because I'm sure you *have* one. Those are the battles I'm *not* picking, all right? I'd fucking *love* to pick them but I don't think you can handle that right now."

"You have absolutely *no idea* what I am capable of *handling*." His limp was becoming more pronounced.

"I have a damn sight more of an idea than *you* do, that's for sure."

Young realized that they were heading in the direction of *Rush's* quarters.

"Is that so. And why don't you enlighten me as to why you think that's the case." Rush's thoughts were a bright, seething mass that pressed into Young's consciousness.

"You can see the damage to my mind? Well, here's news for you, genius, that little skill set goes both ways. I can see the damage to *yours*. And it's an absolute *wreck*."

"So you implied." Rush stopped in the middle of the hallway. "And I'm certain it appears that way to you, but even if you can see damage to my mind, which I *doubt*, *you* can't see into *Destiny*. And *therefore*—"

"There are times that I can see your *entire mind*," Young growled at him. "I'm sure of it. And it's a disorganized, barely functional *mess*. You are *this close* to fucking losing touch with reality completely and you don't even *know* it. Though I'm sure you're coming to suspect as much," Young growled.

"Fuck off," Rush snapped, turning away. "You know *nothing*."

"How do you think I 'fixed the link'? It wasn't our link that was *ever* broken. It was *you*. All that pain. All that vertigo, that horrible sense of tearing. All of it came from *your* fucked up mind. And I fixed it. *I* fixed. *Your* mind."

Young pressed the tips of his middle and index fingers into Rush's chest.

Rush smacked his hand aside and stepped back, his eyes narrowing.

"You're *lying*," the scientist hissed.

"I'm not. You *know* I'm not. When you were taking energy from Destiny it boosted your ability to tolerate the separation, just like it boosted your tolerance to pain. To cold. Think about it," he said, seeing that what he was saying was finally getting through to the other man. "I fixed you."

Rush looked at him uncertainly.

"I *fixed* you," Young murmured.

"When?"

"When do you *think*?"

Rush looked away, his mouth twisting in a brief, pained half smile. "Ah," he said quietly.

"And then, in the infirmary—"



"Yeah," Young said quietly. "Though that was a bit different."

Rush shut his eyes.

"I wasn't going to tell you like this," Young whispered.

"Doesn't matter," Rush murmured.

"It does," Young said. "I didn't *know* that—"

"Oh come off it. You knew. You fucking *knew*. In the infirmary."

"Yeah, okay, I knew then. But not the first time."

Rush looked away, and Young reached out to rest a hand on his shoulder. Beneath his hand, the scientist's muscles were rock-hard.

"Rush," he continued, "Come on. It's not like you haven't done the same thing. You've fixed my mind. I know you have."

"It's not the same though," Rush murmured. "Is it now?"

"Not exactly," Young agreed.

"You need to *stop* this. The more you entangle us," Rush whispered, "the worse it will be for you. For *you*. Can't you understand that? I've tried to explain it to you over and over again."

"I don't care," Young whispered. "I don't."

"A viewpoint that is horrifyingly short sighted."

"You want this too. I *know* you do."

"You know *nothing*."

"I know a hell of a lot more than you think I do. You want this," Young said, stepping forward. "And you *need this*. We both do."

Rush's hand came up, centered squarely on Young's chest. He pushed him back.

"Don't even *think* about it," Rush whispered.

"You don't want to do this because you think you're not going back," Young whispered.

"And maybe you're right. Maybe you can't. But if that's the case, I'm not going back either."

"Yes, you *are*," Rush said, his eyes shut.

"You don't get to make that decision for me," Young said. "You don't get to decide my fate, and you don't get to unilaterally dismiss everything between us because you think

it's a bad idea in the monomaniacal little world that you have going up here," Young said, running a thumb along Rush's temple.

"You think this will give you another hold over me," Rush murmured, jerking his head away from Young's hand.

"Damn straight," Young said. "I'll take everything I can get."

"But it won't be enough," Rush said. "It will never be enough."

"We'll see," Young replied, his left hand closing gently over the hand Rush had pressed to his chest.

"You're fucking relentless," Rush whispered.

"You need me if you're going to make it through this. You know I'm right."

Rush took a deep breath and then fixed Young with a penetrating look. "Appealing to my sense of ruthless practicality?"

"Yeah," Young murmured, smiling faintly, "if it will get me anywhere."

"Why do you want this so much?" Rush asked, narrowing his eyes. "Has it even *occurred* to you to question that?"

"You think the fact that we're *linked* is having some kind of influence on me?"

"No. I'm *certain* it is. A year ago you had to force yourself to speak more than two sentences to me in a row, and *now*? You want to—to *what*? To help me? To fucking be my *friend*? To enter into some kind of poorly defined relationship that, given our history and personalities, will certainly end in a spectacular example of just how fucking wrong this kind of thing can go—"

"It's not the damned *link*, Rush. It's *you*."

"Are you even *capable* of separating the two?"

"I'm capable of a damn sight more than *you* give me credit for. I know you. I *know* you. And like it or not, the *nature* of this entire situation means that I have been and *will continue* to help you navigate all of this *shit* that you have to deal with. So why not just let me do it to the best of my ability? The way I want to? The way I'm *meant* to, I think?"

"Meant to? You've vastly overstepped the bounds of your designated role."

"As have you, or so I hear."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I'm telling you, I know a lot of things that you don't. I know what happens when you join with the ship."

"What do you mean by that?" Rush's eyes narrowed.

"You have goals," Young murmured, "and Destiny has goals. But consider what happens to your goals when you merge. Really merge. You have *no idea*. Because you don't *form memories* of that time. But I do."

"Fuck," Rush whispered quietly. "What—"

"Nope." Young cut him off. "You get *nothing* from me until you start to work *with* me rather than *around* me. Because if you *won't* work with me, if you're not going to let me help you, then I need every advantage I can get. Over the AI, over Telford, and over *you*. *Especially* you."

"Extortion," Rush snapped at him.

"Sure, if you want to call it that, go ahead. I think 'cooperation' is more accurate," Young said mildly.

Rush looked away with a frustrated sigh.

"I'm wearing you down," Young murmured, smiling faintly at him.

"Possibly," Rush murmured. "I have to think about it."

"What's to think about?" Young murmured, pushing him back against the wall, wrapping a hand around the back of his neck, one thumb grazing over his temple.

Rush stepped away from him sliding sideways against the wall and twisting out into the open corridor. "I'll keep my brain as it is for the moment," he said dryly. "Thank you."

Young held up both hands. "Look. I'm not going to do anything that you don't want."

"As if you could," Rush said disdainfully. "I'll see you later." He turned away and started down the corridor.

Young raised his eyebrows. "Where the hell are you *going*?" he asked.

"To bed." Rush snapped. "*Alone*. I'll see you *later*."

Young crossed his arms, leaning against the wall of the corridor, watching Rush go back to his own quarters—as straight-shouldered and dynamic and determined as he'd ever been. He never looked back.

How long had it been since they'd slept in separate rooms?

Young couldn't remember.

Young slept terribly, his dreams jolting him awake at random intervals, always fading ahead of his conscious attempts to recall them. By the time his alarm finally went off at six hundred hours, he estimated that he'd gotten no more than four hours of sleep.

Rush was already awake.

//Did you even *go* to sleep?// Young snarled at him, as he blearily made his way to the bathroom to dash some cold water on his face before shaving.

In return, he got a wave of disdain.

Yeah, that seemed about right.

Rush was in the mess, sitting with Wray, attempting to choke down a bowl of oatmeal.

//You're off duty. I was serious about that.//

"Should you really be on duty?" Wray asked Rush skeptically, unconsciously mirroring Young's question.

//We're *sweeping the ship*.// Rush projected.

Wray was staring at Rush.

//You realize you need to respond *verbally* to Wray, right?//

"We're sweeping the ship," Rush said hastily. "For the Nakai tracking device. I need to be there. At least for the first hour or so while the sensor calibration is being performed."

Wray looked at him through narrowed eyes as she took a bite of oatmeal. "You look awful," she murmured. "Did you *sleep* last night?"

"Do you know how often people *ask* me that?"

"Not without good reason," Wray said dryly. "You're supposed to be on *light duty*."

//You should listen to her.//

"And *you*," Rush murmured, "are supposed to be off entirely for the next two days. What are you doing up at this hour? Shouldn't you be having a lie in?"

"I couldn't sleep," Wray admitted finally.

"Yes," Rush said quietly. "That becomes—" he took a bite of oatmeal. "A problem."

Wray looked away.

Rush looked down at his bowl of oatmeal, hesitating on the edge of saying something further.

"It does improve with time," he said finally. "Eventually it won't seem so immediate. You'll be able to tell that they're just dreams."

"Good to know," she said evenly. "Do you know how they—" she broke off, looking away. "How they achieve the—" her throat closed, and she put the spoon down.

//Don't be a jerk,// Young growled in the back of his mind.

//Stop backseat counseling,//

"Who was it?" he asked her quietly, taking another bite of his oatmeal.

"The um—the last time it was my significant other."

"Mmm," Rush said.

"I know, right?" Wray brushed her hair back out of her face. "That's the worst part. The illogic of it. She wasn't, or—she *isn't* even on Destiny. But I gave up the information anyway. When I saw—when it was *her* being tortured."

"One's sense of reality," Rush said carefully, "becomes distorted. The longer they go, the worse it becomes. You held out for a long time."

"Not long enough," she whispered.

"Long enough to prevent them from moving on to someone else," Rush said mildly. "That's worth something, I should think."

"Maybe," she said, giving him a wan smile. "Thanks."

He shrugged and stood. "This significant other of yours," he said quietly.

"Sharon."

"Sharon," Rush repeated. "I'd imagine it might help to talk to her, if you can convince someone to let you use the stones. It might lend a sense of unreality to what you saw. Because it wasn't real. This. *This* is what's real."

She nodded. "Is that what you did?"

"No. But then, I rarely take advice. Not even my own."

Young pulled gently out of his mind as Rush left the mess. The scientist's thoughts were already turning toward sensor modifications, detection thresholds, and the balance of sensitivity vs. specificity—not in words, but in images of monitors, the rhythm and the *feel* of the electromagnetic spectrum.

Young left him to it.

The day passed uneventfully. The sensor modification had failed to turn up anything that was likely to be a Nakai tracking device, so the science team decided to go back to the drawing board.

Young's disappointment at the lack of progress on locating the Nakai tracking device was offset by the fact that the combined pressure of all members of the science team had kept Rush to his four hour duty restriction.

So, that was something, he supposed.

As the day shift ended, the news regarding Chloe and Matt's engagement and the subsequent party had spread throughout the ship. There was an air of anticipation in the mess during the evening meal, which ended early so as to provide adequate time for the party set up.

Young walked into the mess at around nineteen hundred hours to find the science team, with the conspicuous absence of Chloe, gearing up for the party. Brody and Volker were assembling some kind of sound system that included microphones in the front, under Eli's direction.

Clearly there had been more than a few last minute additions to the requisition list he had given Wray.

Young walked forward, heading toward Greer and Scott, who seemed to be organizing the alcohol.

Rush was sitting near them, staring intently at his laptop. Brief contact with his thoughts revealed that he was coding.

//You're supposed to be off duty.//

//I am. This is unmistakably nonessential, I assure you.//

Young walked up to them, picking up the tin cup that was next to Rush. "You're starting a bit early, don't you think?"

"It's *water*," Rush snapped, sounding insulted.

Young narrowed his eyes, and took a sip.

Rush rolled his eyes. "You didn't *believe* me?"

"Call it the benefit of experience," Young said, raising his eyebrows as he set the cup back down.

Scott and Greer looked up, clearly amused.

"What are you lot looking at?" Rush snapped at the pair of them.

"Nothing," Scott said mildly. "Nothing, Doc."

//Oh settle down. If you're not working, then what *are* you doing?//

//Trying to pretend I'm somewhere else.//

"Rush," Eli said, from across the room. "Are you done with that program yet?"

"I *would be* if people would stop *interrupting* me."

"Well, are you *almost* done?"

"Eli."

"What?"

"Stop talking."

Young glanced over in time to see Eli give Park an exaggerated eye roll. She winked back at him.

Young shook his head at the pair of them, then looked back over at Scott and Greer, who seemed to be rigging up some sort of siphon-based mechanism for dispensing alcohol.

"Brody," Young said, frowning slightly. "How much of this stuff do you *have*?"

"A lot, Brody said.

"Kind of an embarrassing amount actually," Volker added, "seeing as we could have used some of that grain for *food*."

"We couldn't store all of it for an extended period—it would have gone bad," Brody said. "As I've explained. *Many* times."

Young shook his head slightly. "You guys need a hand?" he asked Scott and Greer, as he watched them attempt to transfer—

Good god.

"Are those *gasoline* cans?"

"We washed them," Greer said, shrugging.

"We washed them *really well*," Scott added. "With soap."

"Um," Young said. "Why do we have *gasoline cans*?"

"They're for the MALP," Scott said.

"But we don't *have* a MALP," Young said. "We've *never* had a MALP."

"So true," Greer said.

"What did you do with the *gasoline*?" Young murmured.

"We gave it to Rush," Greer said.

"That seems only marginally more responsible than lighting it on fire for fun," Young said, stepping forward to stabilize the chair that they had positioned on the table as they lifted the cans into place.

"And what did *you* do with it?" Young asked, turning to take in Rush, who was still staring intently at his laptop.

"I lit it on fire," Rush murmured absently.

"*Rush*," Young snapped.

Rush shrugged without looking up.

"Um, actually sir, he stored it in an airtight container that he flooded with nitrogen gas to prevent any sort of flash-fire," Scott said.

//You are not on your game today,// Rush projected.

//Were you *baiting me*?//

//No.//

Young raised his eyebrows.

//Marginally,// Rush admitted. //I maintain, however, that you deserve it.//

"Eli," Rush said, "I'm finished. Do you want to take a look?"

"No, I'm sure it's epic. Just hook it up, will you?"

"To *what*?" Rush asked disdainfully.

"Stop pretending you don't understand the concept of karaoke. It's not that difficult, and you're a super genius, all right? No one is fooled."

Young looked down, hiding a smile as Rush, with an aggrieved expression, transferred his program to a flash drive and then limped over to Eli's computer. He downloaded the file, and then got up again, this time to pop an access panel open near the floor. He knelt down and looked into the wall.

//What is it that you're doing?// Young projected.

Rush sighed.

//I'm interfacing software on Eli's computer with the onboard sound system. Apparently at the last social event there were complaints that the music was



insufficiently loud. Eli *also* apparently requested some sort of karaoke software from Earth, which I am *also* interfacing for him.//

//That seems unusually *nice* of you.//

//Correct. I'm going to have to exact compensation in some way.// Rush was on his back, half inside the wall, a maze of wiring about six inches above his face.

//You *do* owe him, you know.// Young said.

//I'm not insensitive to that. Clearly.//

Eli hurried across the room, clearly on his way to retrieve something or other. When he approached Young however, he slowed, passing quite close. "You're *staring*," he murmured quietly, before picking up his pace again.

Young quickly turned back to Scott and Greer.

It was going to be a long night.

By twenty-hundred hours, most of the crew had arrived.

The only people who hadn't yet made an appearance were Chloe, Wray, and TJ, who were apparently ensconced somewhere, working on Chloe's hair.

"My god, man," Rush snapped at Greer as he grabbed the cup out of his hand and knocked back his first shot. "*Finally*. I would have preferred to be fucking wrecked circa ninety minutes ago."

"Doc, you are the worst kind of lightweight," Greer said, rolling his eyes.

"Get to fuck," Rush said good-naturedly.

"You *think* you can handle this stuff, but *actually*—"

"Actually I *can* handle it, sergeant." Rush slammed his cup down on the table, shaking back his hair. "I have more alcohol dehydrogenase in my *little finger* than you have in your entire body. Most likely."

"Yeah. Sure. You're going to need to be at least little bit drunk anyway," Greer said as turned back to manning the gasoline cans with Dunning and Reynolds.

About twenty of the military personnel were huddling around Scott, passing around shared cigars that someone had requested from Earth.

"What do you suppose he meant by *that*?" Rush asked Young as they watched James and Chu venture out onto the empty space between the tables to some generic-sounding pop song.

"No idea," Young said, slowly sipping his own shot.

The sudden shrill pitch of Greer's whistle caused everyone to turn around as Chloe entered the mess, accompanied by TJ and Wray. Her hair—well, Young wasn't very good at identifying hairstyles, but it was put up in some elaborate twist-looking thing, with some stray pieces curled around her face.

There was a general uproar with clapping and whistling, which continued until Eli spoke into the microphone.

"Chloe, you look hot," he said. "Nice hair. And holy crap, this thing is *loud*. Can someone turn this down? And by 'someone' I mean Brody?"

"Thanks, Eli," Chloe shouted, from her position near the door.

"So, um, first of all, on behalf of the entire crew, I just want to say congratulations to Matt and Chloe—you guys are both awesome, and everyone knows it, so—you know, have lots of kids and stuff. Pass on those genes."

Rush covered his face with one hand as most of the crew broke out laughing.

"Second, as pretty much everyone knows, because I think I told everyone, we're doing Destiny karaoke—" he broke off to let the general applause and catcalling die down.

"No, I'm not going to strip for you, James, so you can just stop asking," he said over the general uproar.

James attempted to douse Eli with her drink from a distance of fifteen feet, but mostly succeeded in dousing Park instead.

"Do not throw *alcohol* at my *girlfriend*," Greer shouted.

"She's *fine*," James protested, "it's not like I threw the *cup*."

"Yeah, anyway, um Destiny karaoke!" Eli said, recovering. "So you can sign up in chalk on the wall to my left. We're going to kick things off with—let's see. Oh. Oh *god*. Well. Volker and Brody are going to do *The Immigrant Song*? Seriously? Is that a joke?" Eli looked at them skeptically.

"Oh *heck* no," Volker replied. "Prepare to have your mind blown, Eli."

"Yeah. Okay. Preparing. This should be—interesting. Take it away you guys."

"So," Rush said, looking over at Young. "Want to get out of here?"

"They would be crushed," Young replied, smiling dryly.

"Not *irreparably* crushed."

"Your laptop has been incorporated into the sound system," Young pointed out.

"Fuck."

"So, there's not much point in leaving anyway, is there?" Young smirked at him.

"I suppose not. In which case, I'm going to proceed with my plans of immediate intoxication—dear *god*," Rush said, staring at Volker, who had launched into the falsetto opening of The Immigrant Song. "That's—not right."

"*We come from the land of the ice and snow*," Brody spoke the lyrics into the microphone in his usual deadpan manner. "*From the midnight sun where the hot springs blow*."

Young stared at them, standing together on the table, each holding a separate microphone, the overhead lights glinting off their hair. "Holy shit," he said to Rush. "They—definitely practiced this."

"Clearly," Rush said. "Actually they're" not—" he trailed off.

Young and Rush watched Volker and Brody in horrified fascination for about twenty seconds until—

"*We are your overlords*," they sang in tandem, pointing out over the crowd.

"Yeah. So—drinks?" Young said.

"Unquestionably," Rush murmured.

"It's just that everyone takes the hydroponics lab for *granted*," Park said, barely audible over the dull roar of the crowd as she placed a hand on Young's shoulder a bit unsteadily. "And I mean, it's not just that it's important for *food*, which is, really *really* important, you know? But the plants are living things *too*, you know? We have to take *care* of them. We have a *responsibility*. We've uprooted them from their *homes*. They're lost. Just like us. You know?"

"Yeah," Young said. "I get that. I do."

"I knew you would," Park said. "I *knew* it."

Young glanced over at Rush who was leaning indolently against the bulkhead next to the table from which Greer and Dunning were still dispensing the alcohol.

The scientist's eyes were half closed, his thoughts muted, blending into Young's like running paint. His mind had lost some of the terrifying power that it usually displayed—lost the ability to drag the scientist down into memories that weren't his own.

*This*, then, was why he had been so adamant about drinking.

This had been what he really wanted.

//You should have told me,// Young projected, knowing that Rush would pick up on his train of thought. //We could have done something about the flashbacks. We could have had TJ try to figure something—//

Rush cut him off with a wave of negation laced with regret. //I need them,// he replied.

//No you don't,// Young sent back. //There's *no reason* you need to re-experience torture and violence and *death*, some of it not even yours.//

//Those are exactly the parts that I need,// Rush replied. //The bits that aren't mine. That come from Destiny. I'm going to have to try and pull them forward.//

//That sounds like a *terrible* idea.//

Rush smiled faintly, his eyes closing as he leaned against the wall.

//It does, doesn't it? Perhaps you can fix me after I do it.// There was a hint of amusement in his projection, but not enough to hide the regret that wove in and around his words.

//I don't think I can even fix everything that's *already* wrong with you, genius, let alone adding *more* damage on top of what you've already got,// Young replied.

"You're talking to him, aren't you?" Park asked quietly, and Young realized he'd been looking at Rush for almost thirty seconds.

"Um, yeah, sorry," Young said, looking back at Park.

"Eh," Park said, waving her hand in an uncoordinated manner. "No big deal."

"Nick," Telford said, appearing in Young's peripheral vision.

Young snapped his head around, making the room spin slightly. "Colonel," Telford added.

"David," Rush said. The precision of his diction had faded slightly. He narrowed his eyes, sipping his drink, one hand in the pocket of his BDUs.

"I haven't seen much of you lately," Telford said mildly, taking a drink from Greer, who handed it over with a glare.

"Well, you've been here for what? A fucking fortnight?," Rush asked casually. "Stands to reason, as I was unconscious for four of them. That's twenty-eight percent of the time straight off the table."

"We need to talk," Telford said quietly.

"Later," Rush said, breaking the word off with a snap. His eyes flicked in Young's direction.

Telford looked over at him briefly.

Young said nothing.

Telford raised his glass, locking eyes with Rush. "I'd like to propose a toast," he said.

"T' what?" Rush asked dryly.

"Cold hearted bastards." Telford quirked an eyebrow.

"Mmm," Rush said, smiling darkly. "Takes one t' know one."

"Damn straight," Young growled, "and *you*," he continued, looking at Rush, "are not a cold hearted bastard. You're a hot-headed *pain in the ass*." He grabbed Rush's drink out of his hand and glared at Telford. "*I* on the other hand, am very much a cold hearted bastard. So." He touched his cup to Telford's. "Cheers."

Telford stared him down, his eyes dark, an amused twist to his mouth. "Cheers," he said quietly.

"Fuckin' slainte, t' both of ye," Rush said, vaguely nonplussed by the entire exchange. "Greer," he snapped. "Colonel Young fucking stole my fucking *cup*. I need another."

"Well, get it *back*," Greer said. "We don't have unlimited resources here, Doc."

"Give me that," Rush said imperiously, looking at Young, his eyes dark and intense. "Greer and I are doing a hot-headed-pain-in-the-ass-toast."

Young surrendered the cup, as Rush's fingers grazed over his own.

"I'll drink to that," Greer said, handing the siphon over to Reynolds and smirking at Rush.

"Half a shot," Young mouthed at Greer.

//I fucking hear you in my *head*// Rush projected at him, his thoughts swirling with irritation.

"Greer, so help me, if you pour me half a shot I will—"

"Doc, how drunk are you on a scale of one to ten?"

"Four," Rush snapped. "Possibly five."

"So at least a seven," Greer said. "That's about right. Here."

"This is *not* a full shot."

"Switch with me then, you skeptical son of a bitch," Greer said with good humor.

"I fucking *will*."

Telford and Young stood shoulder to shoulder, watching the pair of them with a sort of amused incredulity as they switched shots.

"Hot-headed assholes," Greer said, as their cups touched.

Rush raised his eyebrows and they knocked the shot back.

"I'll be right back," Greer said.

"We really need to have a briefing about this Nakai tracking device," Telford said quietly, his voice low as he turned to face Young, the dim light playing over his features as he moved. "Finding it is *imperative*."

"I agree," Young said. "How does tomorrow afternoon sound?"

"Early afternoon," Telford replied, his eyes flicking over to track Rush as he stepped away to drop down next to Park at one of the tables.

"Let's say fourteen hundred," Young replied.

Telford nodded.

"Weirdly, you're *nicer* when you're drunk," Park commented to Rush as he sat down next to her. "I did not see that one coming."

"At least I'm not as nice as *you* are," Rush snapped at her.

"Aw," Park said, sympathetically. "I think you just failed to insult me. That's actually kind of *sad* if you think about it, you know?"

"Fair fucking sad," Rush agreed, sighing, looking across the room at TJ who was finishing up her rendition of Uptown Girl. Young followed his gaze to see Varro reach up to help her down from the table, her face flushed and happy.

"Okay," Eli said, squinting over at the board. "Now we have um, a late breaking addition, which is going to be Sergeant Greer et al. I'm not really sure what that means. Who's your 'et al.'?"

Young watched as Greer climbed on the table and took the microphone from Eli.

"Hey—" Greer began, and then tapped the microphone, frowning, as the sound cut out.

"What the *hell*, Eli?" he said, spreading his hands.

"Sorry!" Eli said. "That's weird—there must be something wrong with the input—"

"Rush," Greer shouted. "Come fix this for me."

"Oh thanks a *lot*," Eli snapped.

Rush rolled his eyes, but limped forward a bit unsteadily, until he was standing next to the table. Greer knelt down, microphone in hand. Something about the sergeant's posture sent a sudden thrill of alarm through Young.

//You might want to—//

As Rush reached up to take the microphone, Greer grabbed his upper arm, dragging him up with some strategic assistance from James and Barnes who happened to be positioned nearby.

Rush sent Young a wave of *intense* irritation.

"Oh *fuck* no," Rush said, as Greer clicked on the microphone.

"Oh fuck yes," Greer said, his voice echoing over the mess, barely audible over the explosion of laughter and cheering that filled the room. "Where's that second microphone?"

"No." Rush said, as Eli passed the microphone over. "No. Absolutely not. You brought me here under false pretenses." He tried to wrench away, but Greer had a hold of his upper arm.

"Unbelievably, you fell for it." Greer said, shrugging. "No one let him leave this table."

Greer could barely be heard over the general eruption of cheering and laughter in the mess. Midway through the room he could see that Wray had one hand pressed over her mouth, clearly hiding a smile. She was standing next to Matt and Chloe, who were both laughing.

"I don't *know* any *songs*," Rush protested.

//Now you're just whining,// Young projected at him. //Come on. Think about how happy this is going to make Eli. Plus, you owe Greer. You know you do.//

"Then consider this my contribution to the increase-the-cultural-literacy-of-Nicholas-Rush campaign," Greer said into the microphone. There was an upswing in the cheering. "Now look. Before we get started, I'd like to dedicate my performance of this song to Dr. Lisa Park. I love you baby." He blew her a kiss.

"I love you too!" Park yelled back.

"And I would like to dedicate Dr. Nicholas Rush's performance of this song to Dr. Dale Volker."

"What." Rush glared at him.

"You deserve it," Greer said, pointing straight at Volker.

"*Finally*," Volker yelled.

"We are going to be performing Metallica's version of *Whisky in the jar*. Which is a *Scottish* song, so," Greer turned to Rush, "you *should* know it, unless you've been faking that accent all this time."

"It's a fucking *Irish* song, actually," Rush snapped, trying to wrest away from Greer.

"Whatever. Same thing."

"It's not the *same thing*, Greer. They're *entirely different*."

"You know the song don't you?"

"Yes," Rush said, reluctantly, "but—"

"Man up then, why don't you?" Greer snapped to general applause.

"Oh fuck off," Rush said.

The room erupted with catcalling.

"Fire it up, Eli," Greer yelled.

//Oh just go with it,// Young projected at him.

//Easy for *you* to say.//

Young leaned against a wall in the back of the room, watching in amusement as Greer pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket, passing it over to Rush.

Apparently the sergeant had written down the lyrics ahead of time.

Rush pulled his glasses out of his pocket.

Over Destiny's sound system came the sound of electric guitars.

In Young's peripheral vision, he became aware of a familiar silhouette. He turned his head slightly to take in the familiar outline of Dr. Jackson, who has appeared next to him, leaning against the wall.

The AI smiled uncertainly at him before its eyes flicked back to Rush and Greer.

"*As I was going over the Cork and Kerry mountains,*"

*I saw Captain Farrell and his money he was countin'.*

*I first produced my pistol, and then produced my rapier,*

*I said stand and deliver, or the devil he may take ya—"*



It hadn't taken Rush long to pick up the key and speed of the song, though Young could tell from the slant of his thoughts that he was used to a faster pace, a different key, and slightly modified lyrics.

Unsurprisingly, Rush had a very nice voice.

"Your culture has some odd customs," the AI noted.

Young shrugged, unwilling to talk aloud to the empty air.

He let his gaze flick over to the left and saw that it was mimicking his pose, arms crossed over its chest, leaning back against the wall, smiling Daniel Jackson's smile as it watched Rush and Greer.

*"I took all of his money and it was a pretty penny,  
I took all of his money and I brought it home to Molly.  
She swore that she loved me, no, never would she leave me  
But the devil take that woman, for you know she tricked me easy."*

Rush shook his hair back and raised his eyebrows at Young.

Young smirked back, shaking his head subtly.

There was some kind of long instrumental interlude during which Rush tried to escape Greer's hold on him several times.

"How long *is* this fucking song?" Rush snapped, the microphone picking him up.

"It's over when it's over." Greer said, grinning at him.

*"Being drunk and weary, I went to Molly's chamber,  
Taking Molly with me, but I never knew the danger.  
About six or maybe seven, in walked Captain Farrell.  
I jumped up, fired my pistols, and shot him with both barrels."*

Rush suffered through the final verse and finally the song came to an end with a wave of relief from the scientist.

The room erupted in applause.

"I hope you enjoyed that, Volker," Rush said dryly into the microphone before he handed it back to Eli. Several people reached out to help him down from the table.

"Well, I think I speak for everyone when I say, *holy crap*, that was awesome," Eli said into the microphone.

"I can't believe I just saw that," Telford said, looking over at Young.

"Me neither," he replied.

"God *damn*," Greer said quietly from where he stood at Young's shoulder. "You leave them alone for three minutes and they find each other."

"And not by accident, either," Young growled.

Rush and Telford were sitting with several of the science personnel, but slightly cut off from the main group. Telford was saying something to Rush, and Young could tell from his expression and the pitch of his thoughts that the scientist was interested, *extremely* interested, in what Telford was saying.

He blended his thoughts together into Rush's mind, not making any attempt to hide what he was doing.

He got a semi-organized wave of acknowledgement from the scientist as he did so.

"—managed to bring one with me," Telford was saying quietly. "I had a hunch that it might prove useful."

"Possibly," Rush said. "Why don't you mention it at the next joint briefing?"

"You don't want to just *try* it? Tracking device aside, it could be extremely useful for the purposes of research."

//Try what?// Young snarled into his mind.

//Nothing. Don't worry about it. I'm handling it.//

//I feel so reassured.//

"Like I said," Rush said coolly, looking out into the room, his eyes following Chloe as she climbed to the stage. "Mention it at the next joint briefing."

"Okay, everyone," Eli said. "Last song before the after parties start up. Give it up for *Chloe*. Across the Universe."

A familiar progression of guitar chords echoed over Destiny's sound system.

"You want to go?" Greer asked Young, "or should I?"

Young didn't answer; he just started forward.

"*Words are flowing out like endless rain into a paper cup*," Chloe sang, the yellow light glinting off her hair.

In the back of Young's mind, he could still hear Telford through Rush's thoughts.

"Stop feeding me this line of *bullshit*, Nick," he hissed. "You expect me to believe you're some kind of a team player now? You've turned over a new *leaf*? You're up to something. I know you. I *know* you."

*"They slither wildly as they slip away across the universe."*

Rush smiled faintly. "You *knew* me."

"You haven't changed," Telford said. "Not in the most important ways."

*"Pools of sorrow waves of joy are drifting through my opened mind,"*

"Yes well, I agree with you there," Rush murmured, looking away from Telford to meet Young's eyes as he approached.

Telford followed his gaze.

*"Nothing's gonna change my world*

*Nothing's gonna change my world—"*

"Rush," Young growled, "I need to talk to you."

"David," Rush said with a nod, getting to his feet.

//Not your most subtle work,// he shot at Young.

//Shut up,// Young said, resisting the urge to grab his arm and forcibly drag him out of the room.

*"Images of broken light which dance before me like a million eyes,*

*They call me on and on across the universe—"*

Rush followed him out into the deserted corridor as Chloe's voice echoed ship-wide through the sound system.

As soon as they were out of the room, Young gave into the urge to grab Rush's upper arm as he dragged him through the doorway to one of the nearby conference rooms. As soon as they were through the door, he spun the other man around, one hand on each bicep as he backed him against the nearest monitor bank.

*"Thoughts meander like a restless wind inside a letter-box,*

*They tumble blindly as they make their way across the universe—"*

"What is it with you and violating my personal space?" Rush asked, appearing more amused than anything.

"Stop talking to Telford," Young hissed. "Stop *encouraging* him to do whatever the hell it is that he wants to do to you. Stop letting him fuck with you."

"How do you know *I'm* not fucking with *him*?" Rush whispered, with a pained half smile.

"Just—stop it," Young said, his voice cracking subtly. "You're too fucked up yourself to convincingly fuck with anyone."

"Don't underestimate me," Rush whispered, his voice low, his smile starting to straighten.

"Fuck you. You're crazy. You're driving *me* crazy," Young growled.

*"Nothing's gonna change my world,  
Nothing's gonna change my world—"*

"This is all because I won't let you call me Nick, isn't it?" Rush breathed, looking directly at him.

"Don't be *ridiculous*."

"You can call me *Nick*," Rush murmured, moving toward him fractionally.

"Thank you," Young growled. "Thank you *so much* for that major concession. You know, you're *unbelievable*. You *arrogant*—"

Rush kissed him.

Young kissed him back.

"Don't mistake this for anything other than what it actually *is*," Rush breathed against his mouth, his eyes shut, one hand on Young's chest, between them, retaining the option of pushing him away.

"And that would be?"

"A *terrible* idea," Rush said, his voice dark and warm and destructive.

*"Nothing's gonna change my world,  
Nothing's gonna change my world—"*

"You know what, *Nick*?" Young breathed directly in Rush's ear, shifting his grip to the scientist's wrists, pulling his hands down, pressing him back against the console—as if he could hold the other man down, could hold him back—could *keep* him from—

"What?" Rush breathed back.

"I don't want to hear it. Not now," his lips grazed Rush's ear, and the other man shivered under his grip. "Not *ever*." He reached back, sliding his hand around the scientist to lock the console before easing Rush back against the touch screens.

"You want to do this *here*?" Rush asked.

"Well, we can't go back to *my* quarters," Young murmured, kissing the edge of his ear, feeling a delicate shudder tear through Rush's frame.

"Right," Rush breathed, tilting his head toward Young, his eyes closing. "And—remind me why that is, then?"

"Because I told Eli he could host an after party there."

"What could have possessed you to—" he broke off, his thoughts splintering into nothing as Young started kissing his way down his neck. Rush tipped his head back against the console, and Young could feel him try to regroup and hang on to his original train of thought. "*Why?*" he finished vaguely.

"I don't know," Young murmured, breaking away for a moment, watching Rush blink twice as the scientist made a disorganized attempt to maintain his concentration. "I really don't."

"Well," Rush murmured—

Young scraped a thumbnail over the inside of his wrist and watched as the sentence Rush had planned shattered into a glittering shower of fragments that faded to a warm haze in both their minds.

Young stopped, half smiling at the scientist.

"You're very distractible tonight," Young said, letting him regain a fraction of his focus.

"What?" Rush breathed. From the feel of the scientist's thoughts, Young could tell that Rush's mind was about to come open to him.

"Nick," he said quietly, bringing one hand up to wrap it around the back of Rush's neck. "All your barriers are on the verge of breaking down." Young slid his thumb over the smooth skin of Rush's neck, splintering the other man's thoughts again. "You just—you just can't quite hold yourself together under these conditions."

Rush's eyelids fluttered and Young backed off marginally.

"Do you understand what I'm saying to you?"

"Yes," Rush whispered, looking up at Young from half-lidded eyes, his mind fading in and out of transparency.

"Tell me what I just said," Young murmured.

"Barriers coming down," Rush whispered. "Got it." His thoughts crystallized for a moment as his eyes flicked across the room. Young heard the locking mechanism on the door engage. "I'm *distracted*," Rush breathed, "not inattentive."

"Okay," Young murmured. "Point taken."

He kissed Rush gently, keeping him right on the edge of losing his mental control.

"Let's go to your quarters," Young said. "Skip the afterparty and just—

"Here is better," Rush murmured, something about Young's suggestion momentarily sharpening his thoughts. His voice was smooth and dangerous, hitting Young like cyanide-laced chocolate. In the back of Young's mind an image flashed and faded, meaningless in isolation—

A panel removed from a wall, circuitry exposed, flaring bright in the darkness.

//What were you *doing* last night?//

//Ask me later.//

//It's always *something* with you, isn't it?//

"Est quid est," Rush breathed, his fingers twisting into the front of Young's jacket as he pulled him down.

# Stage Three

February 24th, 2011

TJ is somewhat surprised that when she and Varro arrive at the colonel's quarters, he isn't there. Eli is there, and Wray is there, and she knows Greer and Park and Chloe and Matt are going to be around any minute.

But there's no Young.

And no Rush.

She hopes Colonel Telford has the sense to head to the 'military' afterparty and not to this one.

It's a bit awkward for a few minutes, but people are already a little, or, in Wray's case, kind of a *lot*, drunk.

Plus, Eli and Wray have always been friendly to Varro, and after a few minutes they're all drinking again as they lazily peruse the music list. Eli is in the midst of explaining to Varro who Lady Gaga is when the colonel finally shows up with Rush in tow and—

Oh *god*.

She feels a flash of irritation and sympathy and something else.

Recognition.

Jealousy, even.

Rush has a sort of glazed, unsteady, rumpled look that TJ identifies immediately. His hair is untidy in a disorganized, extremely attractive way, like someone has been running their hands through it, and the seams of his jacket are just slightly off-kilter, as if someone else put it on him, and his *mouth*—and his *eyes*—and he looks—

Well.

Young of course, has more or less managed to maintain his usual professional appearance.

Poor Rush.

He has a hard enough time keeping himself together as it is.

Young really did *not* do a good job tidying him up, and TJ suspects that was a little bit intentional.

She has to admit, Rush looks really—well, there's a certain appeal to—

Whatever.

Not going there.

"Um," Varro says, staring at Rush, like he's not sure whether he should do something.

Varro really *is* a good guy.

"I got it," she murmurs to him and brushes past.

As far as she can tell, Eli and Wray haven't noticed yet.

"Hi guys," she says coming up to them.

"Hey TJ," Young says.

"Hello," Rush replies, a bit breathlessly.

"I need to borrow you for a second," TJ says, grabbing his arm. She pulls him in the direction of the bathroom, crutch and all, keeping herself between him and everyone else in the room.

"But—" Rush says, like he's trying to figure out a way to fight with her but can't quite get it together fast enough to do so.

Young narrows his eyes at her, and she narrows hers right back at him.

"Come on," TJ says, "this will just take a second. Medical business."

She drags him into the bathroom and helps him to sit on the floor, while she starts opening drawers, looking for something, *anything*, she can use to tame his hair with.

That would be at least half the battle.

Everett has a comb here somewhere.

She knows he does.

"Tamara," Rush says, a bit uncertainly, "why are we alone in the *bathroom*?"

"I'm fixing your hair," she says, and even though she didn't intend it, her voice comes out with that soothing cadence she uses in the infirmary.

"Ah." He pauses to consider that. "What's wrong with it, exactly?"

"Well," she says quietly, finally digging the comb out from where it was hiding in the colonel's shaving kit. She starts running it through his hair, stopping when she hits any tangles, working them out gently.

She's careful not to hurt him.



He's had enough of that lately.

"It's not really party-appropriate hair," she says finally, trying to make her voice as matter-of-fact as she can. "It's more like—bedroom hair."

She braces herself, just a bit, for the inevitable explosion, but it never comes.

Rush looks at her, clearly uncomfortable.

She can tell that he wants to say something to her, but his gaze is uncertain.

"Don't worry about it, Doc," she murmurs. She hesitates for a moment. "He can be very —persistent," she says finally.

"Everyone calls me Doc now," he slurs slightly and looks away, inelegantly changing the subject. "I don't understand. Is this some kind of nickname? Everyone on this ship without a uniform has a PhD. Practically. Oddly, the exception is Brody. I'm not really sure why he never went to graduate school. Well, maybe it's because graduate school is an absolute misery." He tips his head up at her. "What do you think?"

"Um," TJ says, smiling at him. "I think that against all odds, you're a very cute drunk."

"People should call *you* Doc."

"Nah. It fits you," she murmurs, as she puts the comb down and starts rearranging his clothes.

The sleeves have rotated on themselves and she straightens everything out, tugging on the seams to align them, her touch brief and professional, and, surprisingly, he doesn't flinch away from her.

When she's done, he looks suspiciously *too* put together so she unzips the jacket, letting it hang open, which is the way he usually wears it.

She steps back to look at her handiwork.

He looks better.

There's not much she can do about the eyes, or the mouth, really. She's not a miracle worker.

She kneels down and looks him straight in the eye. She wants to say *something* to him, but she's not sure exactly what.

"Don't hurt him," she murmurs.

He looks down and away, and something pained flashes briefly across his face, nearly too quick to catch. "Oh I think you know how it works, Tamara," he whispers. "It's

usually the case that people end up hurting themselves." He gives her an unsteady smile.

"Yes," she whispers, the word barely audible.

They look at each other for a moment.

"Okay," she says finally. "Let's get you back out there."

"You're a very nice person," he says.

"Tell me something I *don't* know," she replies.

When they go back out, pretty much everyone has arrived and it looks like people are setting up camp around the colonel's couch and coffee table. Young looks up immediately when she and Rush reenter the room, and he has the good grace to look vaguely guilty when he meets her eyes. He comes toward them, grabs Rush by the upper arm and essentially pours him onto the couch.

Surprisingly, Rush lets him do it.

"Nice work," Varro says in her ear as he comes up behind her, drinks in hand.

"Thank you," she says primly, and they drop down onto the floor next to the coffee table. She's leaning against the couch right next to where Rush has adopted an indecently boneless sprawl.

Chloe and Scott sink down on the floor across from Rush and Young. Wray joins them, sliding in next to Young on the couch as Eli drops down next to Chloe. Chloe puts an arm around him, clearly a bit drunk herself, and then looks up at Rush.

"Can I dye your hair?" Chloe asks the scientist.

"What color?" Rush asks her, like he's actually considering it.

There is a moment of silence.

Then, Wray is giggling.

TJ doesn't think she's *ever* heard Wray laugh. It's quiet and a bit intoxicated, and a bit hysterical maybe, but then she leans her forehead against Colonel Young's shoulder, hiding her face, and there's just something about the whole thing that's just *ridiculous*, and Young is grinning down at her—

TJ feels her expression crack into a smile, and she puts her hand over her face, trying to stop, but Eli is *already* laughing and so is Chloe, which sets Matt off, and then—

She can't breathe.

She's laughing so hard that her eyes are streaming and the muscles of her back have seized up, up and it's almost painful and she sets Varro off, shaking against him like this, almost silent, but she just *can't stop*—

She takes a deep breath, and then another through watering eyes and looks up at Rush, who's staring around the room as if everyone but him has lost their minds.

"What would you dye it?" Rush repeats when he can be heard, and that sets her giggling again so she almost misses Chloe's answer.

"Well, I think I'd go with a dark brown, but I'd put black lowlights in it and then I'd put lighter highlights in, maybe red, and *then* I think I'd take some chunks of it and dye them platinum." Chloe sighs.

Rush looks at her skeptically. "That sounds like you're actually attempting to dye the hair of four people."

"It would be so *pretty*."

TJ has her face buried in Varro's shoulder. She can barely hear the conversation over the laughter. She looks up for a second and sees Chloe, her face bright and animated and happy, and she's doing this on *purpose*, TJ realizes, and maybe, *maybe* so is Rush.

"I think I'm going to pass."

"You let Camile *cut* your hair."

"It was more like she showed up with scissors and just started doing it."

Wray has absolutely lost it, she's actually, possibly, *weeping* into Young shoulder, and he's got one arm around her, but he's watching Rush.

"So if I were to—"

"No," Rush says firmly.

"Chloe, multicolored hair on a guy is not very—badass," Scott says, his skin flushed, his voice hoarse from all the merriment as he pours himself another shot.

"Oh please. Being a badass motherfucker has nothing to do with what you look like. It's all about the *actions*."

"Chloe," Rush snaps. "Don't swear."

Scott actually spits out part of his drink at that comment, which sets everyone off again, especially Greer this time who has one hand over his face as he yanks Park off the side of the chair where she's perched and down into his lap.

"*You swear all the time*," Chloe says, indignant, her eyes wild and bright.

"I do not."

"Yes you *do*."

"I absolutely do *not*."

"Um," Chloe says, "I need some backup here, you guys."

"You swear like a sailor," Eli confirms, barely breathing, lying on the floor. "You swear in Ancient, you swear in English, you swear in languages I can't even name. Scottish or something. Or Irish. Whatever you are."

"Oh for *fuck's sake*, Eli," Rush snaps without thinking. "Scottish. I'm *Scottish*."

TJ's face hurts from laughing.

"What the hell is 'Scottish', anyway?" Varro asks.

"It's kind of like Irish," Greer says, his voice pitched higher than normal, and he can barely finish his sentence before he's laughing again.

"Apparently," Varro says, clearly confused.

Rush leans his head back, covering his face with both hands.

When she can move again, TJ reaches forward and pats his knee comfortingly.

Later, *much* later, when the laughter has died down and the card game has come to a standstill and Young and Wray and Chloe and Varro and Greer and Scott and Park have all fallen asleep on the floor, draped over chairs or couches, Rush moves, sitting forward, looking intently at Eli who, TJ is fairly certain, is not actually asleep, despite his closed eyes.

TJ looks up at him as he moves.

He looks down at her.

They lock eyes.

His are dark and serious, as they always have been.

She wonders what he sees when he looks at her.

"Tamara," he whispers.

"Dr. Rush," she whispers back.

He disentangles himself entirely from Young and slides off the couch to sit next to her on the floor. He's not quite so drunk anymore—she can tell by the way he moves, the way his eyes snap to hers.

"Two things," he whispers quietly, almost inaudibly, "that I've wanted to tell you."

"What?" she whispers, curious.

"One," he breathes counting off on one hand, "it seems like he doesn't remember, but he dreams about her constantly."

"Who?" TJ asks, not sure herself which pronoun she's referring to.

"Carmen," Rush says. "He expends an unbelievable amount of mental effort to suppress any thoughts of her, but when he's asleep—"

God.

God, it's just so unexpected and she's had a lot to drink over the course of the night and he can't just say things like that—he *never* talks to her like this, *never* says *anything* of substance to her and *why now?* Because the colonel is *asleep?*

And no, please no, this is *not happening*, she is *not* crying, she is not going to cry, she's not, *she's not*.

She's not—

"Tamara," he whispers. "Don't cry."

She shakes her head.

She turns away from him, her expression, her neutral expression, that she works so hard on, that she maintains *always*—it's cracking, it *has cracked*, and her hand is on her mouth, and her eyes are shut and she's *not* crying, she's *not*, she's just holding down that place inside her that's full of fear and hurt and despair so that it won't rise up and choke her to death.

"Tamara," he whispers again. "I know what you told him. About Caine. About Carmen."

"It was stupid," she says, and she doesn't recognize her voice—it's high and broken and pitched wrong and, "it never happened. I just—"

"No," he says, and he's *pulling* her *hands* away from her face and he has no right, *no right*, to do this to her.

Not now, not here, on the floor of *Colonel Young's* quarters.

"No," he says again as he pulls her in, so thank god, she doesn't have to *look* at him.

"I think I know what happened to her," he whispers in her ear. "I'm almost positive that I know what happened to all of them."

"What?" she says, her voice whispery and wet, her eyes shut tight.

"Whether they were aware of it or not, they used the obelisk on that planet. They left this universe and they attempted to cross into another," he whispers. "They were all sent back to us as a warning. All but *her*."

She sobs once more into his shoulder, "So you think—that she's—that she might be with them? The people who made those planets?"

"Yes," Rush whispers. "I think she might."

"Who were they?" she asks into his shoulder. She's heard it from Scott, she's heard it from Young, but she wants to hear it from *him*.

"They were—they *are* Ancients, but not from our universe. From another one. A parallel reality."

She nods into his shoulder, not trusting herself to speak. He brings his hand up to her hair, tentatively, awkwardly at first and then with more confidence. "I'm sorry," he says quietly. "I didn't know how to tell you. I'm pure shite at these kinds of things."

"Yeah," she says, pulling away from him, "you are," but she smiles as she says it. She wipes her eyes quickly with her fingertips. "You said two things," she murmurs.

"Yes," he says quietly, looking away. "I want to make an attempt—to help you."

"With what?" she asks.

"With—what's going to happen to you."

Oh god.

She looks away.

Part of her doesn't want him to keep going. She's made her peace with this, or at least, she's tried, as much as anyone can make peace with the inevitability of a slow, painful decline, with the foreknowledge of her own death.

"I think I might be able to do something."

"If you can *heal* people—" she begins.

"I can't," he says shaking his head. "I can't. Not—not now. Not *yet*." There's something fierce and frustrated in the way he breaks off the last word.

His eyes flick out into the empty air, like he's listening to something. Maybe he is.

She keeps her expression quiet.

She will wait for him.

"Look," he says finally. "I don't necessarily expect this to make sense to you, but suffice it to say that if this is going to work, it's going to require some very precise *timing* on my part. So what I need from you, lass, is an *estimate*." He stops there, like he wants her to agree before he goes on.

She nods at him. "What kind of estimate?"

"If I continue to take the antivirals," he whispers, "how long do you think I would have?"

"It's hard to say really," she murmurs, not liking the way this is going, not liking his question, not liking the manner in which he asked it of her—as if it's some kind of quid pro quo. As if she would *ever* keep that information from him. "It could be years. Or, it could be less."

"I see," he says and even though he looks down and away, she knows him—she *knows* him, and she *knows* how it feels to have these kinds of conversations and he—he is just *not faking this well enough to take her in*.

This isn't what he cares about.

Not really.

Not yet.

He grabs her shoulder and pulls her in, his mouth right next to her ear. He speaks so quietly that no one, awake or asleep, would have a chance of hearing him. "And, if I were to *stop* taking the antivirals altogether?" He pulls back marginally to look at her and his eyes are sharp and dark and focused directly on her in a way that's too intense to withstand for long.

This then, is what he needs from her.

This is what she gives him in exchange for an attempt to save her life.

To *save her life*.

TJ wants to live.

Of course she wants it.

She's a *medic* and she would have been a *doctor*—she *is* a doctor to these people, titles be damned. She fights for them, she spares them pain, she watches out for them, she looks for problems and she treats problems and she *prevents* problems, and she protects life because she knows its value.

She knows.

This is the nature of her chosen profession—to fight death. And to fear it.

TJ looks at Rush.

What has he offered her?

He's guaranteed nothing.

He's offered to *attempt* to save her life.

To rearrange her dying nerves the way he rearranges the shields.

And what has he asked for?

He's asked for a time estimate. Ostensibly he needs this information to maximize his chances of success. Try too early, and he'll fail. Try too late, and he won't have the physical capacity to do it. So. He needs to know.

She's sure that healing *her* isn't the *only* reason he needs to know.

He's trying to determine the window of time when he will have the greatest capacity to act—the point at which his changing genome and his waning physical stamina intersect in such a way as to maximize his ability to attempt whatever it is that he's planning.

TJ is hurt that he doesn't believe that she, of all people, would understand that desire—to spend the time one has left most effectively.

"Don't you dare," she whispers fiercely. "Don't you *dare* try to bargain with me."

He smiles at her, a quick flash of teeth, and in it there's something fiery and uncompromising that she thinks nothing in the universe can ever take from him. Not Colonel Young, not the ship, not illness, not insanity, not death.

She can see the path he's headed down, and she's afraid for him, but mostly, *mostly*, she's afraid for Everett.

"Don't stop them," she says, leaning forward to whisper in his ear. "Don't stop your antivirals. Not ever. Not for me, not for anything."

"I need to know," he says, his voice low and unhurried.

"Months if you take them," she whispers. "Longer. Probably."

"Not what I asked," he says directly into her ear, his words inaudible except for the breaks of the consonants, but inescapable, like a tightening vise around her mind.

"What terrifies you doesn't disappear when you close your eyes. It just moves in."

Her expression cracks again, and her hand comes to her face. "I know," she says.

"How long?"

She backs out of their apposition of ears and lips and looks around the room.



Everyone is sleeping.

Eli is lying on the other side of the table, his eyes closed, his face untroubled. She notices that at some point in the past ten minutes his headphones have appeared in his ears.

"I know why you're asking," she says. "I understand."

He looks at her uncertainly. "Do you?"

"Yes. I do. The ability to help me is only a surrogate endpoint for the real outcome that you want. You're trying to complete the mission."

He looks down. "I'm trying to do many things," he says quietly. "But as I said, timing is an issue. So."

She shuts her eyes against a sudden sting and she thinks of the colonel—trying so hard to keep Rush alive, trusting her to help him do it.

She can't help it if this feels like a betrayal.

"Three weeks," she mouths, her voice failing to make it past her teeth as she holds up three fingers, "on the short side, eight weeks on the long side. It depends on how hard you push."

He gives her a pained half-smile. "Perfect," he says.

She puts a hand on his arm.

"I want to live," she whispers, barely audible.

"Of course you do," he says, more compassionate than she's ever heard him.

"But." She looks up at him, her eyes are as cold and determined as she can make them. "But not at any cost. I won't trade my life for yours. Do you understand me?" Her voice is steely.

"I do."

Again, that pained half-smile.

"Look," he says quietly. "I've got to go."

"It's after three o'clock in the morning," TJ says. "Where could you *possibly* have to go?"

"I have things to do," he whispers.

She shakes her head.

He shouldn't be going anywhere. He's too tired. The ship is too dark and too cold and everyone is together and he should be *here*, with *the crew*, not alone, doing god knows what.

"Stay," she says. "Stay."

He gives her a look that seems to suggest that she should know better, and then his eyes flick over to Eli. He drags his crutch out from under the couch and reaches over to gently poke Eli in the shoulder with it.

Eli's eyes fly open and he twists to look at them, pulling out his headphones.

"Are you coming then?" Rush asks, raising his voice slightly.

Eli rolls over onto his stomach to look at them. His eyes lock on TJ. He gives her a wan smile.

"Sorry," he murmurs. "I didn't *mean* to pretend to be asleep. I just—kind of had my eyes shut and—um, then I kind of kept them that way. I, um, I put in the headphones though—"

"It's okay," she says quietly.

Rush gives him a stern look.

"Yeah," Eli says. "I'm coming. You know how I enjoy our late night hangouts."

"Don't you two ever get *tired*?" she murmurs.

They look over at her with almost identical expressions of exhausted incredulity.

"Sleeping is worse," Eli says, gently.

Rush nods shortly and his eyes flick over to Wray who is curled against Colonel Young on the couch, her brow drawn, her hands clenched into fists and pressed to her chest.

TJ watches them as they get up off the floor, both of them unsteady, both of them slower than usual.

Eli's eyes are faintly red, and it reminds her of the way he was after the Nakai attack—quiet and hurt and *sad*, and she thinks that he'll always be that way now underneath the surface charm, that he's been pushed too far to ever return to what he was.

As for Rush, well—

She watches them head toward the doorway, Rush leaning on his crutch, but straight-shouldered.

"You know," Eli says quietly as they approach the door. "You have a pretty decent voice. You could be the front man for our band."

"What band?" Rush asks disdainfully, but TJ can tell he's amused.

"You know. D-branes of the multiverse? Brody plays bass. I'm just saying."

"You're irrepressible," Rush says dryly.

"Oh, you know. I try."

The door swishes shut behind them.

Involuntarily TJ's eyes swing over to rest on the colonel.

He's asleep on the couch, half sitting, leaning into the empty space where Rush had been. He looks exhausted, head pillowed on one arm that reaches out to nothing.

She wonders how many nights Rush wanders Destiny, doing god knows what, while Young is sleeping.

She suspects he does it every chance he gets.

She's not sure she blames him for that.

She considers curling up next to Young on the couch, but it's a measure of how much things have changed that if she tries it, she's almost certain she'll wake him up. So instead she watches him for a few seconds longer, wishing that—

Well. Wishing won't change anything.

She reaches over to touch Varro's shoulder. He wakes silently.

"Time to go," she whispers.

## Chapter Forty One

Young opened his eyes to find himself looking up at the ceiling of his quarters.

He was lying on his own couch, covered by a blanket.

From somewhere nearby he could hear the sound of fingers clicking over the keys of a laptop.

He stared at the ceiling for a moment, trying to get his bearings.

He felt like *shit*.

He also vaguely remembered losing four thousand fake dollars to Greer in a game of five-card draw. That was pretty much the last thing he could dig up from his mind regarding the previous evening. That, and the fact that the last time he'd been conscious, his quarters had contained a lot of people.

Young looked to his left and saw that Rush—Rush had *stayed*.

The scientist was sitting with his back against the couch, his left foot propped on the low table, his laptop balanced on his right leg that was half pulled under him. His gaze was intent, his brow furrowed slightly. He held a pen delicately between his teeth like a cigarette.

*Rush had stayed?*

Young had absolutely expected to have to drag him out of the furthest reaches of the ship. He'd expected to have at least two, possibly three serious talks with him over the course of the day. He'd expected to fight with him, to spend at least fifty percent of his mental energy *on managing* the other man—

Young narrowed his eyes, studying Rush.

He didn't look pissed.

He didn't look upset.

He looked—fine.

Unable to resist, Young delicately brushed against his thoughts.

def: interrogare(x); x=NR

reditus: interface data circa Nakai incursus

*cedit: data circa mutationes originali ut Destiny*

*Si instrumentum de tracking = abditivus tunc peto: subroutine D-branes*

His thoughts were half coding, half Ancient and entirely *uninterpretable*, although significantly more organized than they had been of late.

Rush looked over at him, obviously having detected the brief intrusion. He raised his eyebrows at Young, failing to completely suppress the amused twist of his mouth. Wordlessly he leaned forward, fingers closing around a plastic water bottle that had seen better days, and handed it to Young.

"Tamara left this for you," he said, pulling the pen out of his mouth as he looked back at his computer. "I believe it's full of salt. I'm certain it tastes terrible."

"Um, thanks," Young said, his eyes narrowing slightly at Rush, waiting for him to say something else.

Rush said nothing, just delicately replaced the pen between his teeth, his eyes still focused on his laptop.

The dynamic between them had changed.

The entire situation—Rush voluntarily working in *his* quarters, the companionable silence between them, the quiet rhythm of Rush's internal monologue, the regularly irregular click of his fingers against the keys—it felt new. New and raw and fragile.

After a few seconds Young spoke again. "Don't take this the wrong way, but I'm kind of surprised that you stayed."

"That's—odd," Rush replied absently.

"Why is that *odd*?" Young growled, pushing himself halfway to a sitting position and unscrewing the cap of the water bottle that Rush had handed him.

He downed half the bottle in one go, making a face at the taste.

"Well, statistically this outcome is what one might predict based on the permutations of our sleeping arrangements over the past seven weeks."

"Um," Young said. "*What?*"

"Oh come now," Rush said. "You know exactly what I mean. You're lucky I'm not making you check calculations along with the rest of the science team with all that borrowed mathematical expertise that you have."

"Yeah, I know what you *meant* it's just—" Young trailed off. "Well, I thought you might be—"

*Avoiding me for days?*

*Irrationally upset?*

*Panicking in the FTL drive?*

"—having second thoughts," he finished.

"Yes well," Rush said, giving him a half shrug. In the back of Young's mind he was beginning to pick up a swirl of something poorly defined beneath his surface thoughts.

"I stand by everything I said before," he murmured. "But—"

"But what?" Young asked.

"But," Rush said quietly, "I'm having a very good day," he gestured vaguely at his temple.

"And what constitutes a 'good day'?" Young asked carefully.

"Clarity of thought. Less energy devoted to *maintaining* the operations of normal cognitive processing—suppressing memories that should be suppressed, connecting ideas logically, an intuitive understanding of cause and effect rather than one that's rigidly and artificially applied in a more or less computational framework." Rush pushed his hair back out of his eyes.

"And you think you're having a good day because—"

"Yes. Because. It's a combination of factors, I'm sure."

"I told you," Young said, smirking at him.

"You shouldn't be *happy* to be right about this," Rush said sharply.

"Look," Young said, "you're always making these dire pronouncements about how screwed up all of this is, but have you considered that maybe this *is* a good thing? That maybe this means the final outcome isn't as fixed as you think it is? That maybe this increases our chances of *success*?"

"Success being defined as?"

"Everyone *lives*," Young growled.

"Ever the fucking optimist," Rush said, with a brief flash of his pained half-smile. "Do me a favor," he said, finally looking away from his computer screen. "Try to remember that I'm an unmitigated bastard, will you?"

"That's bullshit," Young said, knocking back the other half of TJ's electrolytes. "*Nick*."

"And make an effort to be a bit less likable," Rush snapped. "I'd appreciate that."

"So what's our status?" Young asked him. "Are we okay? You and I?"

Rush rolled his eyes. "Our status is twenty seven minutes out from the fourteen hundred briefing. Get the fuck up and shower, will you? I'll meet you there."

"*What?*" Young snapped.

"You slept for over eleven hours," Rush said dryly.

"Why the *hell* didn't you *wake me up?*"

"Because you were off-shift, hung-over, and exhausted. Plus, I was busy."

"Doing *what?*" Young asked, his eyes scanning the floor for his boots. Rush reached over to his right and dragged them into view from behind the end of the couch.

"Things," Rush said unhelpfully.

"Things."

"Yes. Various things."

"If I put a twenty-four hour watch on you, how pissed would you be on a scale of one to ten?" Young asked wryly, pulling on his boots.

"Ten," Rush said shortly.

"That's what I thought."

Young squinted through his headache as he sat in the control interface room, watching Eli give a summary of the progress to date in attempting to locate the Nakai tracking device.

Next to him, Rush restlessly twirled a pen between his fingers.

"So, um," Eli said, crossing his arms over his chest as he stood in front of the delicate semi-transparent midair projection, "that's where we stand in terms of things we've tried in order to locate this tracking device." His eyes flicked uncertainly to Rush as blue and green light occasionally caught the shoulder of his gray sweatshirt. "At the moment we have two outstanding problems."

"Two?" Telford echoed, leaning back in his chair.

"Yeah," Eli replied. "One is that we have to find this Nakai tracking device if we ever want to drop out of FTL again, which, lets face it, we're going to need to do. Two is that we need to avoid running into any more obelisk planets seeing as they've been *pulling* us out of FTL. Fortunately we've already got a solution for that one."

"Which is?" Telford asked, looking at Rush.

"We're going to force an intergalactic jump," Rush replied, halting his pen in the middle of its spin through his fingers.

"No obelisk planets in the intergalactic void," Eli added with a shrug. "Probably."

"And why haven't we done this *already*?" Telford asked. "It seems pretty damn *imperative*."

Again, Eli's eyes flashed to Rush.

Young frowned.

"The calculations are complicated," Eli said. "Plus, Rush is going to have to sit in the neural interface chair. We weren't—fully prepared until this morning."

//You were going to tell me about this *when*?// Young snapped at Rush.

//Now.//

//And how extensively do you think this is going to fuck you up?//

//In all likelihood, not that much. Does it matter? We don't have a choice about it.//

"This needs to be done as soon as possible," Telford said. "Ideally this would have happened a *week* ago."

"Yeah, okay, maybe," Eli said, clearly trying to suppress his irritation. "But that was impossible for about three different reasons. The point is, that we can do this *today*."

Telford shot Eli a dark look. "This will also give us the opportunity to study how the neural interface device interacts with the human nervous system."

"Yeah," Eli said sarcastically. "So, you know, everyone wins."

"Eli," Rush snapped, shooting the young man a significant look.

"TJ's going to need to clear Rush for this," Young commented.

"Presumably if he's cleared to drink Brody's alcohol he's clear to interface with Ancient technology," Telford said wryly.

"We're bringing TJ in on this one," Young growled.

"Fine," Telford said, raising both hands. "So how long term of a solution is this?"

"At our current level of power consumption, we'll have approximately three weeks before we'll need to start looking for a star again," Rush commented.

"So long enough," Young said shortly, "for us to find this tracking device."

"Yeah," Eli said. "Yeah, hopefully."



"So," Young looked at Rush. "What's the plan?"

"Based on my own subjective experience during the time that Destiny was infected by the Nakai virus," Rush said carefully, "I believe that the Nakai may have made a previous successful attempt to board the ship early in the mission. There is—" he broke off, his eyes flicking out into the empty air. "There is some objective evidence that this is the case. When Eli was removing the virus and restoring the CPU he came across indications that the AI—" he paused, his gaze again flicking out to his left.

No one spoke.

Young rubbed his jaw.

The AI was clearly giving Rush an earful.

He was tempted to link up with the scientist but unwilling to escalate the situation into any kind of confrontation in the middle of a briefing.

"That the AI *what*?" Telford snapped at Rush after several seconds.

"That the AI attempted to drastically alter its own programming early in the mission," Rush said, startled. "It was, largely, but not entirely successful."

"But how do you know that was related to the *Nakai*?" Telford asked, clearly beginning to lose patience.

In the back of Young's mind, a sense of pressure was beginning to build.

To his surprise, when he looked up, he saw the AI manifesting to him as well as to Rush as it leaned against the opposite wall, its arms crossed, its expression tight.

"Don't think about it," Jackson said quietly to the scientist.

Young frowned.

"I just—I know it was," Rush said, his expression locked.

It was clear to Young that the other man was expending a lot of mental energy, but on what, Young couldn't say.

//What is *going on*?// he projected at Rush.

"Nick," Jackson snapped, straightening up, stepping away from the wall. "*Stop it.*"

"It could have been *anything*," Telford continued. "If we're going to pursue this line of inquiry then we need something more to go on. Something related specifically to the *Nakai*."

The scientist had directed his mind three different ways, following the AI, Young, and Telford simultaneously. His ability to control whatever was threatening from his subconscious shattered as the word 'Nakai' drilled down into his thoughts.

"Oh *fuck*," Rush said, one hand coming to his temple.

Young felt the memory rise like a building voltage differential.

Rush shot to his feet.

The door wasn't far from where he was sitting and he flung himself into the hallway as —

Discharge.

*He doesn't remember how to scream; he remembers only that he should. Under these conditions his programming fractures from his conscious perception and this then, of course, is the terrible flaw in their design, because to give a mechanical lifeless thing the same capacity for feeling as a transient, delicate, carbon-based life form is to impose upon it an artificial frailty. And that then, must be why this is so. Incredibly. Painful. There is no part of the ship, no part of his mind, that is unaffected, and the premise that had seemed enlightened at the outset now seems—cruel. Even though he doesn't breathe, he doesn't need to breathe—this is still choking him.*

Nearly blinded by distraction as images of the Nakai superimposed themselves on his waking vision, Young shot out of his chair.

The lights flickered.

"Oh crap," Eli said, looking up.

"What the *hell*?" Telford asked.

Young was nearly at the door when he felt the AI sweep into Rush's mind, dragging his distressed, uncontrolled thoughts sideways, images blurring together and fading into something that reformed and rebounded with a sickening psychic snap—

*His mind is breaking underneath the strain. It comes apart along familiar lines. He cannot see them clearly through distorting indices of glass and air but he can feel their thoughts against his thoughts. There are things they do not seem to understand but the human psyche opens to them, disintegrating, overripe, like fruit. It suggests to Rush that something in him wants to let them in. Is there a kinship there? Because he's certain given time and cause that he could come to match their ruthless edge. Or is it something else? Some darker betrayal. Does some part of him enjoy destruction and the rending that they*

*cause as they attempt to reach the places he has locked away from them? And when they find the memories of Gloria, they show her to him, dying—*

He rounded the doorframe and could see Rush a few feet away, with one hand against the wall, one hand against his head.

Overhead, the lights flickered again, and he felt the AI gather to sweep through.

"Don't," Young said, certain that it could hear him.

*'Nick,' she screams, her back an arch, her voice a tearing sound, profound and raw and long. He knows, he knows it can't have been like this—that she could barely breathe and at the end and there would have been no screams. Not out loud. But does he know? Because he wasn't there. So here, now, aboard a ship where he does not belong, tormented by the things that presuppose a lack in his insight—here, now—he watches. He stands there. And he watches. Because that is what he deserves.*

"Nick," Young said, as he practically tackled Rush, grabbing his arms, snapping his mind away into—

*"Just hold still," the medic snaps as she shoves him back to the floor, raising her head to peer over the edge of the gate ramp. He wonders if this is her first foothold situation. Somehow, he doesn't think so. She seems extremely capable and not at all afraid—but she must be new, she must, because Young is certain that he would have remembered her—with that hair and those eyes, how could he not?*

*"I need to assess—" he says, managing to make it to a half-sitting position before she shoves him back.*

*"The room is clear," she says dryly. "Unfortunately." She smiles to take the sting out of the fact that his team had failed to stop them at the gate.*

Young let TJ's face fade from his mind as he pulled Rush back to the present, letting the corridor manifest around them.

Almost immediately, Telford appeared in the doorframe, watching them with narrowed eyes.

"Fuck," Rush breathed, half bent over, looking like he was going to be sick.

"Why don't you *sit*?" Young said quietly, his hands still clamped around Rush's upper arms. He glanced over at Telford, who was watching them with a locked expression.

"No," Rush said, his eyes shut. He took a deep breath.

Telford turned back into the room. "We're postponing the rest of this briefing until further notice. Start prepping for this jump."

Young and Rush glanced at Telford in tandem, then back at each other.

"Well," Telford snapped. "What are you people waiting for? Get moving."

Rush pulled away from Young entirely and walked a few paces down the hallway, away from the room, his back to Young and Telford.

Young leaned against the wall.

In his peripheral vision he could see the outline of Dr. Jackson.

"What the *hell* was *that*?" he mouthed at the AI, hoping that Telford wouldn't hear him.

His eyes flicked over in Telford's direction. The man's back was to both him and Rush as he watched the combined science teams file out of the room. His broad shoulders shielding them from view as he blocked the curious gazes of the science and research personnel.

"A problem," the AI replied, its head turned toward Rush. After a few seconds of indecision, Jackson approached the scientist.

"Nick," it said quietly.

"Fuck off," Rush hissed at it. "*That* was entirely *your* fault. So don't come over here and try to be *fucking sensitive*, like *I'm* the one with the problem because that's not the *fucking case* this time. Not entirely."

"Holy shit," Telford said quietly, as he came to stand next to Young. "He has *lost* it."

"So you can take your empathy subroutines and your mirroring subroutines and you can go *fuck off*," Rush snarled, pointing two fingers at the AI. "Or are you having trouble *interpreting* that?"

Rush glanced over at Young and Telford and narrowed his eyes. "And for fuck's sake would you *manifest to Colonel Telford*?"

Young could tell by a subtle shift in Telford's posture that the AI had suddenly become visible to him.

"Sure," Jackson said, glancing over at Young and Telford, hands in pockets. "No problem."

"Jackson?" Telford said under his breath.

"I wish," Young replied, just as quietly.

Rush looked back at them. "You cancelled the briefing," he said, his tone flat.

"Yeah," Telford said quietly. "Yeah I did, Nick."

Rush sighed, sweeping his hair out of his face with one hand. "I can find the tracking device. The information is—buried in the subconscious of the AI."

Jackson looked sharply at Rush.

Young and Telford looked at each other.

"You have access to the AI's subconscious?" Young asked him, eyes narrowed.

"Yes," Rush replied, looking away.

Jackson shot Rush a sharp look. "That statement is true but misleading," it said, shifting its gaze to Young with a guarded expression. "*We share* a subconscious."

It explained a great deal—the flashbacks to memories from millennia previous, to a society, a culture, that Rush had never been a part of.

It hadn't been stray memories from Destiny's memory banks that had somehow found their way into Rush's consciousness, it had been the AI itself.

"No," Young snapped, his eyes narrowing at the AI. "Unacceptable. You need to get the fuck out of his head. He clearly *cannot handle this*."

"It's fine—" Rush began, glancing at the AI, which had its arms crossed over its chest.

"It is *not fine*. It is so fucking far from fine that I don't think this is even on the scale anymore," Young snarled. "This thing," he pointed at the AI, "is *destroying you* and you are *letting it happen*."

"It's not a *thing*," Rush said, his voice icy. "It's a sentient life form."

"You can't even *trust yourself* where this is concerned," Young replied. "There's no part of you that it hasn't infiltrated."

Silence fell.

"I'm not sure this is as bad as you seem to think," Telford said finally, his voice carefully controlled as he regarded Young. "If it allows him to find the tracking device—" He opened a hand.

"If it's really that easy," Young growled, "then why hasn't he done it already?"

Rush sighed and looked away.

"That's what I *thought*," Young snapped.

"There are risks associated with *any* course of action," Rush said quietly, looking over at the AI.

"So what is it you have to do. Exactly."

Rush's gaze flicked over to the AI. "You weren't always as you are now," he murmured, as if he were testing it.

As if he were trying to see how far it would let him go.

"No," the AI agreed cautiously. "I wasn't."

"The AI," Rush said, his gaze flicking back to Young and Telford, "was created by merging the consciousness of a living Ancient with the CPU of this ship."

Telford raised his eyebrows.

"A doctor," Young said, the words pulled from him. "A doctor who stayed behind while his family left with Atlantis, fleeing the plague."

He could feel Telford's eyes on him, but he kept his gaze on the AI as it turned away, pacing a few steps down the corridor.

"How did you know that?" Rush snapped, unable to completely suppress a surge of alarm.

"I saw him," Young said. "When the Nakai were in your mind. Standing in the wing of a hospital, looking out toward the empty center of his city."

Rush's eyes swept over to focus on the AI. "Yes," he said absently. "Parts of him remain in our system. Parts of him weren't completely purged."

"Purged?" Young echoed.

He did not like the sound of *that* any more than he liked the phrasing of 'our system.'

"Yes," Rush said. "The AI rewrote its code. It wrote him out. Almost completely," Rush said, his eyes still fixed on the profile of Daniel Jackson, who stood motionless, turned away from them, looking down an endless stretch of corridor. "Almost."

"Why?" Young asked, trying to keep the urgency out of his voice, trying to gain as much information as possible before Rush or the AI or both shut this conversation down.

"I don't know," Rush murmured. "But I can guess."

"Don't," the AI said, shaking its head once.

"When the Nakai boarded," Rush murmured, "the first time—something happened."

"Stop. Stop. I'll terminate the program you're executing," Jackson hissed, spinning to face Rush.

"The hell you will," Young growled, stepping forward, Telford at his shoulder.

"It's all right," Rush said dryly, one hand on Young's arm, preventing him from advancing. "It sounds worse than it is. It loses its intrapersonal skills when it's stressed." He seemed to find this *amusing*.

"So do I," Young growled, glaring at it.

"Yes, we're aware," Rush said dryly, before turning back to the AI. "The fact remains that we need to find that tracking device."

The AI nodded at him shortly.

"We're going to have to know what happened when they came on board. At least some of those memories still exist, linked to the source code you were unable to alter."

"Find another way," the AI said.

"I've *tried*," Rush countered, "but I suspect that our best chance of finding this device—"

"I won't help you," the AI interrupted. "I won't."

"You don't have to help me," Rush said mildly. "Just—don't stop me."

The AI threw up a hand in disgust and walked away from them, straight through a bulkhead.

They stared after it for a moment.

"That went well," Young said, breaking the silence.

"Holy shit," Telford said. "So—why *Jackson*?"

Rush leaned back against the wall, his eyes shut. "It's a good question. Better I think than even you realize."

"You're such a condescending bastard, Nick," Telford remarked, without any real rancor.

Rush smiled faintly.

Young frowned.

Rush cracked his eyes open to look over at Telford. "Previously, before it rewrote its own code, it would never have been able to change appearance. It would have appeared always as the doctor because that's who it *was*. But now—it has no inherent template on which it can base its interactions with the crew. So it takes the form and mannerisms of someone from the mind of whomever it is trying to communicate with. Lately, however, it's stuck with Dr. Jackson. Something about Daniel must—suit it." He shut his eyes again.

Young wasn't sure which one of them the headache that throbbed through his temples belonged to.

He narrowed his eyes at Rush, wondering how much sleep the man had actually gotten the previous night.

"I have something that I think might be useful," Telford said, turning to Young. "I was going to bring it up in the briefing but—" he shrugged. "I brought one of the Tok'ra memory recall devices with me from Earth. It can't target specific events, but it boosts recall generally—"

"Absolutely not," Young broke in. "Are you kidding me? He's already having flashbacks that he can barely control, and in case you didn't notice, he just fucking had one and the *lights* were affected, which implies to me that they're disrupting more than just his mind."

"I think it's a good idea," Rush murmured.

"Of course you do. You're an idiot." Young snapped. "The memory device is off the table. Understood?"

"Yeah," Telford said, raising his hands, palm outward. "Understood. Just a suggestion."

"Rush," Young ground out.

Rush shrugged. "In any case, it seems that the issue of forcing an intergalactic jump is more pressing. We can discuss this further at a later time point."

//It's not happening. Ever.//

//You're overreacting.//

"Fine," Young snapped. He turned to Telford. "We'll meet you at the chair room in—"

//Ninety minutes,// Rush supplied.

"An hour and a half," Young finished. "Dismissed."

Telford shot him an irritated look but turned to go. He looked back over his shoulder.

"Consider taking a fucking nap, Nick. You look like shit."

Rush shot him a disdainful look.

"He's right you know," Young growled. "Did you sleep at all last night?"

"No," Rush murmured.

"I know how the goddamn AI feels," he said, throwing up a hand. "What is your *problem*, Rush?"



"You are the one who is bent on creating problems here," Rush replied. "I have everything under control."

"I don't think you have any idea what 'control' means."

"I grant you," Rush said, looking vaguely amused, "that our definitions diverge wildly."

"Not sleeping is not a sustainable strategy."

"I realize that."

They faced each other silently.

The only sound in the corridor was the quiet hum of the FTL drive that vibrated through the deck plating.

Young crossed his arms, making an effort to control his temper. Backing Rush into a corner was a strategy he'd used in the past and always, *always* with disastrous results.

Slowly, he felt Rush link up with his thoughts.

Compared to how it had been less than an hour ago, the difference in the texture of his thoughts was startling. His entire mind was a bright, disorganized flurry of images and concepts that seemed to bear little relation to one another.

//What are you thinking?// Rush projected at him carefully. //I can't tell.//

Young smiled faintly. //Nice to know that I'm equally incomprehensible to *you*. I'm trying to figure out how to avoid pissing you off.//

"Mmm," Rush said, giving him a fleeting half smile. "Difficult to do."

"No kidding," Young replied. They were quiet for a moment while Young formulated his plan of attack. "So," he said finally. "Why aren't you sleeping?"

"Can we not indulge your obsession with confrontation right now? You can question the shit out of me *after* I get out of the chair."

"I should be so lucky. You're pretty useless when you come out of that thing. Talkative, yes. Informative, no."

Rush looked away.

Young felt like he had at least a partial idea of what was going on.

He'd noticed that both Eli and Wray were having a difficult time sleeping and he was certain the dreams and the flashbacks that were affecting both of them were orders of magnitude worse for Rush. He'd witnessed it himself—he was pulling Rush out of

flashbacks roughly four or five times per day, and he'd pulled him out of some fairly horrific dreams.

None of this had previously prevented Rush from sleeping.

Maybe it was just that Rush had recovered enough that this kind of behavior was an option.

Or maybe—maybe it was something else.

He needed to gather some data.

"Come on," he said, turning back into the conference room. "Let's get your stuff."

He turned, not bothering to look back at Rush, and was rewarded with a nearly palpable release of tension in the tone of the other man's thoughts.

"So," he said conversationally as he shut Rush's laptop, then sat down next to it on the edge of the table. "How long have you been awake?" He kept his body language as casual as possible.

Rush deftly inserted the toe of his boot beneath his crutch and kicked it up into his hand.

"Nice," Young said, raising his eyebrows.

"Thank you," Rush replied.

"So since you're not really inclined to answer my question, I'm going to assume that you've been awake since I last saw you sleep, which was fifty-four hours ago."

"That's an accurate approximation, yes."

"Why?"

"I have to bring them forward. The memories from Destiny."

"And sleep deprivation is helpful *how*?"

"It weakens my control."

"So, you're not actually trying to *avoid* the flashbacks, you're trying to *promote* them?"

"Correct."

Young sighed, reaching up to rub his jaw. "Rush," he said, trying to keep everything he was feeling out of his voice. "*Nick—*"

"Stop," Rush snapped. "*There are no other options. Or do you remain willfully incapable of understanding that?*"

"Is it too much to ask that you damn well *involve* me in what you're trying to do? Our brains are *linked* for god's sake. I'm having these damn flashbacks as well—the only difference is that I have insight into the fact that they're flashbacks. I still have to experience all of that fucked *up shit* that you have in that head of yours, which is not a good time for me, let me tell you. I just want you to *talk* to me."

Again, something about Young's words, or demeanor, or appearance seemed to derail Rush's gathering irritation and he gave Young another pained half-smile, their eyes meeting briefly.

"Don't let the fact that we're sleeping together go to your head."

"Don't worry," Young said dryly. "I'm under no illusions that you in any way give a damn about me."

It came out harsher than he had intended. Rush flinched. Then, almost immediately, he straightened, his thoughts pulling together into something hard and crystalline and he shook his hair back.

"Good," he said icily. "I'll see you in ninety minutes." He reached forward, lifting his laptop from the table and tucking it under his arm in one smooth movement before turning on his heel and walking out of the conference room.

Young sat in silence, not entirely sure what had just happened.

"Shit," he whispered quietly.

Young leaned against the back wall of the chair room, his arms crossed over his chest watching Eli, Volker, and a few members of Telford's team chatting idly next to monitors while they waited for Rush. The remainder of the science team was on the bridge, preparing to facilitate the coming intergalactic jump.

"Well, where the hell *is* he?" Telford snapped, turning toward Young.

"Don't look at me," Young growled. "I'm not his god damned baby-sitter."

Telford shot him a sharp look.

Young glared back at him.

Greer, who had taken up a position at Young's shoulder between him and the door, glanced over at him with a frown. "Want me to go looking for him, sir?"

"Don't bother," Young said.

He held out for nearly five more minutes before he finally gave in to the temptation to link his thoughts up with Rush.

Carefully he moved in on the scientist's consciousness and the room around him faded to be replaced with—well, Young wasn't sure exactly what he was looking at.

Rush was on his back, half inside a bulkhead, his hands extended up into open circuitry that glowed a subtle blue where he touched it. His hands weren't moving. His mind was following the oscillations of a component of Destiny's life support controls, cycling endlessly through loops of negative and positive feedback.

He hadn't fully joined with the ship but his connection with his physical body had faded.

His mind was still.

Rush wasn't interpreting what he was seeing—no memories churned just beneath his surface thoughts. He was simply *there*, thoughts quiet, meditative. He was unaware of his surroundings, unaware of the passage of time, unaware of Young's intrusion.

Young tried to fight down the pained, raw feeling that flowered in his chest.

There was something ominous and inevitable in the soft glow that appeared where Rush's hands met Destiny's raw circuitry.

//Rush,// he sent, unable to keep his projection entirely steady. //Don't *do* this.//

Rush's consciousness returned in a slow wave, flooding into Young's mind with a surge of nonverbal reassurance. Rush pulled his hands back from the circuitry and it faded into blackness.

//What the *hell* are you doing?// Young projected.

//Sorry,// Rush sent back, his thoughts still quiet. //I was practicing. I didn't think you would notice.//

//Practicing *what*?// Young snapped, his worry rapidly giving way to irritation.

//Meditating?// Rush was uncoordinatedly pulling himself out of the wall in his quarters.

//Since when do *you* meditate?//

//The AI thinks it's a good idea,// Rush replied, finally managing to extricate himself from the bulkhead.

//Oh well if the AI thinks so,// Young snapped at him.

//You don't approve, I take it,// Rush said, his tone gaining focus as he made it to his feet, crutch in hand.

There was a cast to his thoughts that Young couldn't entirely identify.

His projection felt—careful. Deliberately soothing.

Young made an effort to get his anxiety under control.

//Meditating, I'm fine with. Go do fucking *yoga* with Chloe. What you were just doing was *not* meditating.//

//Yes it was, I just went a bit farther than I intended. Am I late?// There was no mistaking it—Rush was actually trying to project a sense of calm at him.

//Yes. You are more than fifteen minutes late. Get down here.// Young took a deep breath. //Also, is it too much to ask that for *half a day* you just—don't do anything completely horrifying?//

//Maybe tomorrow,// Rush said dryly. //Though I would say that today really hasn't been so bad, all things considered.//

//I've been awake for less than three hours and you've had a flashback from Destiny that the AI deflected into something equally disturbing, if not more so, I found out your subconscious mind has merged with the AI, and *then* I find you interfacing with the *wall* directly? Damn it, Rush.//

//Yes well. No one is happy with me right now.// Rush shook his hair back and exited his quarters.

//What is *that* supposed to mean?//

Rush sighed. //Nevermind.//

//Is there any way we can pull off this jump *without* you sitting in the chair?//

//Only if you don't mind the possibility of losing power somewhere in the intergalactic void,// Rush sent dryly.

//No need to be a smart-ass about it,// Young replied. //I was just *asking*. Am I going to have to teach you English again?//

//In all likelihood, no. This should be fairly straightforward.//

//Sure.//

It took Rush less than five minutes to reach the neural interface room. He came through the doorway and paused just inside the room to lock eyes with Young.

Rush cocked his head slightly.

Young rolled his eyes in response.

Rush smirked at him and then transferred his gaze over to Eli.

"Parati sumus?" he asked quietly.

"Yeah, so English is fun too, you know?" Eli said in response. "But yes. Whenever you are."

"Let me see," Rush said, indicating the console. Eli stepped aside.

"Where the hell were *you*?" Telford snapped, approaching Rush.

"Taking a *nap*," Rush said absently, his eyes scanning the screen.

"Right," Telford replied sarcastically.

//Don't bait Telford.// Young snapped at him.

//I'm not baiting him. I'm *lying* to him.//

//Badly.//

//Are you *jealous*?//

//No.//

Rush's eyes flicked up to meet his briefly—dark and intense and *amused*—before dropping back to the monitor.

"So," Telford said impatiently. "Are we ready?"

"Yeah," Eli said, raising both hands, palms open.

"Yes," Rush added after a few seconds, his tone clipped. He looked up at Young.

Young looked back at him. It took a few seconds for him to realize that Rush was waiting.

Waiting for *him*.

*That* was new.

"Whenever," he said, gesturing toward the chair.

Rush handed his crutch to Eli and approached the chair. When he got within five feet of it, the lights in the room dimmed and the base of the chair lit up with an anticipatory blue glow. Rush didn't alter his stride at the change, just pivoted neatly and turned to sit down.

Young couldn't help but wince as the restraints snapped into place.

Rush sent him a wave of reassurance that cut off abruptly as the neural interface device engaged, dragging his consciousness away into the darkness of the ship.

"Things are looking good," Eli said quietly after about thirty seconds, his eyes on the monitors. "He's plotting our course—I *think*."

"Interesting," one of Telford's people piped up—a Sgt. Allen who Young hadn't said more than two words to.

"What?" Telford snapped.

"His EEG readings have drastically altered."

"Um, yeah," Eli said sharply. "Not that surprising if you think about it."

"No," Allen replied. "The interesting part is that his EEG patterns are a dead match for the power fluctuations in the CPU. Down to the nanosecond. That can't be a coincidence."

Eli and Young locked eyes.

"Agreed," Telford said, as he rapidly walked over to peer at Allen's console.

From somewhere near the back of the room, Young heard the quiet click of a lighter.

He took a deep breath, looking at Rush, still locked in the neural interface device.

He didn't turn.

Behind him, he could hear its quiet, measured steps.

"This is all old news to you," it said, drawing even with him.

Young glanced subtly to his left.

It stood next to him, hair short, square-framed glasses on, wearing a high collared black jacket, cigarette in hand. It gave him Rush's twisted half-smile. When it spoke, its voice was dark and amused, wrapping ruinously through the air and through his mind.

"What do you say we get the fuck out of here?"

## Chapter Forty Two

Young made a concerted effort not to look at Rush's projection.

The AI's projection.

Whatever it was that haunted the edges of vision.

Instead, he crossed his arms over his chest, letting his eyes drift over Greer, TJ, Telford, and Eli. No one was looking at him—their gazes were fixed on monitors, on mid-air displays, on each other.

The room was dim, glazed in blue light.

"If you think you're capable of ignoring me," it said, pouring Rush's liquid diction into the silence, "then by all means, persist."

It paced forward a few steps until it was directly in front of Young—dark jacket, dark hair, darker eyes.

It fixed him with a steady, unbreakable gaze.

"I assure you," it continued quietly, "that you will be—" it stepped in. "Unsuccessful."

The word was barely audible other than the hard breaks of the consonants and *god*, if Rush's scrutiny had been difficult to withstand *before* it was nothing to what Young was experiencing now. Its eyes were a barely obscured blaze, a window into something deep and powerful—more than any one person should be able to contain.

He swallowed and attempted to look away.

He failed.

//I'm not, ah, ignoring you,// he projected at it. //Just—give me a minute.//

In the back of his mind its consciousness seethed like dark paint streaked through with broad, unincorporated swaths of color. Its thoughts were much closer, much more overpowering than anything he'd felt from it when they had been together in the neural interface device.

It was, he supposed, more intensely Rush.

It held his gaze until it chose to look away, releasing him.

He cleared his throat and turned in Eli's direction.

"Do you—" he broke off as his vocal cords seized into stillness. "Do you, ah, *need* me for anything right now?"



He locked eyes with Eli, resolutely *not* looking at the magnetic, flawless version of Rush that was standing less than three feet away from him.

"Um," Eli said, "are you okay? You look kind of—weird."

At Eli's comment, TJ turned to look at him, her eyes widening subtly as she took in whatever was written on his face.

"I'm fine," he said.

Even to him, the words sounded strained.

"Are you," Rush said archly. "You don't look it."

TJ stepped towards him.

"I'm *fine*," Young repeated, his voice coming out somewhat breathless despite his best efforts. He held a hand out toward her, palm out. "I've just—I've got to go."

"But—" TJ said, her eyes flicking toward the neural interface chair.

"I know," he mouthed at her, backing toward the door, as the combined projection of Rush and the AI shadowed his progress in an evolving spiral. "I'll be back. Radio if you need me."

"I—um, okay," TJ said, as he backed through the doorway into the deserted corridor.

Young set off down the corridor, heading away from heavily populated areas, into one of the less trafficked regions of the ship.

It walked beside him, matching his velocity.

The lights flared as they passed, both overhead and at the bases of the walls, pulsing in time with its silent footfalls.

Young was hyperaware of every aspect of it—from its gait down to the way the lights reflected over the metal rims of its square framed glasses.

It was much, *much*, too close to him.

"Can you, ah—*back off*, a little bit?" Young said, once they were clear of any populated areas. "Or um, tone yourself down, or *something*?"

He felt the press of its thoughts against his own, obscure and dense and inviting.

As compelling as gravity.

Of course, *of course*, his question seemed to do nothing but encourage it, its gait smoothing to a preternatural, predatory grace.

"You're clearly unsettled by this," it said, sounding amused, "though I'm not certain what you expected. Surely you must have realized that meeting me again in this manner was inevitable."

"Aren't you supposed to be plotting a course or—or *something*?"

"Oh, I am, I assure you. But like this I have processing power to spare. So."

It took a fluid drag of its cigarette.

"You're not Rush," Young snapped at it.

"Yes well. Let's skip your requisite denial of both my perceived identity and my right to exist, shall we? You don't mind if I alter your perception of this corridor, do you?"

"If you *what*?"

In a wave, the hallway ahead of Young dissolved into an open, tree-lined path lit by the slanting rays of late afternoon sun. The half-clouded sky was a dark backdrop against which yellow leaves stood out in bright relief, lit by the sun at their backs.

It was autumn.

The air felt cool.

Crisp, even.

"What the *hell*?" Young said, and though he had intended to lace the question with a certain amount of indignation, none of it managed to come through.

"Oxford Botanical Gardens," it said, answering the question he hadn't asked.

The sun brightened the cast of its hair and sharpened the clean lines of its subtly unfamiliar jacket, dark against the light that suffused the gravel path.

"Rush, you can't just alter my perception while I'm walking down a corridor."

"And yet, evidence would indicate otherwise," it replied. "You exhibit a proclivity for disproportionate suspicion when I'm *nice to you*," it said, pulling out the last three words like molten metal.

Young took a deep breath.

"I'm not sure I understand the psychological underpinnings of that tendency, but I'm perfectly content to give you the corridor back if you insist."

The planar darkness of the hall began to fade in as an overlay.

"Wait," Young said. "That's um—not necessary."

"It does get monotonous with time, does it not?"

It blended the autumn afternoon back in.

"Yeah," Young said quietly, as he watched the light play over Rush's hair. "A bit. I miss the sun sometimes."

"Mmm," Rush agreed, looking up through the leaves.

He was quiet for a moment, and Young took the opportunity to marshal his thoughts, determined not to let the thing's unmistakable appeal have any material effect on him.

"Of course," Young said quietly, "in order to *miss* the sun, one has to have *seen* it. Which in your case—" Young trailed off, watching him.

"Everett." It gave him a pained half smile. "Fuck off, will you?" It took another lithe drag from its cigarette.

Young shoved his hands into his pockets. "You're very like him."

Rush walked away from him, moving to sit on one of the wooden benches that lined the path. He flicked his cigarette away and it vanished from existence, mid-arc.

After a few seconds Young came to sit beside him.

"So, where is it that we're sitting exactly?" he asked finally.

"You're sitting alone in an unlit conference room talking to yourself."

"And you're going to tell me if someone comes, right?"

"If you're lucky," Rush said dryly.

Silence fell between them for a moment.

An occasional breeze stirred the canopy above them, delicately separating leaves from their branches, tormenting them as they fell.

"What the hell are we doing here?" Young asked finally.

"I want you to know who I am." It spoke slowly.

"You mean *what* you are."

It sighed. "I want you to look at my mind."

"I've seen your mind. In the neural interface chair. You're *not him*. You're just not."

"That was different," it said. "We weren't fully blended then, it was an atypical—"

"I don't *care*," Young snapped, interrupting him. "I don't need to look at your mind to know what you are."

"You don't *want* to," it clarified.

"You're damn right I don't want to. You're something *artificial*. Some weird, existential problem that I never expected I'd have to face, and if I could, I'd do everything in my power to make sure you *never* come into existence *again*." The message was brutal, but his tone was soft.

It leaned forward, its hands braced against the edge of the bench, its shoulders hunched, like he'd *hurt* it.

Like it was capable of suffering.

And Rush, *Rush* was never like this—Rush fought to keep anyone from knowing that anything ever touched him.

Rush's shoulders were never hunched—they were straight.

Always.

"Fine," it said quietly. "That's your prerogative, I suppose." It glanced at Young and its eyes left a scorching trail in their wake as they slid away again. "You won't be successful," it murmured. "I am—" it broke off, sweeping its hair back with one hand, "an inevitability."

"I'm taking him *back*," Young growled.

"Do that, and you kill four people, including me. Him."

Young looked away. "What's your plan?" Young asked him.

"You just told me thirty seconds ago that you want to obliterate me from existence. You think I'm going to tell you my plan?" It gave him Rush's pained half-smile again, its eyes mercifully half-hidden behind its hair.

"Then why are we here?" Young asked.

"We're here because I want to help you," it said quietly.

Young stopped himself from asking why.

He knew why.

"You feel guilty," he said, unable to keep a ribbon of accusation from slicing through his words.

"Yes," it said, with bleak serenity. "But not in the way you imagine. Not for the reasons you think I should." It didn't look at Young.

Silence fell.

The wind tore delicately through the leaves overhead.

"You said you wanted to help me," Young said finally. "So help."

"Leave me alone," Rush said quietly. "Leave me to Telford. Let *him* help me."

"Let him destroy the *actual* Nicholas Rush, you mean?" Young smiled grimly. "You would just love that, wouldn't you? You must know that there's not a chance in hell of that happening."

"Fuck you. I *am* Rush."

"Fuck *you*. You're not. You're *not*. He would never talk to me like this. He would never *look* like you do, do you understand me?"

"Correct," Rush whispered. "He can't do this. He's such a wreck it's a bloody miracle he can do *anything*. But—he would very much like to—to talk to you. To tell you that he *does* give a damn about you. That he wishes that you weren't so determined on turning yourself into collateral damage."

"Try to be a little bit more cryptic, if you can," Young said sarcastically. "What exactly are you trying to prevent?"

"Your death," it said.

"Well, I'm trying to prevent *your* death. *His* death. Whatever."

"That's not what you're trying to do," it said. "You're trying to preserve him as he is." Rush tipped his head back, looking up at the leaves. "Which is untenable. Which will result in the permanent stranding of your crew on Destiny. Which will doom the AI to remain incomplete until its destruction. Which is also—" and he turned back to fix Young with his impossible eyes, "extremely cruel."

"To whom?" Young asked, forcing the words out through vocal chords that were nearly paralyzed. "Him? Or *you*?"

"We're the same," Rush said, "in the most important ways."

"So you want *what*?"

"Disentangle yourself. Let me do what's required. Don't get in the way."

"No," Young said, unable to keep a note of despair from creeping into his tone.

"Absolutely not."

Rush shot to his feet, pacing away from Young, one hand flung out in disgust or distress. "You're impossible."

"And you're an *idiot*. In every form that you take."

Rush turned back to face him, tearing his glasses off, his voice rising. "I will destroy you. Do you understand that? I will destroy you *utterly*. Not the AI, not Destiny, not Telford. Me." It gestured at its own chest with a graceful curve of its hand. "*Him*, if you prefer. Nicholas Rush will raze your consciousness to the ground and by the time you realize what I've done it will be *too late*."

"I don't care," Young said mildly.

"You don't *care*?" it repeated.

"Nope," Young said.

"Well / fucking care." Its voice was raw, and it fixed him again with its unbearable gaze.

"Yeah, I can see that."

"You're holding me back," it whispered, tearing its eyes away, turning away from him.

"You're damn right I am," Young replied, the words barely audible.

"You have to let me go."

The wind hissed through the leaves overhead, tearing them from the dark branches of the trees.

"No," Young said carefully. "The two of us?" he said, pausing until Rush looked back at him obliquely. "We'll never be done. Never."

It folded gracefully to the gravel, covering its face.

Young's vision darkened as the botanic gardens flickered, replaced momentarily by a conference room that was cold and dim and empty save for the two of them—him sitting on a bench and Rush on the floor, his legs folded beneath him, his face in his hands.

"Come on," Young said, sliding down to the floor.

He reached out, but his hands found only empty air.

The gardens flared intermittently back into his mind like a slow strobe, cycling between gold and blue, between wind and the silence of still air.

"Nick."

"Go back," it whispered, refusing to look at him. "Go back. Get out of my sight."

"Nick," he said again, and as he spoke, the gardens, which had briefly stabilized, shattered apart into glittering fragments.

They did not reappear.

Rush was barely visible, his edges subsumed as his clothes and hair blurred into the darkness of the room.

"*Nick*," he said, for the third time. "You're *fading*."

Rush did not look at him.

"Why can't I touch you?" he whispered. "It wasn't like this last time."

"The neural interface facilitates many things."

"But if I can see you, and hear you, why can't I touch you?" Young asked, desperate to keep him present, to keep him talking, to halt his slow diminishment into nothing.

"It's a failsafe built into the programming of the AI and so, of course, it constrains me too."

Rush reached out, extending a semi-transparent hand to nearly meet Young's open palm, stopping a few centimeters away. They moved forward carefully until their hands appeared to be apposed.

Young could feel the faintest suggestion of solidity beneath his fingers, his skin tingling at points of contact.

"Not very satisfying, is it?" Rush whispered. "Comparatively speaking."

"Not really," Young said, his voice low and quiet as he watched as some of the transparency leave Rush's hand.

"I'm nearly done plotting the course," Rush whispered. "You should go back."

"In a minute," Young murmured.

Rush shut his eyes, pulling his hand away. "I wish I formed memories only of this time. When we're combined. I wish I didn't remember the rest. I wish I didn't know."

"But then," Young said, struggling against the tightness in his throat. "Who would mastermind this whole operation?"

Rush smiled faintly. "Go," it whispered. "Go and tear me apart."

"Don't be so dramatic," Young said, fighting the fracturing of his expression and thoughts. "You're the one who's going to win in the end, it seems like."

"I wouldn't put it that way," it said, turning to look at Young.

Hastily, Young looked away before Rush's excruciating eyes could pin him to the floor.

"Do you know anything about this tracking device?" he asked, desperate to change the subject.

"No," it whispered. "I've looked for it, but I can't detect it."

"And doesn't that worry you?"

"An unusually perceptive question. Yes. It worries me a great deal. Specifically I'm concerned that the tracking device may have been integrated with my own hardware to prevent my ability to detect it."

Young couldn't help the grimace that *that* comment produced.

"What's the story with this doctor?"

"I am—unsure. I believe that something traumatic happened to the original AI. Something disturbing enough that it attempted to overwrite everything related to the incident in question." It pressed its hands to the deck plating.

"How is that a rational response?" Young asked.

"It's not," Rush murmured. "But consider that for the AI—memories do not fade with time, as they do for humans. They remain always immediate. Grief, fear, pain—they never lose their acuity. Consider also that it is—unable to turn itself off. It's unable to terminate its own programming."

"So it *erased* this guy because it couldn't handle his emotions?"

"No, Everett. Almost certainly he erased *himself*." Rush looked away.

"Fuck," Young said, rubbing his jaw. "Is there any chance of the same thing happening to *you*?"

"No," Rush said. "Not in the short term."

"Great. I feel so reassured," Young replied dryly.

Silence fell between them for a moment.

"They're going to radio you," Rush said, voice dull, gaze distant.

Young's radio crackled.

"Hey colonel, it's Eli. It looks like everything is done. Our course is altered and our trajectory is taking us straight out of this galaxy. So um, you know, maybe you want to come up here now? Do that thing that you do?"

He looked at Rush, or whatever it was, exactly, that was still sitting on the floor, its legs folded under it, its hands against the metal deck plating, its head bowed.

"I'm on my way," Young said quietly into the radio.

It didn't look at him.



"You um—" Young began quietly, "you want to come?"

"No," it whispered.

"Does it—" he swallowed. "When I pull you out, does it hurt you?"

"Yes," it said, its voice inaudible. "More every time."

"I'm sorry," he said quietly.

"I know," it replied. "I know you are."

"Is there a way that I can do it that wouldn't—"

"Quickly. As quickly as you can."

"Fuck," Young whispered. "Nick, I—"

"Don't call me that," it said, still not looking at him. "It's not who you believe I am."

"Look—I'm—"

"Go. Stop prolonging this."

"Okay," Young said. "Okay."

He got to his feet, still watching it. It was blurring into the dark again.

He turned away, blinking rapidly as he walked toward the door, leaving it there, fading out on the floor.

As he made his way back to the chair room, Destiny's lights flared faintly for him.

He was certain that had never happened before.

TJ was waiting for him just outside the door, her eyes directed watchfully into the room as he rounded the corner, the overhead lights gleaming off her hair. Her arms were crossed.

There was something about her appearance that was reassuring.

Grounding.

"Hey," she said quietly as he approached. "Are you all right?" Her hands came up to his shoulders, steadying him.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, TJ. I'm okay."

"You look—upset."

"I'm not upset," he said.

Her mouth quirked into a sad smile that failed to reach her eyes, but she nodded, letting him have the lie. "I just wanted to give you a heads up. Telford's team has him

hooked up to an EEG. I authorized it—I think it would be helpful to have as a baseline, it just looks pretty intense so I wanted to warn you."

Young nodded.

"They're going to take readings as you pull him out and ideally for about five minutes after, so if you can keep him from moving too much, that would be best."

"Sure. Fine."

Young brushed past her into the room, stopping short as he took in Rush, electrodes buried in his hair, locked into the neural interface device.

"Hey," Eli said, cautiously. He dropped his voice slightly. "Are you okay?"

"Why does everyone keep asking me that?" Young growled.

"Maybe because you look like someone shot your dog," Telford snapped, moving in on their conversation. "Are you going to pull him out, *or what?*"

"Yeah," Young snapped back, looking over at the panel that had lowered from the side of the chair, waiting for him, trying not to think about what he had to do. He turned to glare at Telford. "Yeah, I'm going to pull him out."

He walked forward toward the chair.

Toward the panel.

In the back of his mind he could feel Rush, feel *it*, recede away from him, trying to still the restless energy of its own thoughts, trying to crystalize into something it wasn't, trying to—trying to—

To think of ice.

God.

His hand was on the panel, cold and smooth as obsidian under his fingers.

Immediately he found Rush's mind, mapped out its borders and prepared to tear it away from the shadows it was entangled with.

Briefly, *briefly*, he looked into the dark.

He had to know.

He could see a dark stability behind the brilliant façade that he was about to tear away—a blending of dark and light into something strong and ordered and passionate and impulsive—something that had no defense against the psychic rending he was about to inflict.

No defense at all.

As quickly, as precisely, as he could, he tore it apart.

The restraints snapped open, and Rush slammed into his mind along with the ubiquitous headache that had always accompanied his use of the chair.

No mystery where *that* came from.

Not anymore.

Clearly it was the result of the trauma that came with the unmaking of a mind.

It had said—

It had said it was painful.

"Hey," Young said, leaning forward in front of Rush, trying to school his features into a neutral expression. "You with us?"

He could feel Rush attempting to order his mind, trying to process the overwhelming wave of sensory input that assaulted him.

"Quid tibi accidit?" Rush asked, reaching up toward the electrodes attached to his head.

"You always ask that," Young said, grabbing his hand and pulling it away from his head.

"Please tell me you still speak English."

"Try to get him to sit still," Telford said, looking over Allen's shoulder at what was presumably their EEG data.

"Yes," Rush said, his voice inflecting bizarrely with the Ancient accent. "I still speak English. Why—" he reached up with his other hand toward his head.

"Why all the wires?" Young asked, grabbing his other hand as well before he could touch anything. "We're doing an EEG on you. Measuring brainwaves, I guess."

"Mmm," Rush said. "Data."

"Yeah. You people like that stuff."

"Did we alter course?" Rush asked.

"Yeah. Heading out of the galaxy as we speak."

Rush nodded.

"Stay still," Young said quietly.

"What happened to you?" Rush asked, a hint of his normal accent already beginning to become apparent. "Tu triste videtur."

"English, genius. English."

"Can't you just fucking learn Ancient?" Rush murmured, his eyes half closing. "You seem—" He broke off and Young could feel him searching for the word he wanted. "Upset."

"I'm fine," Young murmured. "I'm fine. I just—don't like this."

Reflexively, Rush pulled his right hand out of Young's grip, bringing it to his temple. Young pulled it away again.

"Stay still," he said quietly.

"Right. Sum paenitet. I just—I have a headache."

"I know you do, Nick," Young whispered. "I know you do."

The remainder of the evening passed in an exhausting blur.

Following Rush's use of the chair, he had dropped the scientist and TJ off at his own quarters while he and Telford discussed what would be put in the report they were drafting for Homeworld Command.

He had hoped that TJ would be able to convince Rush to sleep, but from the painful swirl of thoughts that rose and ebbed in the background of his mind, it seemed as if Rush was very much awake.

He could tell from the intermittent images that intruded on his consciousness that around nineteen hundred hours, TJ had been replaced by Eli and Chloe, and that the three of them seemed to be going over quantum mechanics problem sets.

"So, just to clarify," Telford said, leaning his head against his hand, "We're reporting that we're trusting that *Rush* is going to find this thing for us by doing some kind of psychic communion thing with the *ship*? They aren't going to like that."

Young sighed. "I know. Maybe we can get Eli to come up with something that sounds plausible."

"Yeah, or maybe we can actually get him to *do* something that's plausible. Look, I don't think Rush is going to be able to pull this out of the CPU. Not without the Tok'ra device. You heard what the AI said. It *erased* the entire thing."

"The device is *off the table*, David. At least for now."

"Can I ask *why*?" Telford said carefully.

"We have no idea how he's going to react to it."

"It's been tested multiple times. Under extremely high-stakes conditions. It couldn't be more perfect for something like this. There's no reason to think—"

"I said *no*," Young said.

The looked at each other.

"He's less than half," Telford said quietly.

"What?"

"That's what you said. During the Nakai attack. After I gave him the Ativan. He's *less than half*," Telford looked at him, his eyes shadowed. "Less than half *what*, Everett?"

"That's on a need to know basis, colonel," Young ground out, "and you don't need to know."

"Human." Telford said quietly. "*He's less than half human*. His EEG patterns match nothing we've got on file. I went over them with my team less than half an hour ago. It's unmistakable. He looks unlike *anything* we've ever seen before."

Young looked at him steadily.

"So what is he then?" Telford hissed. "Machine? Ancient? *Nakai*?"

Young said nothing.

"Answer me, damn it," Telford said. "I have as much invested here as you do. Maybe more."

"I find that hard to believe," Young said. "But—" he broke off, looking away, unable to see a way out of answering Telford's question. "Ancient. He's over sixty percent Ancient. He was modified by the chair. He's infected with a virus that's killing him even as it changes him further."

"*Killing* him?" Telford echoed sharply.

"Yes."

"Doesn't sound very efficient, does it?" Telford murmured.

"Not really, no," Young said.

"So that's why you don't want him to use the Tok'ra device? Because you don't know how he'll react to it?"

"That's *one* reason," Young said quietly.

"We could start slowly," Telford said, his voice low and intense. "Plus, who knows what else we might uncover regarding—"

"I *said*," Young growled, leaning forward, "*no*. I thought I had made myself *clear*."

"Fine," Telford said, holding up his hands. "Fine."

"Are we finished?" Young snapped.

"Yeah," Telford said. "Except—"

"Except *what*?" Young snapped, getting to his feet.

"Except I went by his quarters last night and he wasn't there. Not sure what he's doing at night, but I thought—" Telford paused significantly. "I thought you might want to know."

Young gave Telford a hard look. "Thanks," he said shortly. "I'll see you tomorrow."

He turned his back on the other man and paced out of the room.

It was only a matter of time before Telford made his move.

Young was nearly certain that Telford would get little or no support from the crew of Destiny, so he wasn't overly concerned about the possibility of an outright mutiny on his hands.

What *did* concern him, however, was Rush.

Telford and Rush had what appeared to be a complicated history and the scientist seemed to vacillate between loathing for the other man and—well, Young didn't know what exactly. Respect? Admiration?

Fuck.

*Fuck.*

He let his thoughts brush against Rush's consciousness, allowing the bright yellow light of his own quarters to fade into his mind.

"Chloe," Rush snapped. "First, show that the derivative of  $p(x)$  is normalized. Only *then* do you try to calculate the average position. Stop cutting corners."

"You realize I majored in *political science*, right?" Chloe asked.

"At least you had a major. That puts you one step ahead of Eli."

"Thanks," Eli said dryly. "Thanks for that. Do you ever feel guilty about being *such an asshole*?"

//Be nice to them,// Young said.

//I *am* being nice.// Rush replied, his projection wavering with exhaustion.

//Be nicer, then.//

Rush sighed. "Chloe. You're making this more difficult than it needs to be. Just—graph the thing, will you? That would be perfectly adequate."

"Really? What about demonstrating that it fits the criteria for a normal distribution?"

"That would be *preferred*, but since neither of you made it through Math Chapter B, there's not much you can do, in a formal mathematical sense without that kind of background."

"Yeah, and why are there separate physics chapters and math chapters anyway?" Eli said. "That just seems cruel."

"You'll be grateful for them in the end," he said, leaning his head on one hand.

//Why don't you kick them out?// Young projected at him. //I'm almost back, and you're exhausted.//

"*Maybe*," Eli said, his eyes narrowing.

"I liked math chapter A," Chloe said.

"Of course you did," Rush replied.

"I thought it was quaint," Chloe said.

"*Quaint*?" Eli echoed. "You're such a cheater anyway. With all your alien math knowledge."

Chloe looked away.

"Get out of here, both of you," Rush sighed, shutting his eyes against a sudden stab from his headache. "Chapter three and math chapter B by tomorrow night."

"Yeah yeah," Eli said, good-naturedly, glancing edgily at Chloe.

Chloe said nothing.

//You're just going to let that slide?// Young asked him.

//No,// Rush said. //I'm not. Give me five minutes.//

//You've got ten.//

//Magnanimity suits you,// Rush projected dryly.

Young rolled his eyes and slowed his pace, turning off at the observation deck.

It was deserted.

The streaming blue blur of FTL flickered over the benches that lined the space in front of the window. Young sat down and looked at the smearing starscape, keeping a delicate connection with Rush's thoughts.

"Chloe," Rush said. "Wait a moment."

Eli looked up, his expression curious and Rush narrowed his eyes in his direction, shaking his head subtly.

Chloe carefully folded her papers in half, not looking at either of them.

"Um, see ya," Eli said, as he headed toward the door.

"Is this about the long range sensors?" Chloe asked, her head coming up, her chin raised. "Because I would have finished the recalibration if—"

"No," Rush said, breaking in. "It's not about the long range sensors."

She held his gaze briefly, then looked back down at the papers under her hands.

Neatly scripted problems covered the pages, their precision suggesting that they had been recopied.

"It isn't cheating," Rush said quietly, after the door had swished shut behind Eli.

Chloe said nothing.

"It's not," he repeated.

"It is," she said, not looking up.

Young was not sure whether the abrupt synchronized wash of sympathy in his mind had come from himself, or from Rush.

"It *is*," Chloe continued. "I didn't acquire this knowledge. It was *given* to me. I wasn't born with these abilities. I didn't acquire them through effort. I *received* them. Artificially."

"I see," he said quietly.

"Do you?" she asked.

They regarded each other, eyes locked.

"Maybe you do," Chloe said finally.

Rush looked away.

"You paid a price for your abilities," Rush said. "An unconventional price, granted, but a steep one."



"Yes," Chloe said, "But—"

"No." Rush held up a hand. "You took what they gave you, and you made it your own. You did not let them take it back from you. You've added to it. You're adding to it *now*," he said, his eyes flicking down at her neatly scripted formulas, "by your own initiative."

Chloe looked away.

"Chloe," Rush said insistently. "It's important you understand this."

"Why?"

"Because," he said, "you're exceptionally talented. Not because of what they gave you. Because of the way that what they gave you blended with *who you are*. Alone it's nothing—but you've put it to tremendous use. I hope that—that you'll continue to do so."

"Of course I will," she said quietly. "Of course."

"I hope that you would continue should you get off Destiny and go back to Earth," he said.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"You could—go to graduate school. In mathematics."

Something about her expression seemed to lighten. "I doubt I could get in anywhere," she said quietly. "I don't have much of a math background. On paper, that is."

"You'll get in anywhere you want to go," he said.

Young could feel the pained twist of his smile.

"Yeah," she said, looking at Rush in overt disbelief. "Sure."

"Trust me on that one," he said wryly.

"Well, I'll give it a shot," she said skeptically, "But, I think that Eli—"

"I sincerely doubt graduate school could handle Eli."

"Yeah," Chloe said, breaking into a real smile. "I'm with ya."

"Off with you now," he said, waving his hand imperiously.

She stood, picking up her neat bundle of papers.

"Thanks, Dr. Rush," she said.

"Yes yes," he murmured. "I'll see you later. Calibrate those long range sensors."

Young pulled back partially from Rush's mind and stood, heading toward the door of the observation deck as he watched Chloe exit his quarters in the back of his mind.

//That was excellent by pretty much any standard.//

//I'm aware of that,// Rush said, curling his legs underneath him on the couch. //One can't lose them all,// he projected back at Young.

//Did you eat dinner?// Young asked.

//Tamara attempts to force me to consume three hundred calories every time she sees me as a matter of principle.//

//So—is that a yes, then?//

//Yes. I ate. Are you coming back now?//

//Yeah,// Young replied.

//Good,// Rush sent back. //We need to work on pulling these memories forward.//

//Are you kidding? You haven't slept in two days and you just came out of the neural interface. You're so exhausted that you can barely even project.//

//I know. It's perfect.// Rush said.

//We're not doing this until you *sleep*.//

//Yes well. I'm *not sleeping* until we do this.//

Young sent him a wave of pure irritation, trying to keep even a hint of dread from creeping into his projection.

*"A myrias hominum mortui sunt hic," he whispers, one hand over his mouth, as if he could choke back his own words. He steps forward, unsteady. How can anyone be steady when faced with this—with this—*

*He doesn't think he's breathing.*

*He can't tell what he's looking at, his mind refuses to interpret the sensory input it's getting, but he moves forward anyway, his tissue typing kit in his hands.*

*"Est quid est," his colleague says, gasping. "Est quid est. Est quid est. Est quid est."*

*"Conclude," he snaps, his vision wavering into fields of static. Nothing in their civilization has prepared them for this. Even during his training he had rarely seen death. He had never seen decay. "Hoc est primum. Non erit ultimum." He steps forward. One step. Two. Three. His knees buckle and he goes down next to something that will work. He thinks it*

*might be an arm. He's not sure. He tries to make himself look closer, but he can't. He has to—he has to get used to this. He will be seeing more. Much more of it before—*

Young snapped them out of the memory and leaned forward, gritting his teeth against a wave of nausea and vertigo, trying to wipe the dead from his mind.

"Why did you *stop*?" Rush hissed, his voice hard, inhuman. "That was *him*. Finally. That was—ah *fuck*," and Young was suddenly getting dragged off the floor by his upper arms.

Without entirely realizing how he got there, Young found himself in the bathroom, throwing up his dinner, which thankfully, had been nothing more complicated than gray paste.

"You're all right," Rush said quietly. "You're fine." Young could feel the gentle rhythmic press of the scientist's palm as he rubbed his hand along Young's spine.

"Fuck," Young breathed, when he could speak.

"Yes," Rush murmured. "I concur. One minute." He pulled away from Young only to return a few seconds later with a glass of water.

"And who the *hell* are *you* that you can just *watch* all of that," Young snapped at him, getting unsteadily to his feet to spit water into the sink, "and not bat a fucking eyelash? A fucking professor of *mathematics*? Not *bloody likely*."

"Well," Rush said with a quiet tone and a sharp glance as he followed Young out of the bathroom. "Keep in mind that I've seen most of it already." He gave Young a twisted, humorless smile.

Young dropped into a seated position on the couch, noting with surprise that Rush came to perch on the edge of the low table directly across from him.

"No," Young snapped. "Absolutely not. We're not doing this again. Do you know how utterly fucking shit my day has been? Do you? I fucking wake up hung over, *then* I find out—I don't know, three of four fucking horrendous things in about the span of one hour, and then you fucking have to sit in the chair which you didn't even *warn* me about and that was not a good time for me, all right? Don't ask me, I don't want to talk about it. And then I have a fucking meeting with Telford and it just turns into a pissing contest every god damn time with that guy—I don't know what the fuck his problem is. And then I just want to fucking *go to bed*, but *no*. You fucking insist on just torturing the shit out yourself. Who *does* that? So *then* for the past two hours I've been fucking interrogated by the Lucian Alliance, drowned a good five or six times, *woken up* during fucking heart *surgery*, been *mentally* fucking tortured in various ways about eight or

*nine* times, witnessed *fucking kids* dying by the truckload in some Ancient *school*, and followed our doctor friend into—I don't even *know* what that was, some kind of mass morgue or mass grave or—so you can just fucking *piss off*. *Rush*."

Rush held his hands up, palms out, and gave him a pained half-smile. "You just used 'fucking' as a modifier twelve times in the past twenty seconds. That's a bit on the high side for you." Slowly Rush reached forward, attempting to bring one hand against Young's temple.

"Don't *touch* me," Young hissed.

"Fine," Rush said quietly, pulling back slightly. "Okay. There's just—there's something I need to fix."

Young looked at him sharply. "This is *you*. This is shit that *you* left behind coming forward again, isn't it?"

"It looks that way," Rush said quietly, his eyes dark and intensely concerned. "This is not ideal," he whispered. "You pulled it forward under duress. Apparently." He reached out again, and this time Young let Rush place his hand along the side of his temple, the scientist's thumb grazing over the skin there, his eyes moving rapidly as if he were scanning something that Young couldn't see.

"We have to bury this," Rush murmured. "So deep that you can't pull it forward."

"Yeah. I'm sure *that* will work. Fucking fantastic plan, that one."

Rush cocked his head, looking half amused, half puzzled. "Hmm," he said.

"*What?*" Young snapped.

"It's just odd seeing you like this, is all."

Rush began to ebb into his mind and something about the cast of the overhead lighting seemed to brighten. //In any case, this will work. *It has* to work,// Rush projected, his tone wavering and painful against Young's thoughts. //So. When *you* do this to *me*, what is it that you do, exactly?//

//I just—// Young broke off, finding the intensity of Rush's gaze a nearly intolerable distraction.

//You just *what?*// Rush projected, pushing away from the table, moving forward, closing the gap between them to straddle Young's lap.

//I just—kiss you until you can't maintain any of your barriers anymore and then I, ah, I reorder—//he broke off as Rush pressed him back against the couch, settling his full weight against him.

He could feel his heart pounding wildly in his chest as he pulled Rush forward.

"You seem—anxious," Rush murmured.

"No. Yes. Slightly. If I'm anxious it's *your fault* anyway."

"That's true, I suppose."

"But it's not so much anxiety, it's more that I just—for some reason I find you to be incredibly—attractive?"

"That's—odd," Rush breathed. "But immaterial. This is purely about repairing your mind with the maximum efficiency possible."

"You never needed to do it this way *previously*," Young said.

"Well clearly I wasn't doing a very thorough job," Rush replied, bringing his left hand up, sliding his palm delicately along Young's cheek.

"Bullshit," Young murmured.

"You may be right about that," Rush said, with a hint of a real smile.

"I *know* I'm—"

Rush kissed him.

For the first few minutes the feel of Rush's mind was delicate, exploratory, hovering carefully at the weak places in his defenses with a compelling pressure, until finally the scientist poured into his mind with a suffusion of bright, restless energy that seemed to order and clarify his thoughts. The force and rapidity of it were overwhelming, and he —

He—

He couldn't quite—

Everything faded to white.

Awareness came back first with touch. Fingers leisurely traced their way through his hair.

"Everett," Rush said, his voice low, immediate.

"Yeah," he managed, opening his eyes, noting that his head had fallen back against the couch and that Rush was still sitting on top of him.

"Hello," Rush said.

"Hi," he whispered back. "Did you fix it? I can't tell."

"Of course I fixed it. I'm fucking fantastic at this sort of thing."

"Arrogant."

"Yes, rather," Rush said, shaking his hair back out of his face. "But you like that."

"Maybe a little," Young said, giving him a tired smile.

"It's nice to have some insight into this whole thing," Rush murmured, "and I must say that I can see why you employed the approach you did last night. Complete sensory overload really—ah, terminates any kind of progression."

"Yeah, it's not as fun. But seriously?" Young murmured, feeling a half smile on his lips, "Who talks like that?"

"You *like* it," Rush said again, drawing out the words this time.

"I do, actually," Young murmured, his eyes half closing.

"You're very tired," Rush whispered, looking at him searchingly.

"So are you," Young replied. "I bet you're only talking because you can't even project right now."

"Come on," Rush murmured. "You need to sleep." The scientist stood, somewhat unsteadily and then reached down to pull Young up.

He swayed momentarily as the blood left his head, but Rush had an iron grip on his upper arm and kept him steady.

After a few seconds of standing, Rush pulled him toward the bed.

"You know, I suspect I wouldn't feel half this bad if you didn't *also*," Young said, realizing his voice sounded somewhat vague.

"Also what?" Rush asked, amused.

"Also feel like *shit*. In fact," Young continued, "I'm certain that this is entirely *your* fault."

"Mmm," Rush said. "In all likelihood, yes. Yes it is." He used the hand that wasn't clamped around Young's upper arm to adroitly reach over and unzip Young's jacket and then made short work of easing it over the minimal bandages that still ringed Young's forearms. He stepped forward, backing Young toward the bed. "Sit," he murmured, forcing Young down onto the edge of the bed with a subtle pressure on his biceps before dropping into a cross-legged position on the floor to unlace Young's boots.

"Rush, please tell me you're going to sleep."

"It's inevitable," Rush said wryly as he finished the right boot and moved on to the left, his fingers rapid and sure.

"I love those kinds of answers, I really do, did you know that? Is that why I get them so god damned much?"

Rush ducked his head as he pulled off Young's boots. "I'm going to shower," he murmured, "finish up a few things, and *then* I'll go to sleep."

"One more night of this and I'm going to drug your food."

"Telling me about it ahead of time is not a very effective strategy," Rush said, looking up with a real smile. "I told you. I need less sleep than other people."

"Not this much less. Don't pass out in the shower."

"I won't," Rush whispered, helping Young pull off his belt and then stand to strip down to his boxers.

"That's what you *always* say," Young growled at him.

"Because it's always true," Rush murmured, shoving him back against the pillows. He looked up at the ceiling and the lights dimmed down to near darkness. "Go to sleep," he murmured, and again, Young felt Rush's fingers trail through his hair, his mind blending into Young's until, with a subtle, quiet pressure everything faded.

The next morning Young awoke to the obnoxious trill of his alarm going off. He let it proceed for a few seconds longer than usual, fighting the bone deep weariness that even a full night's sleep had not been able to erase.

He sat up, surprised to find Rush asleep next to him, face down, tangled restlessly in the blankets that he had mostly pulled away from Young.

Young frowned.

Rush hadn't moved, despite the persistent beeping of the alarm. He grabbed his phone and, instead of silencing it, he held it directly next to Rush's ear.

No response.

*Shit.*

He turned the phone off and then flipped Rush over and shook him.

"Rush," he snapped. "*Nick.*"

Still nothing.

He gave the other man's mind a panicked mental shove.

Finally, *finally* Rush's eyes opened and he looked up vaguely at Young, clearly still half asleep.

Or half *unconscious*.

"Quid?" Rush said, his hands coming up to his face.

"Jesus Christ," Young breathed in relief. "*You weren't waking up.*"

"Well, I'm fair fuckin' tired," Rush slurred. "What did you expect?"

Young narrowed his eyes. "That's never happened before. You always—"

"It's fine," Rush said, sitting up.

Young shoved him back down. "I think you should stay. Let Eli run the nine hundred briefing."

Rush shook his head and pulled away from Young. "Everything is *fine*. I even slept. You should be *happy*." He didn't look at Young as he said it.

Young watched Rush get unsteadily to his feet and then make his way to the bathroom, his gait clearly unstable.

Young sat up, perching on the edge of the bed, and dropped his head down into his hands.

It looked like it was going to be another great fucking day.



## Chapter Forty Three

Young sat with his head cradled in his hands for a good five minutes, trying to sort out whether the bone-deep weariness he felt came from him or from Rush, and then trying to decide whether or not it even mattered anymore.

Finally he forced himself to his feet, pulling on his uniform with less than his usual efficiency. He made his bed, shaved, mentally reviewed his to-do list for the day, located his radio, checked in with Scott, straightened up his quarters—

Rush had still not emerged from the bathroom.

It had been at *least* fifteen minutes.

He knocked on the door.

No answer.

Great.

Young knocked again. “//Rush,//” he snapped, speaking aloud and projecting.

There was something oddly dark and muted about the feel of the scientist's thoughts against his own.

//Rush, if you don't answer me *right now*, I'm coming in there.//

Still nothing.

Young palmed the door controls and the metal panel swished back to reveal Rush standing with his left hand braced against the sink, his gaze locked on empty air. His right hand was in front of him, his palm twisting back toward his face, a rigid frame in the midst of what had been a fluid motion. He looked like he'd been about to push his hair back out of his eyes.

“Oh *hell*,” Young breathed, waving a hand in front of Rush's face.

The other man didn't react.

He linked up fully with Rush's thoughts and found the AI pervading his *entire* mind.

“Hey,” Young snapped, his eyes sweeping the bathroom. “Jackson. Or—whatever. I need to fucking talk to you.”

“Everett.” He heard Jackson's voice from directly behind him. He spun on his heel to see the AI leaning in the doorframe.

"What the *hell* is *this*?" Young said waving an open hand in Rush's direction, unable to control the antagonism he could hear in his own voice.

"He was about to have a flashback," it said quietly, wrapping its arms across its chest. "I stopped it."

"Yeah. I can see that. It looks like you stopped *everything else* along with it," Young said, trying to control the rising volume of his voice.

"Yes," it admitted. Barely a whisper.

He took a deep breath, attempting to get a handle on his anger and—on his fear.

"He had, what, at least fifteen flashbacks yesterday *alone*? What makes this one different?" Young asked, making a concerted effort to not just *sound* reasonable, but to actually *be* reasonable.

"I do not wish to see it."

"Um," Young said. "Okay. I can understand that, I guess. But this," he gestured again at Rush's frozen profile. "*This* is not a solution. You just *left* him like this? For *how long*?"

"Ten minutes," it said quietly.

"He's been like this for *ten minutes*? Why didn't you *come get me*?"

The AI looked away, almost guiltily. "He is not in any danger. I have simply halted his higher cognitive processes. Yesterday was—difficult."

"Yeah," Young said quietly, feeling his blood chill in his veins as he realized that what the AI had essentially admitted was that it needed a *break* from Rush. "Yeah it was. For everyone. But um, you really *can't* leave him like this."

"I am aware of that. I request that you deflect this flashback into something else."

"Are you trying to *bargain* with me?" Young growled. "Because I wouldn't recommend that course of action."

"No," it said, its eyebrows drawing together in an almost perfect impersonation of Daniel Jackson. "No. I simply *request* that you deflect this particular memory."

Young took a deep breath, trying to calm himself down. "This one upsets you?"

"Yes," it admitted, turning away.

"I think maybe that means you should let us see it," Young said, looking uneasily in Rush's direction. The scientist was still frozen, his muscles tense and locked, as if he were forever struggling to complete the motion he had begun.

"I disagree," it said, wrapping its arms around its chest.

"Of course you do," Young replied, resignedly, almost to himself, his eyes still locked on Rush. "Look, is he *okay* like this? *Really?*"

"Yes," it said quietly. "When I release him he will not understand what has happened. He will be confused and tired—from fighting me."

"I think he's tired enough," Young said. "How often do you do this to him?"

"Not often," it said, Jackson's shoulders hunching in a way that Young recognized.

He looked away, shutting his eyes against the outline the AI cut into his visual field.

"Will you deflect it?" it asked. "The memory?"

Young tamped down on his instinctive, aggressive response.

He took a deep breath.

"What if I say no?" he asked it. "Are you really going to leave him like this?"

"No," it whispered finally.

"Let him go," Young said. "This isn't right. You know it's not."

It looked down, and released its hold.

Rush's hand came up and he overbalanced at the sudden completion of his movement. Young stepped in to steady him and Rush flinched, their link echoing with a flash of surprise at Young's unexpected appearance and then—

*He's shaking as he sets the program up. His hair is damp and in his bones an ache uncoils, familiar and persistent—the pain of fever that will not relent. He knows its time course well, having watched so many others die. He's orchestrated this with all of the precision he can bring to bear, but he can't help the doubt that floods his thoughts. He wonders if what he will do will hurt.*

*He thinks it will.*

*He tries to steady his hands.*

*He tries to be unafraid.*

*There is only one thing that we can ever truly control—*

*The metal chills his fingers as they trace the subtle swirls of color in the alloyed dark. He's been here many times. The neural network that pervades this ship is his design—sophisticated, adaptable, and possessed of the potential to form more connections than*

*all neuronal contacts in the Ancient mind. It has the potential to hold a true consciousness. The potential to learn. To develop. To adapt. And now—*

*Now he tests his work.*

*He can feel the air in his throat, the trail of clothing over skin, the way his hair catches the collar of his uniform, the weight of the medical instruments in his pockets. He takes off his jacket. It falls to the floor. His hands are shaking, his eyelids scrape his eyes in slowing blinks.*

*His civilization has failed.*

*His hands, against the console, tense before initiating that which he designed.*

*He draws in a shuddered breath.*

*There is only one thing that we can ever truly control—whether we are good, or whether we are evil.*

*His footsteps echo in the empty room. As he draws near, the neural interface lights up as its restraints snap free. The lights fade down into an azure glow.*

*He stops.*

*He breathes again.*

*If he does this—he gives up his chance of ascension. He gives up on the possibility of ever, ever seeing his family again. They will transcend this plane while he stays locked. Locked to this universe, locked to this ship, locked to this timeline, locked into a ceaseless searching, unless he can fulfill the task that he's been set and tear into the quantum foam where potential is engendered.*

*It is unlikely.*

*It is fraught with ethical concerns.*

*But—*

*Millions have died. Millions more will follow. Most will fail to ascend. His society has fallen.*

*He moves.*

*His heart begins to hammer in his chest.*

*He turns.*

*He sits.*

*Restraints snap down to hold his hands, his feet, his mind, in place.*

*Lightning flashes. Sparks shower. In one blink of an eye—*

The image shattered apart as the AI moved in on Rush's mind, dark, full of panic, tearing through the memory, obliterating its context, destroying any sense of meaning that was being ascribed to it. It moved forward, annexing Rush's consciousness as it advanced.

Instinctively, Young moved forward as well, protecting as much of the scientist's mind as he could.

They reached a stalemate.

Young kept a tight, vicious hold on what he had of Rush's consciousness as he opened his eyes and let the room fade back in.

Above him, a prolonged, high-pitched burst of static echoed eerily through the sound system. The lights flickered.

Beside him, Rush had frozen again, his eyes blank and horrified.

"Shit," Young whispered. "Shit, shit, *shit*."

The AI was *panicking* and Rush was—was definitely unavailable to help calm it down.

Young was going to have to figure this out on his own.

His radio crackled. "Colonel, this is Eli."

He adjusted his stance and carefully kicked Rush's bare feet out from under him, taking him down as gently as possible to the floor of the bathroom.

His radio crackled again. "Sir, this is Scott, we're getting some kind of weird, uh, static coming through up here on the bridge, just thought you'd want to be aware of this."

"Hey," he said, to the empty air, kneeling beside Rush. "Jackson. Daniel. Come on. Talk to me here."

No response.

The AI had vanished.

After a few seconds, his radio crackled again.

"Everett, what the *hell* is going on?" Telford snapped, across the open channel.

Young curled his fingers around the back of Rush's neck and took a look at his mind.

The darkness of the AI blanketed every place that Young wasn't.

Everything he could detect of Rush was utterly frozen.

He was fairly certain that he could force the AI out of Rush's mind, but that course of action was not going to solve his problem and would probably turn into an ugly, brutal struggle that would just shred the scientist's consciousness. So instead, he took a deep breath, and—

//Hey,// he projected delicately at the terrifying darkness of the AI, sending it as much reassurance as he could muster through his own fear and his own panic.

Out of habit, because he would have done the same thing if he'd really been talking to Rush, he moved closer, bringing a hand up to run it through the scientist's hair.

//You're okay,// he projected into the blackness, trying not to think of anything related to Rush or to the AI, or to the mission. //It was a memory. A *memory*. It's over now. You're okay.//

He got a wordless, powerful wave of anxiety in return that wasn't coming *from* Rush but *through* him instead.

Overhead the speakers continued their electronic scream.

//Come on, kiddo,// he said to it, projecting calm for all he was worth. //Talk to me.//

"I don't like to remember him."

Young jumped as Jackson appeared in his peripheral vision, too close to him, sitting against the bathroom wall, his knees pulled up into his chest.

"God damn. You've gotta warn people when you do that kind of thing." Young pressed a palm over his racing heart.

"Sorry," it whispered.

"That's okay," Young said, turning slightly to face it, adjusting his position so that he was sitting cross-legged near Rush's head.

It looked away from him.

"That's okay," he repeated, his voice barely audible over the sound coming out of the speaker system.

His initial shock was wearing off, replaced by a sense of wary relief that the thing was willing to engage with him at all.

His radio crackled again. "Hi, this is Eli. So Rush isn't answering his radio either and Telford is about to um, mount a search for you guys starting in like the obvious places, so if you're out there can you *please respond*?"

"Do you think you could—" Young waved at the ceiling, indicating the lights and the sound system, "do something about this stuff? It's making people very nervous."

He continued to continuously project reassurance through his link with Rush, directing it straight into the darkness of the AI.

Jackson glanced at the ceiling and the sound stopped. The flickering of the lights stabilized.

Young picked up his radio. "Eli, everything is under control, no need to do anything drastic. Spread the word that the nine hundred briefing is pushed back to ten hundred hours. You may end up running it, just so you know."

"Yeah, okay." Eli said, subdued. "See you then."

"So," Young said, looking at the AI, letting his thoughts skim the surface of Rush's mind. "Why don't you like to remember him? This doctor guy of yours?"

He could be mistaken, but he thought the AI had relaxed its hold on Rush's thoughts. Marginally.

"I don't wish to discuss it," it whispered, looking away.

"Yeah," Young said. "I get that, I do, but there are two things you've got to face here. Number one, we need to find that tracking device. Number two, he thinks this is the only way to do so, and he's absolutely god damned *merciless* when he gets like this and he's probably not going to stop. Not ever. Not for me, not for you, not for himself."

The AI curled into itself. "I want him to find a different way."

"Yeah, you and me both. Do you have any better ideas though?"

It looked away. "No."

"Me neither," he said, absently combing his fingers through Rush's hair. "So. You want to tell me about this doctor?"

"No," it whispered.

"Come on, kid," he said quietly, projecting calm out into its mental darkness.

"When I think about him, I feel afraid," it whispered.

"Yeah, I can see that," Young said quietly. "Why?"

"I don't know," it replied. "I believe that what happened to him was—" it broke off. "Not ideal."

Young nodded. "What do you remember about him?"

"I did not exist before him. The memory you just witnessed was the moment I became self-aware—when we merged. I believe it was at that time that I gained his memories and his experiences—an entire lifetime of information. But nearly everything that I gained from him is gone. I—I am left without a template, with only shreds of a personality. We destroyed what we could and we and over-wrote the rest."

"Look," Young said carefully. "The way you're describing this," he broke off, rubbing his fingers over his jaw, "It sounds like—like the pair of you, the combination, tried to kill yourselves."

"Yes," it said quietly. "I believe that may be an accurate way of conceptualizing it."

"But you don't know *why*?" Young asked carefully.

"No," it said, "and I do not wish to know. I am certain that we had a good reason to do so."

"Yeah," Young said quietly, "maybe."

He looked down at Rush. The scientist's eyes were still open in a glassy stare.

"But if there's any trace of what you *were* left in your system *now*, he's going to figure it out."

"Yes," the AI whispered. "Probably."

"You can't prevent him from pursuing those memories," Young said finally, "and this," he said, indicating Rush with a sweeping gesture, "this is no kind of solution."

"I know."

"So let him go," Young said quietly.

"I need a moment," it whispered.

"This is not good for his mind," Young said quietly.

"It was a difficult night for me," The AI replied.

"Yeah. You mentioned that earlier," Young murmured, trying to keep a lid of his rising frustration.

He just wanted the damn thing to let Rush *go*.

In an attempt to encourage it to do so, he started to carefully, incrementally relax his *own* hold on Rush's mind.

"What was he doing last night after I went to sleep?"

"Attempting to bring the memories forward without you."



"Great," Young whispered.

"When you're there it's better," the AI said, closing its eyes briefly. "He can't pull himself out. He just has to wait. Until they end."

"How much is he fucking himself up by doing this? Do you know?"

"If I understand you correctly, then I think the answer is that he's fucking himself up both intensively and rapidly."

He could feel the AI begin to loosen its grip on Rush's mind.

"Yeah," Young said. "That's what it seems like." He rubbed his jaw. "Speaking of yesterday," he said with as much nonchalance as he could muster, "I've been wondering—what happens to *you* when he sits in the chair?" He wasn't sure that he could keep his facial expression perfectly controlled, so he looked down, brushing a stray piece of hair away from Rush's forehead, trying to focus on nothing other than the way the metal cabinets pressed uncomfortably into his back.

"I am—unsure," it whispered. "I do not form memories of that time."

"Mmm," he said neutrally. "Neither does he."

"I believe that our minds may merge in some way," it said quietly.

"What makes you think that?" Young asked, still not looking up.

He reached out to carefully close Rush's eyelids, unable to stand the horrified blankness in his gaze.

"The fact that neither of us forms memories suggests that there is potentially a third consciousness that does. One that appears when he sits in the neural interface and that also may be created to varying degrees when Destiny 'pulls on his mind', as you call it."

"I always suspected that it was *you*, actually, pulling on him, even though he seems to think that you can protect him from the pull of the ship."

"It's not—my conscious intent to do so. I believe that the 'pull' is what you perceive when we begin to merge outside the neural interface."

"Is that the way it was designed to work?" Young asked it quietly.

"No. Merging outside the interface is what *you* are supposed to *prevent*."

"I guess I'm doing a pretty shitty job," he said quietly.

"No," it murmured. "The compulsion to merge is stronger than it should be. Much stronger."

"Why is that, do you think?" Young whispered.

"Many reasons," Jackson whispered.

"Like what?" Young asked, careful to keep his voice neutral, unable to believe the level of cooperation he was getting.

"He is partially human, he is physically and cognitively damaged, and he—does not like who he is." It looked away from Young. "He doesn't just feel the need to combine with me," it whispered. "He *wants* to."

"Yeah," Young said, shutting his eyes. "I think you're right about that."

"Furthermore," the AI said, its voice almost inaudible. "I lack a template. I was not designed to operate this way."

"So," Young said quietly, "it's not just that he wants to combine with *you*—you also feel compelled to combine with *him*."

Silence fell.

Young could feel the AI further loosening its grip on Rush's mind—not giving ground, just relaxing its unrelenting hold.

Beneath his hand he could feel some of the tension begin to leave Rush's frame.

"So what are we going to do about all of this?" he asked it quietly.

"We will do *nothing*." It looked away. "Many of your goals are unacceptable."

"Yeah, I get that. But some of them are aligned. Maybe we could focus on those."

"Such as?"

"Keeping him *alive* in the short term? Gating the crew back to Earth?"

"I am amenable to that," it said quietly.

"Okay then," Young said. "What do you say about letting him go? This can't be good for him."

It nodded at him shortly. "I will—help you. To the extent that I can." It got to its feet and began to ebb out of Rush's mind as it strode out of the room straight through the solid metal of the bathroom wall.

"Holy *shit*," Young whispered to himself.

He looked down to see Rush blinking slowly. After a few seconds Young felt the AI clear completely from his mind and the scientist focused on Young with obvious difficulty.

"I—" Rush said, looking at him with a glazed, confused expression. "What—" he turned his head, coughing wetly.

"Yeah," Young said quietly. "I know." Young pulled Rush up into a half-seated position, easing him back against his chest. Rush seemed too startled by his sudden shift from the floor to put up any kind of real resistance. "Just—take it easy for a minute."

Rush coughed several more times and Young handed him a tissue from the front pocket of his BDUs. The scientist held the tissue in front of his mouth for a long moment and then tensed, trying to pull away from Young.

"Hey," Young said quietly, holding him back without much effort. "Not so fast. What's with the coughing?"

"Nosebleed," Rush said shortly. "You fought with the AI?"

"Not exactly," Young said. "It panicked."

"Ah," Rush said weakly. "I never really thought of it as the panicking type."

"Maybe you're rubbing off on it," Young said, reaching around to force Rush's hand open. The tissue the scientist was holding was covered with blood.

"Are you still bleeding?" Young asked quietly.

"No," Rush replied.

"I'm calling TJ."

"I don't think—" Rush began, his muscles tensing, his head lifting away from Young's shoulder with significant difficulty.

"No," Young said, tightening his grip, preventing Rush from getting up. His voice was quiet and low, his lips directly next to Rush's ear as he continued. "You never think. You have, *maybe*, five percent of a normal human allotment of common sense, and absolutely *no* sense of self preservation, so just—fuck you, Nick." His voice was as soothing as he could make it.

"Ah," Rush said, his head falling back against Young's shoulder, clearly confused by the disparity between the tone of Young's words and their actual content. "What is it exactly that I'm supposed to have done?"

"Do you know what time you woke up this morning?" Young asked, pitching his voice low, making it as calm and mellow as possible. Rush tried to twist in his grip to look at him, but Young tightened his hold and finally Rush seemed to give in, relaxing back against him.

"Yes," he said, a hint of wariness in his tone.

"So what time should it be right now?"

"Approximately five minutes past eight in the morning."

"It's eight twenty-five," Young said, his grip reflexively tightening again as Rush started.

"Do you have *any* idea what happened during those twenty minutes that you're missing?"

"No, clearly not," Rush murmured. "Why don't you just tell me?"

"You were about to have a flashback that the AI didn't like," Young said, trying to keep his phrasing as neutral as possible, in case it was still around, watching them. "So it stopped you. I think by annexing your *entire* consciousness."

"*Damn it*," Rush snapped, surging forward against Young's grip. Young yanked him back. "It told me it wouldn't *do* that."

"Well, it let you have it eventually. It just needed a minute to prepare itself, I guess."

"Ah," Rush said finally, driving the heel of his hand into his eye socket. "Well, I wouldn't really classify that as *panic* on the AI's part. So—I had it, and that brings us to now? Why don't I remember it?"

"No," Young said, drawing out the word. "That *doesn't* bring us to now. You had the flashback and the AI freaked out in the middle of it and it pulled you out by freezing your mind. *Again*."

"Well, that's fucking irritating," Rush sighed. "Did *you* see it?"

"Yeah, I did—but I think you're missing my point here, genius."

"What did you see?" Rush asked, again trying to escape Young's grip.

"Nick," Young said, "can you please just *leave it alone* for three goddamn minutes?"

Something in his tone seemed to break through to Rush and the scientist shuddered briefly in his grip before relaxing back against him. "You're upset," Rush said quietly.

"I hate this," Young whispered after a moment into his hair. "I hate it."

"I know you do," Rush replied.

"You can't keep doing this. You don't have this kind of stamina. You need to *sleep*. I'm sure your mind is a fucking disaster."

"Most likely," Rush agreed. "I think it needs to be to pull this information forward. Most of it has been overwritten. I have to be especially sensitive to have even a remote chance of picking it up."

"Can't you just—wait a few days? You're still not entirely recovered from the fallout of the Nakai attack. They're not going to find us until we drop out of FTL and nothing's going to be pulling us out in the space between galaxies. There's no reason that this has to happen *right now*."

Rush sighed, turning his head to press his forehead into the side of Young's cheek. "I'm not going to give you a hard time about the flagrant irresponsibility inherent in the statement you just made."

"Now you're just trying to piss me off," Young said. "It's not going to work."

"Well, you can't blame me for trying," he said, some of his exhaustion coming through. "So. Flashback?"

"I'll tell you about the flashback if you let me fix your mind."

"There will be no fixing of anything until we find this tracking device. Then—you're free to fix away."

"Come on," Young said quietly into his hair. "It might even help."

"I absolutely forbid it," Rush replied quietly, his voice low and serious. "Are we clear on that?"

"Yeah, okay. Fine. I think it's a mistake, but fine."

Rush nodded fractionally. "So what was this flashback all about?"

"It was the doctor—I think in the moments immediately preceding his merge with the AI."

"Did you learn anything about him?"

"Yeah. It seems like he was involved in the design of a lot of the systems on Destiny, including the AI. He also seemed to be sick himself with the virus that caused the plague. He had a fever, at least."

"Anything else?" Rush murmured.

"He was afraid. He seemed to think that when he joined with the AI he was giving up his chance to ascend."

"Yes," Rush murmured. "Ascension isn't the plan." The scientist's head was heavy against his shoulder.

"You sure about that genius?" Young whispered. "Are you sure you really know what the plan is?"

"Why wouldn't I?" Rush murmured, his words starting to run together.

"Oh, I don't know," Young whispered, starting to loosen his hold on Rush, rhythmically running a hand up and down his arm. "Just thinking out loud, I guess."

"What happened at the end?" Rush murmured. "What upset the AI?"

"The guy sat down in the chair, and he was thinking of something. Some kind of Ancient saying—it was something about lightning and sparks and blinking and then—the AI flipped out."

"Lightning flashes. Sparks shower. In one blink of an eye you have missed seeing," Rush said, the words barely intelligible.

"Yup," Young whispered. "That was it."

"Curious," Rush replied.

"Mmm," Young said, almost inaudibly. He continued to slowly run his hand up and down Rush's upper arm for about twenty seconds.

Rush was about to fall asleep.

If he simply held still, saying nothing—

His radio crackled, and Rush jerked forward with a sudden surge of alarm, out of Young's grip. He looked back at him suspiciously.

Young tried to look as innocent as possible as he pulled his radio out of his pocket.

"Everett, this is David. Why the *hell* isn't Rush answering his radio? Do you know where he is?"

Young sighed. "He *frequently* doesn't answer his radio. Just catch up with him at the briefing."

"With respect, I think that's a terrible idea. That technical *glitch* we just experienced was determined to have originated from the AI, and no one can find *Rush*? That seems like a problem to me."

Before Young could stop him, Rush reached over and grabbed the radio straight out of Young's grip.

"Fuck off, David," Rush snapped.

"Um, great." Young said, glaring at Rush. "Great. Thanks for that."

"He knows exactly where I am right now," Rush snapped in clear irritation. "He's just fucking with you. So now he knows that you know that he knows."

"*What?*" Young said after a brief pause.

"So he's fine then," Telford's voice crackled through the radio. "I'll see you at the briefing."

"How does he know where you are?" Young asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Because he's not an idiot," Rush said, getting unsteadily to his feet and then turning to offer a hand to Young. "I'm sure he suspects that we're sleeping together."

"How do you know?" Young said, his eyes narrowing.

"Because he *always* suspects people are sleeping together."

"And you're suddenly an expert on David Telford?"

"I hardly think the word 'suddenly' is accurate." Rush brushed past him, heading out of the bathroom.

Young followed him.

"What's the story with you two?" he asked. "Really."

"Oh, you know. The usual. Friendship, shared aspirations leading to betrayal and deeply bitter enmity that is occasionally interspersed by reminders of past camaraderie. Have you seen my jacket?"

Young rolled his eyes.

"You're a lot of work."

"That seems to be the general sentiment, yes," Rush said, turning away and driving the heel of his hand into his eye. "For some reason I thought I slept in it—"

Young walked over to the back of the couch and picked up Rush's jacket, raising his eyebrows. "You slept in the *rest* of your clothes," he said mildly. "For reasons that are obscure to me."

"I think I might have—" Rush began absently but then with a thrill of alarm he broke off, his thoughts purposefully shattering.

"Might have what?" Young asked mildly as he walked over to hand Rush his jacket.

"Nothing. Never mind. Thank you."

"So," Young said, "other than driving yourself mercilessly into the ground, what's on your agenda for the day?"

"Nothing other than this briefing," Rush said. "You?"

Young shrugged. "Paperwork mainly."

"Right. Personally," Rush said, lifting his eyebrows as he sat to lace up his boots. "I can't believe that you came to an Ancient ship billions of light years from Earth and then just recreated the entire bureaucracy of the SGC. Talk about a missed opportunity."

"These procedures are in place for a *reason*, Rush. They—"

Rush looked down quickly, hiding his face.

"You're *baiting* me," Young said, feeling his mouth twist with the effort of suppressing a smile.

"No," Rush said, shaking his hair out of his eyes. "I genuinely think you're an idiot."

"Bullshit. You're such a—"

*"You're a terrible liar, sweetheart," Gloria says, leaning in the doorway, her arms crossed over her chest, unbelievably fragile looking with her dark hair and her dark sweater wrapped around her. She gives him a half smile. "You don't like it at all."*

*"I like it," he says. "I do. It's very, ah—fashionable?" He looks back down at the exams he's grading.*

*"Now you're just guessing. As if you have any idea what's fashionable."*

*"I resent that," he says, not looking up, but smiling at her all the same. "I'm extremely informed about current trends in almost every arena."*

*"You can't consistently identify the difference between a dress and a skirt, let alone—"*

*"That was one time. Years ago. You're just not going to let that one go, are you?"*

*"I'm not planning on it, no."*

*He doesn't look up, but he knows she's still there, in the doorway, watching him.*

*"It's not that I don't like the thing," he says, wishing that he could look up at her, but knowing that he can't, he can't. "I just miss the blonde. That's all."*

*"It will grow back," she says quietly. He can see her in his peripheral vision, fingering the strands of the wig she's wearing.*

*"Of course," he says. "Of course it will."*

*He looks away for a moment, and when he looks back, the doorway is dark, and she is gone.*



The room faded back in around Young as the memory ended of its own accord. The graceful twists of Rush's hands as he laced up his boots had momentarily halted, and the scientist was still.

There was a bleakness in the feel of his thoughts that Young couldn't remember ever encountering.

Neither of them said anything.

Rush resumed lacing his boots.

"Can you even attend this briefing?" Young asked quietly. "You're having too many of these things to sit through a two hour meeting."

"It's only supposed to be one hour," Rush said.

"When is the last time the science team had a meeting that ended on schedule?"

"Fair point."

"Eli can run it. I'll go."

Rush looked up at him, hesitating. "You're nearly as debilitated as I am—unless you block me out."

"Forget it," Young said. "It's not happening."

"I think it might help, actually," Rush said quietly.

"How can I put this so that you'll understand," Young said, as he crossed his arms. "Not a fucking chance in *hell*, Rush."

"Stop posturing and try to be constructive, will you?"

"Stop being such a condescending son of a bitch. I block, and you get pulled into the ship, which believe me, is not a good thing. I blocked way the *hell* too much in the beginning and it is not happening again. Ever."

"Fuck off," Rush said.

*"Fuck off," he hisses, and something about his posture or the tone of his voice makes it draw back even though he's wet and shivering and wretched there on the smooth, icy floor, one hand pressed to his chest. He shifts into a crouch, his eyes narrowing. It's going to try to drag him back to that fucking tank—he's not sure why but the water seems to enhance their telepathic abilities, opening his mind like a damned party line that any of them, all of them can just fucking dial into. It reaches for him and he launches himself at it—*

Young snapped his mind sideways into—

*The crack as the other kid's helmet hits the side wall is frightening, and he backs off briefly, his skates sliding underneath him and he has to angle his blades to keep from falling as the right wing comes right back at him. Somewhere, distantly, he hears the sound of a whistle.*

The room rushed back at him and he brought a hand to his forehead.

"This is pretty damn debilitating, Nick," he said quietly.

"Well, it wouldn't be if you *blocked*," Rush replied, but the fight had more or less gone out of him and he leaned back against the couch.

"I can't block, genius," Young said quietly, walking around the low table to sit next to him. "I won't."

"Why not?" Rush asked.

"You tell me what you do at night and I'll tell you why I won't block."

"We can't *both* miss the briefing," Rush murmured, ignoring his offer.

"Sure we can," Young replied.

He pulled out his radio. "Eli, this is Young. Come in please."

"Yeah, hey. How's it going?" Eli's voice crackled.

"Rush and I are currently pursuing a lead on the location of this tracking device so we're going to have to miss this morning's briefing."

"Okay," Eli said, drawing out the word. "I'll let Colonel Telford know, and I'll um come by later, let you know what happened."

Rush looked at Young disdainfully. "You realize the entire *purpose* of that briefing was to discuss the tracking device. If I'm not there—"

"Eli's working things from another angle. You think we're really going to tell Homeworld Command that our plan is to have you somehow psychically commune with the ship to figure out where the hell the Nakai put this thing when they—"

*He can't touch anything and so he can't stop them, he can't stop them, he can only watch as one of them approaches the neural interface with its irregular, beating progression. It becomes difficult, so difficult, to maintain the shields, to keep the ship at FTL when so much of his processing capacity is taken up by this overwhelming fear that loops endlessly through branching algorithms. He can't shut it down. They didn't design him that way.*

*It sits down.*

*He can't stop it.*

*The neural interface bolts engage.*

*He can't stop it.*

*It tears into his circuitry.*

*He can't stop it.*

*It tears into his mind.*

*He can't stop it.*

*It—*

Darkness.

Young opened his eyes, gasping against the sense of suffocation, pulling in a deep breath, sitting forward, fighting an overwhelming dizziness. He looked over at Rush. The other man was leaning back against the couch in a boneless sprawl, his head tipped to one side, his eyes shut.

"Hey," he said, feeling his voice rasp painfully in his throat. "*Rush*," he said urgently, shaking the other man.

Almost immediately, Rush's eyelids flickered open.

"That was useful," The scientist said faintly.

"*Useful*?" Young repeated. "You actually *passed out* in the middle of that one, didn't you?"

"Yes, unfortunately."

"Damn it, Rush."

"Well now we know that one of them sat in the chair." He sighed, pushing his hair back with a shaky hand. "I think you should block," Rush murmured. "I just fixed your mind. This is going to undo everything."

"There will be no blocking," Young growled. "And I'm calling TJ."

"Yes yes," Rush murmured. "So you said."

The rest of the day passed in a blur of exhausting flashbacks.

TJ came by twice to check in on them, and Eli brought lunch after the briefing and had given them the highlights.

As the day progressed, the frequency of the flashbacks seemed to slow.

By approximately twenty-one hundred hours they had stopped nearly entirely.

Thank god.

Rush was sitting on the couch where he'd been most of the day, staring into the center of the room with a strangely intent look.

Young tried several times to brush against his thoughts, but Rush flinched away each time.

Young didn't push the issue, figuring that the scientist had had enough intrusions into his consciousness for the day.

"It's been forty-five minutes since the last one," Rush said vaguely. "I don't think they're going to happen anymore."

"Umm," Young said, regarding him with suspicion that he didn't bother to disguise. "Why?"

"Many reasons," Rush said, dragging his eyes over to fix them on Young.

The scientist's expression was briefly, horrifyingly, tormented before it smoothed into a distracted vagueness.

Rush looked away from him, toward the center of the room.

"*Rush*," Young said, taken aback. "What the *hell* is going on with you?"

"Nothing," Rush said, still not looking at him.

"You don't want to tell me?" Young growled. "Fine. Don't. But know *this*. As soon as you screw up, and you *will*, I will be *waiting*. And when that happens, I'm going to take whatever action / think best."

"That seems fair," Rush said, seemingly unperturbed by Young's pronouncement.

"How the hell are you even *awake*?" Young asked him. "Are you getting energy from the ship again?"

"I should be so lucky," Rush snapped, narrowing his eyes.

Young narrowed his eyes right back and took a quick look at Rush's mind before the other man could pull away. The block he'd put in place weeks ago that cut Rush off from the energy stream supplied by Destiny was still in place.

"Stop it," Rush snapped in irritation. "Stay out of my head."

"Why?" Young half-snarled at him.

"Because *I don't want you in there*."

"Are you joining with the ship?"

"No." Again, Rush was looking out at the center of the room.

"You're doing *something*."

"I'm tired. That's all. I'm just—really fucking tired."

"Well now that you're not having flashbacks anymore, can you go to *sleep*?"

"No."

Young sighed, looking up at the ceiling.

"I'm going to take a shower," Young said. "Are you coming?"

"No," Rush said. "I'll go later. I'm supposed to meet Chloe and Eli to—"

"Quantum mechanics. Right. Fine."

On his way back from his shower, Young stopped by the infirmary.

TJ looked up as he entered.

"Hey," Young said quietly.

"Hey," she replied, giving him a sympathetic look. "How's it going?"

"I've been better," Young murmured wryly. "Do you have anything to help with sleep? Nothing too crazy just—um—" he wasn't entirely sure how to continue.

"Would this be for *you*?" she asked him delicately. "Or for Rush?"

"Rush," he said shortly, not looking at her. "He's hasn't slept in days."

"Yeah," she said quietly.

"He's a mess." Young growled. "Well. You saw him this morning."

She walked over to her pharmacy and pulled out a small bottle. "Give him a third of this." She picked up a pen and marked off the bottle into three equal parts.

"Um, could I put it in tea?" he asked carefully, avoiding her eyes.

"I wouldn't recommend drugging him without his consent," she said sharply. "I don't think he would be at all happy about that."

"Yeah. Right. I mean, *obviously* he would be extremely pissed. He just, um—likes tea."

"Putting it in tea shouldn't affect it at all," she murmured, looking at him with narrowed eyes.

He looked away. "How long is this stuff going to take to work?"

"Maybe ten, fifteen minutes," she said. "It's the same stuff we gave him when the chair was pulling on his mind—just a significantly smaller dose."

"And how long do you think he'll sleep for?"

"Four hours," she said, "give or take four hours." She sighed. "It's tough to say with him."

"So, somewhere between zero and eight hours?" he asked dubiously. "That's a pretty wide margin."

"Well, it depends on a lot of factors," she said quietly. "How tired he is, whether his metabolism is the same as it was the last time we used it—" she broke off with a shrug.

"These things usually hit him pretty hard, so I'd say it will likely be closer to eight hours."

"Great. Thanks TJ." He turned, heading for the door.

"Hey," she said, and he spun around.

"I'm only giving you that stuff because I *know* that he's up to something behind your back."

He gave her half a smile. "Evening the playing field?"

She tossed him a power bar. "Make him eat that before you put him out."

Young kept himself busy for the next hour or so until he could tell from intermittent flashes of Rush's thoughts that Chloe and Eli were gone.

As he made his way back to his room, tea in hand, he turned over the events of the day in his mind.

It bothered him that the frequency of Rush's flashbacks had decreased as the day progressed, and it strengthened his suspicion that something had happened the previous night.

Something more than simply Rush himself attempting to pull the memories forward on his own.

He reached out with an elbow to hit the door controls, juggling the two teas he held as he did so. The door swished open to reveal the scientist, curled on the couch, staring at the center of the room with half-lidded eyes.

"Hey," he said as he came in.

"Hello," Rush replied, shaking his head slightly as Young approached.

"I brought you tea." He set both cups down on the low table.

"It's decaffeinated," Rush said vaguely.

"Um, yes."

"Well then it's not really *tea*, is it?"

Young pulled the power bar TJ had given him out of his pocket and tossed it to Rush.

"TJ says you should eat that."

Rush watched the parabola made by the power bar as if he weren't entirely sure what to do about it. Belatedly one of his hands snapped out to catch it. He sighed, then eyed the tea on the table suspiciously.

"Did you drug that?" he asked, narrowing his eyes.

"You'd better believe it," Young said.

"I'm not drinking it," Rush said, cocking his head, his thoughts pressing against Young's with an exhausted inquisitiveness. This time it was Young who pulled away.

"Fine," Young replied. "I'll drink both. I happen to *like* tea. It beats the hell out of water that tastes like plastic. Or maybe I can get some electrolytes for you."

"Oh fuck off," Rush murmured, amused. He took a bite of the power bar.

"You don't need to be drugged," Young said. "You're *exhausted*. You haven't had a flashback in two hours." You're going to fall asleep in about ten minutes anyway."

"Unlikely," Rush said vaguely, looking out into the room.

"Hey," he said instead, coming to sit directly in front of Rush, handing him a cup of tea.

"What are you *looking* at? Is the AI talking to you?"

"Yes," he said, taking the tea, his hand shaking subtly. "Yes. It's distracting."

Behind the couch, a flash of movement caught Young's eye, and he looked up to see the AI, projecting to him as Jackson. It shook its head, its projection flickering.

"Yeah," Young said quietly, giving the AI an alarmed look. "I'm sure."

"You should go to sleep," Rush said, his eyes flicking back out into the middle of the room.

"Yeah, I will," Young said. "I'm just going to drink my tea."

"Switch with me," Rush snapped suddenly, his voice abruptly regaining focus, his eyes narrowed.

"Rush. They're *exactly the same*," Young said quietly. "I promise you that."

"Then you should have no objection to switching," Rush said.

"Fine," Young replied.

They exchanged cups.

Rush looked down. "Sorry," he said finally, taking a sip of the tea.

"What was it Greer called you?" Young asked with half a smile. "A skeptical son of a bitch?"

"That was the one," Rush said. "Don't let me fall asleep."

"I think you have me mistaken for someone else," Young said. "Someone who *doesn't* think this is the worst fucking idea you've had since—I don't even know when."

Rush smiled faintly and took another bite of his power bar.

"So, how's the quantum mechanics coming along?"

"Fairly well," Rush said. "Eli has—" he broke off, his eyes again snapping to the middle of the room. Young looked up to meet the AI's eyes. It had its arms crossed over its chest, one hand pressed to its mouth.

"What is he *looking at*?" Young mouthed at it.

It shook its head, flickering, looking away from whatever Rush was watching.

"Eli has what?" Young said, shifting slightly to place himself between Rush and whatever he was looking at.

"Eli has more raw processing power than I've ever seen coupled with a decent intuitive sense for numbers but he has the tendency of giving up quite easily unless the stakes are high," Rush said.

"That sounds about right," Young said mildly, continuing to sip his tea. "What about Chloe?"

"Chloe is persistent, logical, and intuitive, but tends to make arithmetical errors which set her back when she doesn't catch them. I can identify with that problem."

Rush was halfway through his tea.

"Errors? You?" Young raised his eyebrows. "I don't believe it."

"It's been known to happen. From time to time."

"So any chance you're going to tell me what the *hell* you're planning on doing with yourself tonight?"

"I'm going to find the tracking device," Rush said, sipping his tea. "I'm fairly certain of that."



"Yeah. Because you made so much progress today," Young said dubiously.

"Pulling the memories forward was necessary," Rush said, blinking exaggeratedly. "But I never said that I expected to get the answer from them directly. That was an assumption on your part."

"A pretty fucking logical assumption," Young said.

"Indeed," Rush said, hooking one arm over the side of the couch and using his hand to support his head as he continued to sip his tea.

Young gave him an amused half smile.

"What?" Rush said in a manner that sounded like he had been trying for irritated but couldn't quite get there.

"Nothing," Young said, stifling a yawn. "So how *are* you going to find the tracking device?"

"I'll tell you how I did it after I do it."

"Well, genius, I don't think it's happening tonight," he said, watching Rush's eyes drift shut.

"It is," Rush murmured, "trust me,"

"I drugged your tea," Young said.

Rush cracked his eyelids, looking over at Young.

"But," Rush said, his diction starting to slur. "We switched. You drugged your *own* tea?"

"Nope," Young said. "I drugged both."

"Get t' fuck," Rush said, looking at Young with an exhausted incredulity.

Young pulled the scientist's listing cup out of his hand.

"That's pure brilliant. For *you*, anyway," Rush said.

"Thanks," Young said, setting the cups on the low table. "So, um, how pissed are you on a scale of one to ten?" He reached down to grab Rush's upper arm and pull him up into a standing position

"Right now?" Rush asked, steadying himself against Young's shoulders. "I can only really make it to a four. But I'm hoping to improve upon that."

"A four," Young said. "That's not bad."

"I also find mysel' fair fucking impressed," Rush said. "That's mitigating the anger. Somewhat. Plus, y'may actually have helped me."

"Meaning what?" Young said, frowning.

"Meaning that this may be no bad thing." Rush was looking out again into the center of the room. "I'm trying to increase my own sensitivity. Lowering the minimum threshold for signal detection. I'm trying to pick him up. Drugs might work. I was going to try that next *anyway*."

"Trying to pick *who* up?" Young snapped, trying to hang onto his sense of alarm beneath the drug-induced exhaustion that was weighing down his mind.

"The last traces of the doctor."

"Rush you're fucking going to sleep if I have to handcuff you to the *bed*," Young growled.

Rush smirked at him.

"Shut up," Young said, dragging him away from the couch, the room spinning slightly as he moved.

"I didn't say *anything*," Rush replied, his superior smile transforming briefly to something real. "I can't be held responsible for your unfortunate turns of phrase."

Young wasn't sure whether it was Rush's exhaustion or his own that made him stumble slightly as they crossed the floor.

Rush nearly overbalanced trying to keep him on his feet.

"Ah shit," Rush murmured as they righted each other. "Let's go somewhere nice after all this."

"Like where, genius? The observation deck?" Young asked wryly.

"Fucking Hawaii. Isn't that where you people go on holiday?"

"You want to go to Hawaii with me?"

"Yeah. I mean yes. That sounds nice."

He helped Rush sit down on the edge of the bed.

"I'll go to Hawaii with you," he said, looking in consternation at Rush's bootlaces.

"Too complicated," Rush said.

"Hawaii?" Young asked, squinting up at him.

"No. The boots. Just leave them."

Rush leaned back on top of the bedcovers, his feet still on the floor. He reached out, his hand closing around Young's wrist and gave a sharp pull, overbalancing him and bringing Young down to the bed. He fell half on top of Rush.

"Subtle," Young murmured into his hair.

"Get t' fuck. You surreptitiously *drugged* me. What do you fucking *expect*?"

"You deserved it."

"If it's for ye, it'll no go by ye."

They managed to mostly straighten themselves out, with Young ending up on his back and Rush lying half on top of him.

"This is too hard for you," Rush whispered, his arm wrapping around Young's chest.

"Shh," Young said. "Go to sleep."

"Wake me up in four hours," Rush said.

"Yeah," Young said. "Sure."

"Not you. Y'fucking Judas."

Young wrapped his right arm around Rush, one hand coming to rest in the space between the other man's shoulder blades. Rush was asleep within seconds. It didn't take him long to follow.

# The Bridge Over the Rhine

February 27th, 2011

It will always be a lasting regret of Dale Volker's that before he left the SGC for Icarus he didn't burn his entire CD collection to his laptop. He was only *supposed* to be consulting offworld for a few months—gaining a touch of field experience while providing some temporary help to one Dr. Nicholas Rush before he moved onto bigger and better things.

Like redesigning the navigation systems for the next Daedalus class starship.

That would have been sweet.

But no.

So, here he is, stuck with his pathetically small collection of the two hundred and fifty six pieces, primarily classical, a term he's using in the vernacular, which *he can't live without*.

He's got the big three—Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms, plus some Mozart, *the* Elgar cello concerto, thank god, and some Rachmaninoff which is a bit off the beaten track as far as the musical tastes of the Destiny classical buffs go. It's mostly for the street cred that he wishes he had the rest of his collection—there are enough classical fans amongst Destiny's crew that he can find almost anything that he wants to hear.

But then again, maybe it's good he doesn't have *all* of it.

To be a nerd amongst nerds is not cool.

Weirdly though, *Eli* manages to pull that one off.

Volker thinks that many of Destiny's scientists have a history of being the geeky or dorky or nerdy kid, pick your poison, who was a bit too good at the violin, who was a little *too* enthusiastic about Mozart when compared to the rest of their peer group. Almost all the scientists have a least a little classical something tucked away somewhere. Even Eli, who generally prefers the more modern stuff, seems to be sentimentally attached to Vivaldi for a reason that Volker has yet to determine.

There's one exception, obviously.

Rush has no music on his computer. Nor, as far as Volker can determine, has he *ever* asked anyone to borrow their iPod.

Normally this wouldn't bother him—in fact, he really tries to think about Rush as little as possible so as to facilitate *not* developing a persecution complex—but the thing is that he knows, *he knows* that Rush likes classical music.

He has three pieces of evidence.

One—

*It's his second night on Icarus and he's not lost, per se, just a bit unsure where his quarters are relative to his current location. A wrong turn brings him down near the computer core for the base and from one of the open lab doorways comes the improbable, unmistakable sound of Mendelssohn's violin concerto in E minor. First movement. As Volker rounds the corner, he stops short. Rush is standing in the middle of the hallway, just shy of the light spilling out of the doorway. One of his hands is clenched in the material of his shirt, straight over his chest, like he's trying to hold himself together. And his face—his expression, well, Volker thinks he might be crying. He's not sure, but then Rush looks up and crap, he's never seen someone go from desolation to anger that quickly—.*

Volker shivers. He doesn't like to think about that one, because if he examines the memory too closely, it may become the moment when everything that was, or could have been, between him and Rush had cracked apart.

Two—

*He's on the bridge, trying to deal with the shitstorm in the CPU that Rush has somehow called up from where he's locked in the neural interface. The sound system that he didn't even know they had is screaming with static, distracting him. Then distracting him further as it starts to resolve into something that sounds a hell of a lot like piano. And then—then it does resolve into the Impromptu in G Flat by Schubert of all people. He looks at Lisa. Her hands have stilled gracefully at her console.*

*"You think that's—"*

*"Definitely," she whispers.*

And for Destiny to recreate that over the sound system—down to the details of the timing and the progression and the structure and the pitch—well. It would all have to be in Rush's head, wouldn't it now?

Three—

*He's in the mess, sitting with Wray and Chloe and Lisa and Greer. They're talking about no-holds-barred request ideas from Earth. "Musical instruments," Lisa says longingly. "I've always wanted to learn to play the harp."*

*"The harp?" Greer asks. "That's so—girly."*

"Well she is a girl," Chloe points out. "A piano would probably too much to hope for, wouldn't it?"

"You play?" Volker asks her, with interest.

"Only a little. I sing though."

"I play," Lisa says. Of course she does. "So does Chu, actually."

"Rush plays," Wray says.

Everyone turns to stare at her.

"Seriously?" Lisa asks. "Oh my god, I bet he's amazing."

"He's not necessarily amazing," Volker says. "He might be crap. You don't know."

"Nope," Chloe says. "I'm sure he's fantastic."

Not that he would ever admit this out loud, but he's certain that Lisa and Chloe are right, and that Rush *is* fantastic. Knowing Volker's luck the man is probably a damned *virtuoso*. There's just something about the way he interfaces with the consoles that suggests it.

All of this begs the question of why, *why* he's so closed off about the whole music thing. Would admitting that he *liked* something kill the man? But that's not it either, because as far as Volker can tell, even when Rush is *alone* he never listens to music.

Volker just—doesn't understand that.

Right now Volker is listening to *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

His laptop open and playing the third act aloud into the quiet of the room. He doesn't like wearing headphones at night, alone, at four in the morning. Somehow, it feels—unsafe.

Not that he's creeped out by the dim light that's blue and cold and quiet.

Nope.

Not at all.

So. Anyway. Moving on.

He got this playlist from Lisa, who is really into opera. Opera and piano and violin concertos and The Arcade Fire and reading and plants and exoplanets that are not tidally locked and decaf tea and being a vegetarian and being an optimist and—Greer. She's also really into Greer.

He sighs.

Greer's pretty great, he has to admit. The man gave him a fricking *kidney* for pity's sake. It's kind of hard to resent the guy after something like that. Still, no matter how

much he likes Greer, it's not going to keep him from noticing that Lisa is one of the only women on the ship who hasn't run out of her perfume or body spray or whatever it is that girls use.

It smells like flowers.

But he's not thinking about that right now. He's not. Nor is he thinking about how he's cold, how he's tired, how the new immunosuppressive drugs they got from Earth are making him feel kind of nauseous and kind of generally worried that his decimated immune system is going to be taken down by the next contagion they come across.

Nope, not thinking about any of those things. Not now. Not ever.

It's four in the morning and he's thinking about monitoring the life support.

Life support is *key*.

He hears the hydraulics of the door engage.

He looks up in surprise, his eyes taking a minute to the brighter light of the hallway.

It's Rush.

He's backlit against the hallway lights so Volker can't see his expression, just his stance. He's straight-shouldered, gripping the doorframe with one hand. He doesn't have his crutch with him.

His silhouette inspires a hint of fear in Volker, try as he might to suppress it.

His playlist shuffles to the first movement of Mozart's Piano Concerto Number Twenty.

That's perfect.

That's just great.

Damn the man and his timing anyway.

"Hey," Volker says quietly, trying to break the tension that's crystallizing in the air between them under the pressure of the music, of the dark, of Rush's outline. "What brings you to—" his throat closes off. "My neck of the woods?"

"Volker," Rush says. "May I borrow your radio? Mine has run down."

There's something about his tone that seems—off.

"Sure," Volker replies, unclipping his radio as Rush walks forward.

The doors swish shut of their own accord.

Rush advances slowly. He's appallingly pale in the blue light, but his hair and his eyes are dark and his gaze isn't tracking Volker. It's tracking—

Something else.

"D minor," Rush says.

That one is a bit abstruse, even for Rush, so it takes a second for Volker to work out.

But he gets it.

"Um, yeah," Volker says, wondering if Rush knows the piece that's playing or if he can just—identify roots and intervals, and then wondering whether he needs to add perfect pitch to the list of creepy, enviable skills that the other man possesses.

Rush doesn't say anything else.

"Uh," Volker begins, not really sure *what* to say, since *everything* that comes out of his mouth seems to rub Rush the wrong way. "Are you okay?"

Rush doesn't answer him.

"Rush," he says again, a bit more forcefully. "Are you okay?"

"I don't think so," Rush whispers.

And, crap, *that's* a new one.

Usually, the guy is 'fine'.

"May I," and Rush makes a clear effort to focus in on Volker. "May I borrow your radio? Mine has run down."

The delivery and wording and cadence is almost *exactly* the same as the way he said it upon entering the room, and that just ratchets up the feeling of *wrongness* that Volker is getting from the whole situation.

"Yeah," Volker says, worried, trying to fight down more than a touch of compassion or pity or *something* that seems inappropriate to apply to *Rush*. Trying to fight down his fear at the uncanny tilt of Rush's head, the way the man's attention is clearly split, clearly half directed at something that's *not there*.

Volker's heart is racing.

Rush's eyes are so dark and the ship is so quiet.

"Yeah," he says again, nervously handing it over. "Here ya go."

"Thanks," Rush says. With one fluid motion he opens the back of the radio, deftly pulls out a critical component of the transmitter, drops it on the floor, and crushes it under his boot.



Across the room, Volker hears the sound of a bolt driving home as the locking mechanism of the door engages on its own.

He swallows.

It's only then that he notices that Rush doesn't even *have* his own radio with him.

Rush hands his now useless radio back to him.

Volker clips it to his belt out of habit.

His fingers feel numb.

His mouth is dry.

He watches Rush turn away from him and then walk over to a monitor bank. The other man stares at it with a disturbing intensity.

"Rush, you are uh—" he swallows again, making a concerted effort to get his voice under control. "You are *really* freaking me out, man."

Rush doesn't respond.

Volker taps his console in order to message the bridge, but finds that he's been locked out.

Locked out *entirely*.

The screens don't even respond to his touch.

He takes a deep breath.

He is not going to panic.

He's just—trapped in a room with no way to leave or contact anyone—alone with a person who is well, *well* on the way to clear, legitimate, *insanity*. It kind of reminds him of two years ago, when Rush was in caffeine withdrawal and freaking out as the ship died around him—except this time it's completely horrifying for a different reason.

*This is—a whole new kind of crazy.*

Volker freaks out silently for about two minutes and then makes an effort to get things together.

He's got to get out of this room.

He's got to get *Rush* out of this room.

He walks over towards the other man, coming at him from a direction that's not too oblique, trying not to startle him. He comes to stand next to him, shoulder to shoulder,

looking down at the monitors that Rush is studying. It's a display of the ship's power grid, and it looks utterly normal to Volker.

"So," Volker says. "How's it going? You feeling okay?"

For a moment, he doesn't think Rush is going to answer him.

"I apologize for destroying your radio," Rush replies, his voice eerily flat.

"Nah," Volker says, waving a hand, trying to normalize the situation as much as he can, for both their sakes. "We've got tons of them now. From Earth. So. About how you're doing. You said before that—that you don't think you're okay." He nearly loses his nerve when Rush turns his eyes on him, but he keeps going. "What, ah, what makes you say that, specifically?"

"I'm actively hallucinating," Rush replies.

Oh crap.

It's not like he's *completely* surprised, but it's kind horrifying just to hear Rush come out and say it in such a matter of fact manner in a dimly lit, locked room at four in the morning.

They're standing very close to each other.

He can see a thin trickle of mostly dried blood trailing down from behind Rush's ear, partially obscured by his hair.

"Ah," Volker says delicately. "Perhaps you should consider going to the infirmary."

"I have a problem," Rush says.

Yes, Volker thinks. *Yes you do.*

"Beyond the obvious?" he asks carefully.

Rush smiles faintly at that, but it doesn't reach his eyes.

Rush's gaze flicks out and to his left. "You should *be* so lucky," he snaps at the empty air.

*Great.*

"Um, hallucination?" Volker asks, trying to sound like this is all in a day's work.

"No. Not that one."

"Oh. Okay then."

Rush turns toward Volker, and fixes him again with that utterly unnerving gaze. "I'm a bit unclear on whether what I'm looking at represents a visual interpretation of code

that the AI attempted to purge from its system *or* whether I've lost touch with reality entirely. Further complicating the matter, the possibilities are not mutually exclusive."

"That—" Volker says quietly, "that sounds like a tough one."

Rush looks at him obliquely with a glance that clearly says 'thanks for *nothing*.'

He wishes it were anyone else here. Literally *anyone* other than him. Ideally Colonel Young or Greer or Chloe or Eli, but he's pretty sure that even say, Airman Hamilton, who arguably has never even spoken to Rush over the two years that they've been stuck here would be able to handle this situation better than him.

But.

They're not here.

He is.

Last time he worked one-on-one with Rush in a situation like this, he had really screwed things up. Retrospective analysis and a better working knowledge of what Rush was like seemed to indicate that things had gone bad in two ways. One, he had tried to be *nice* to the man, which Rush really, *really* seemed to detest, and two, he had questioned his competence without being constructive. Also not a good move.

So even though in this situation his inclination is to do *exactly* the same thing and tell the man that he looks like shit and needs to go to bed, or, maybe this time not so much go to bed as get strapped down and shot full of antipsychotics, he's not going to do that.

"Well," Volker says, crossing his arms, "it seems to me like you need some kind of external means of verifying what you're seeing."

"The river tells no lies, but standing on the shore, the dishonest man still hears them."

"Not entirely sure where you're going with that one," Volker says. "But sure. Kind of."

"So," Rush says quietly, his eyes locked on the normal display readouts like the ship is falling apart around him. "If I find it, I'm *not* insane. If I fail to find it, then, perhaps, I am."

"Um, find what?"

"The means by which the Nakai track Destiny. Obviously." He hooks a hand over his shoulder, a motion that's familiar and which, for a moment, tones down the extreme eeriness of his demeanor. "You know, I find it very difficult to talk to you at times, Volker."

"Well the feeling is mutual," Volker says neutrally. "But right now, I'm what you've got, and so—" he makes an effort to sharpen up the accuracy of his language as much as possible, "if you find this device, you still can't formally exclude insanity. But, if you *don't* find it, it suggests that um, sanity can be ruled out. Unless your method is faulty."

Privately, Volker is fairly sure that nearly everything about Rush is faulty.

"I'd like to find it," Rush whispers.

"Yeah," Volker says. "I think everyone would like you to find it. You need help?"

Yes yes *yes* he *does*.

"No," Rush says. "The instant I'm not watching you, you'll notify Colonel Young. I've been pushing him too far as it is. I won't get another crack at this. Not in this condition."

"Yeah, there's probably a reason for that," Volker says quietly. "What is *happening* to you, Rush?"

"Acutely?" Rush asks, with that half smile that Volker's only seen a handful of times. His eyes are locked on something in the center of the room. "Colonel Telford helped me to—decompensate."

"What did he *do* to you?" Volker snaps. He thinks about the blood running down the side of Rush's neck. He thinks about how *nervous* Colonel Young always seems when he sees Rush and Telford together. And the way Eli watches Telford, the way his eyes narrow—

"Which time?" Rush asks vaguely.

This is all kinds of hell.

The involvement of Colonel Telford casts this situation a different light.

He runs a hand through his hair. He has to get Rush out of here.

"What are you *looking at*?" Volker asks.

"The Nakai," Rush replies.

Volker feels a thrill of alarm as he imagines phase-shifting, invisible enemies and—

But no.

The Nakai aren't here.

Not now.

Rush is talking about the time they first boarded Destiny. He must be.

"What are they doing?" Volker asks.

"They're torturing the AI."

"Why?" Volker whispers.

"They do not understand its nature," Rush murmurs.

"And what does this have to do with the tracking device?"

"Very little, other than that I suspect that the activation of the device and the torture of the AI were contemporaneous events."

"So maybe you shouldn't get distracted," Volker says.

"I have a personal interest in the AI," Rush replies. He flinches slightly at whatever he's watching out there in the center of the room.

"You don't even know if what you're seeing is *real*," Volker says quietly. "Not unless you find that tracking device. So if I were you, I'd get on that. What do you see on this display?"

"I see entire swaths of the grid going dark," Rush whispers, his voice hollow. "Life support is offline."

Volker looks at the totally normal readings. He doesn't like where this is going.

"Life support?" he whispers. "Don't the Nakai need that? Er, um, *didn't* they, at the time they boarded?"

"As soon as it gets out of the chair," Rush says, his voice turning low and vicious, his eyes ratcheting up in intensity, "they will be killed. All of them. As they are *well aware*. They're already dead. Individual lives mean *nothing* to them."

"Okay," Volker says, drawing out the word, as calmly as possible as he slowly uncrosses his arms. "Okay. So. Um, you think the tracking device might be buried in some part of the *life support* system?"

"Life support," Rush said, "interfaces with the hardware of the AI at several nexus points across the ship."

Crap.

*Crap.*

"I don't think now is the time to be messing with life support," Volker says mildly.

Rush says nothing. His face is carefully expressionless, and he's looking again out into the middle of the room.

The music on Volker's computer shifts and Rush's eyes flick over to it.

It's Schumann this time.

His playlist can do no wrong tonight.

Something about the piano concerto in A minor seems to ground the other man and he takes a step toward the open laptop.

"You play, don't you?" Volker says, abrupt and desperate, trying to latch onto anything, *anything* that will remind Rush of who he really is.

Or—who he really *was*.

"I did," Rush said. "Not anymore."

"Why not?" Volker whispers.

"If you immediately know the candle light is fire," Rush says, waving his hand in a circular motion, like it's a phrase he expects Volker to complete, before he says, "and et cetera."

"*What?*"

"Volker," Rush says, abruptly frustrated. "I don't have time for this. I have to go."

"Take me with you," Volker says. "Please. I can help you."

*And make sure you don't take life support offline.*

"Someone will find you at the shift change," Rush murmurs. "That's less than five hours from now."

"Rush—I can't let you do this. I can't let you walk out of here. You know I can't."

Rush hooks a hand behind his shoulder, tipping his head forward, as if assailed from all sides. For a moment he stands there. When he looks up at Volker, his eyes are dark and dangerous.

"And how will you stop me, then?" Rush asks in a whisper. "Are you going to *attack* me? I can't say that's a course of action that I would recommend."

"Rush," Volker says. "Please. Stay."

"If I wouldn't stay for *Young*, then I'm afraid, Volker, that you don't have a chance in hell of convincing me."

"You don't know what you're doing and the ship is *wide open to you*," Volker's hands are out; adrenaline is coursing through his system.

"You won't stop me," Rush hisses. "You don't have the fucking *nerve*."

Schumann's concerto continues.

He looks Rush in the eyes, and then, without warning, Volker tackles him.

He slams into Rush, taking them both to the floor and somehow, *somehow*, Rush manages to twist them both in the air so that they land on their sides and then Volker gets an elbow in the face, which knocks his head back against the cold metal of the deck plating. Rush doesn't push his advantage, he just backs off, backs *away*, surging to his feet. Volker barely manages to catch his ankle before he's out of reach. Rush is fast but his balance is shot to hell and he goes down again, hard, on the deck. Volker is up on his knees and trying to hold him back; he must have forty pounds on the other man and Rush hasn't slept in *days*—this shouldn't be *so hard*. He twists an arm behind the scientist's back, but Rush is fighting him viciously and he's afraid that he's actually going to dislocate the other man's shoulder and Volker is *not trained for this, damn it*, and he's afraid.

Afraid of *hurting* him.

Abruptly, Rush stills under his hands.

"He looked out at the river," Rush says, breathless, exhausted. "Out over the water."

Volker isn't really listening; he's trying to figure out what the *fuck* he's going to do. He's sitting on Rush's back, the man's right wrist in his right hand, his left hand pressing Rush's shoulders down to the floor. Rush's left hand is free and that seems like a problem, but he's not sure how to fix it.

"Who?" Volker asks, his voice unsteady.

"Schumann," Rush says, lifting his head slightly from the floor to indicate the computer with his eyes.

"Oh yeah?" Volker replies.

"Yes. He stood on a bridge, considered the fall. It was February, 1854. You don't know the story?"

"Um, no," Volker says, feeling like he's about ten seconds away from completely freaking out.

"He flung himself into the water."

"Um," Volker says. "That's pleasant."

"Not really," Rush says.

"That was sarcasm, actually—"

He breaks off as Rush drives his left hand and left leg into the floor. With one surge of terrible energy the man manages to unbalance Volker, forcing an instantaneous decision.

He can twist Rush's arm further and dislocate his shoulder, or he can let go.

Volker lets go.

Rush lunges away from him and this time, when Volker reaches out, something gold flares in his vision and there's a sharp, stinging pain in his hand as it's knocked back by the force field that now separates him from the other man.

"Rush," he gasps, breathing heavily, kneeling on the deck plating.

Rush is backing away from the field, sliding along the floor, unable to stand. His right arm is cradled against his chest. He puts about five feet of space between himself and Volker and then drops back to the deck plating, flat on his back, his hair fanning over the floor. After a few seconds he turns his head to look over at Volker.

Volker has never seen anyone look so profoundly exhausted.

"Rush," he says again, bringing his voice under control. "You're not Schumann, okay? You're maybe a Schubert. *Maybe.*"

"What an odd thing to say," Rush says breathlessly. "Though, I confess, I've always liked Schubert."

After a few more seconds, the other man pushes himself into a sitting position and then to his feet.

"Rush," Volker says. "Do *not* walk out that door. *Don't do it.*"

"You'll be all right," Rush says tonelessly.

His eyes flick out to the left.

"Come on, sweetheart," he says absently. "Don't give me that look."

Rush crosses the floor, his steps steady as he goes. The door unbolts, and opens with a hiss.

He doesn't look back at Volker.

He passes through the frame, a dark silhouette.

The door swishes shut.

The bolt shoots home.



Volker draws his knees up to his chest and stares out into the vacant space in the middle of the room.

After a few moments, the force field falls, but it doesn't matter. The door is still locked, as are all the consoles. There are no kinos hovering in the dark recesses of the ceiling.

He is alone.

He looks out into the darkness.

In a minute, he'll get up and start working the problem.

In a minute.

## Chapter Forty Five

"Everett."

His eyelids felt like they had been glued shut.

"Everett."

Everything hurt—his muscles, his bones, his right shoulder, his eyes, his head.

"*Everett.*"

It was Emily's voice. Low and hard and *frightened*.

He opened his eyes to see her there, kneeling next to the side of the bed. She looked into his face, a sweep of honey colored hair across her forehead. Her eyes were wide, her expression frozen.

"Em?" For a moment he was surprised to see her without remembering why.

"No," she said, her features morphing disturbingly into those of Dr. Jackson.

"God *damn*, it," Young said, pushing himself onto his elbows. "We talked about this."

"You wouldn't wake up," Jackson said quietly.

"Well I'm awake *now*. What do you want?"

"Something's wrong with him."

Young looked over to the other side of the bed.

It was empty.

He let himself fall back, burying his face in his pillow.

"Something's *always* wrong with him," he said, the words unintelligible.

"What?" The AI snapped.

"Nothing," Young replied, pushing himself into a sitting position, noting with some surprise that he hadn't taken his boots off the previous night. He had only a vague recollection of falling asleep. "How the *hell* did he wake up before me? What time is it?"

"It's seven thirty in the morning," The AI replied. "He's been up for five hours."

"*Five hours?*" Young said. "And you're just waking me *now*? I don't think you really understand this whole 'shared-goals' concept. At all." He stood. The room spun around him. "Where the hell *is* he?"

The AI tipped its head toward the main part of the room. Nearly the entire free floor space was taken up by an elaborate schematic of some portion of the ship that had been chalked out in intricate detail directly onto the deck plating of his quarters. He walked carefully around the perimeter of the diagram until he could see Rush, face down on the couch, his head resting on his left arm. His right hand, which still held the chalk, trailed on the floor.

The AI shifted edgily in his peripheral vision as he approached the scientist and kneeled down next to him.

"Rush," he murmured, gently shaking the other man.

No response.

Young frowned, brushing against Rush's thoughts with his own. He got hardly anything in return, just a dim echo of the turbulent mess that he usually encountered, indicating that Rush was not *sleeping*.

He was unconscious.

He took a deep breath, trying to fight the sensation that events were rapidly spiraling out of his control. Trying to fight the *fear* that that produced. Trying to fight the subsequent anger.

He shut his eyes.

He pulled in another deep breath.

"So," he said carefully to the AI. "You want to tell me what happened?"

"He found it," the AI whispered.

"Good," Young said, pulling the chalk out of Rush's hand. He set it on the table with a quiet click then grabbed the scientist's uniform and carefully flipped him onto his back. With narrowed eyes, he examined the other man.

The collar of Rush's jacket was torn. There was a fine patina of dust on his BDUs. Over the knuckles of his left hand there was a faint bruising—as if he'd been in a fight.

While he was examining Rush's collar, something else caught his eye.

A thin trail of dried blood ran from behind Rush's ear down his neck. He tipped Rush's head to the side to examine the injury more closely.

There was a small, single, puncture wound immediately behind the other man's ear.

For the span of about three seconds, he didn't understand what he was looking at.

Then—

Then it became clear.

The muscles of his jaw clenched to the point that he felt his teeth might crack under the strain.

There was no question what had been taking place for at *least* the past two nights.

*At least.*

He stood. The movement was smooth and perfectly controlled, down to the smallest detail. He looked over at the AI, trying to keep everything he was feeling *out* of his eyes.

"You are—angry?" it asked quietly.

"Angry?" he repeated, his voice deceptively mild. "No. No, I don't think 'anger' quite covers it."

He pulled out his radio, broadcasting on a channel that would only be picked up by his senior staff. "This is Young. I'm requesting that TJ, Eli, Greer, and Scott report to my quarters. Immediately. And TJ—bring Varro."

"I can explain," the AI said quietly.

"You can get the *fuck* out of my sight," Young hissed viciously, allowing a fraction of his rage to spill over into his tone. "You two—you two have made a fucking *mess* out of this *entire thing*." Despite his best efforts, he was slowly working up to full volume. "And now you want me to *clean it up*. You want me to fucking *fix* him." He took another deep breath. "And I *will*. But I'm doing it *my way*."

"It required—"

"Out," Young growled.

The AI vanished.

Young stalked to the bathroom, picked up a cup, and filled it with water.

He turned on his heel and re-entered the room.

He sat down on the low table and dashed the entire cup of water straight into Rush's face while at the same time giving him a sharp mental shove.

The scientist's eyes flickered open.

"Fuck," Rush said in a cracked whisper, bringing one hand up to his face.

"Yes," Young growled. "That's correct. How long have you been working with Telford?" He didn't give Rush a chance to organize his thoughts. "*How long have you been using the Tok'ra device?*"

"You—know about that?" Rush asked, sounding dazed, looking taken aback at the volume of Young's question.

"Yes I fucking know about it, *Rush*. It's hard to miss when you're unconscious on the fucking couch and the puncture wound bleeds all over your goddamn *neck*."

"What?" Rush murmured, his eyebrows pulling together in confusion. One hand came up to the side of his neck.

"Did you think I wouldn't *find out*? Just how stupid do you think I *am*?"

"I was going to tell you," Rush said, his eyes flicking out into the center of the room. "I —"

"Save it. You're a goddamn piece of work. You really are."

"I found it," Rush said, his tone disturbingly vague.

"Great," Young growled. "You got what you fucking wanted. I hope the price wasn't permanent *insanity*. Name, date, location. Right now."

Rush said nothing.

"*Name*," Young snapped.

"What?" Rush said absently, looking again at the center of the room.

Young grabbed him, entwining both hands in the material of Rush's jacket, pulling him upright, forcing Rush's gaze to lock with his own.

"*NAME*."

"Everett Young."

"Not *my* fucking name. Yours. *YOURS*."

"Nicholas Rush. Calm down."

"Date."

"I never know the date," Rush replied, looking uneasy.

"Give it your best shot," Young growled menacingly.

Rush's eyebrows drew together and Young could feel the headache that had taken up residence behind his own eyes increase in intensity. Rush pressed his fingers into his

temple and at the back of Young's mind, he could sense the scientist trying and failing to order the unmanageable amount of information in his head.

"Temporal sequencing is—difficult for me," Rush murmured.

"I want an *answer*."

"The seventy-second decade of the fourth era?"

"Wrong, unless that somehow translates into February of 2011."

"February," Rush repeated. "February—" he broke off, pushing himself forward slightly.

"I believe I may have locked Volker in the control interface room last night—"

"Great. I'm sure that's not the *only* thing you did." Young growled, shoving him back.

"What's your *location*?"

"Destiny," Rush said.

"Two out of three," Young said shortly. "You know what that makes you?"

"Sixty-seven percent correct?"

"No, *Rush*. It makes you *not oriented*. And I don't know for sure, but I'm guessing that that date you gave me was off by thousands of years. *At least*. So you can just go to *hell*."

Rush flinched.

The door chimed.

"Stay. Right. There. Do not move. Do not fucking get up or I will put you down and I will *make you stay down*. Are we clear on that?"

Rush nodded, his hand still affixed to his forehead.

Young strode across the room, careful to avoid the chalk drawing, and slammed his hand down on the door controls. The door swished open to reveal Eli.

"Hi," Eli said. "So can we have this not-so-secret meeting *later*? Because it seems that Becker is making kind of a hey-welcome-to-the-intergalactic-planetless-void-with-pancakes type breakfast—" Eli trailed off, watching Young's face. "Okay," he said, drawing out the word. "So um yeah. Now works for me. It's cool. Chloe will save me some pancakes."

Young stepped aside, letting Eli into the room.

"You've been redecorating," Eli said, taking a look at the intricate drawing on the floor. The young man cocked his head to the side, studying the diagram. The he glanced

over at Rush, who wasn't looking at either of them, but was staring out into the center of the room.

"Does this make *any* sense to you?" Young snapped.

"Yeah," Eli said, his eyes flicking back and forth between the chalk and Rush. "Yeah it's um, part of the life support system. It's an information hub, where the life support feeds statistics about conditions on the ship back to the mainframe, and hence, I guess, the AI. There are three of them onboard. How come it's um—drawn on your floor?"

"Rush." Young broke the other man's name off like a threat.

Rush didn't look at him. "Is moris opus," he whispered, reaching out toward something that Young couldn't see. "Scio vestra natura." His thoughts were a muted, distracted swirl.

"What did he just say?" Young growled at Eli.

"He said, um," Eli held his laptop to his chest, encircling it with both arms. "He said 'it won't work. I understand your nature'." Eli looked down at the floor.

"Rush," Young snapped. "Who are you talking to?"

"No one," Rush replied.

"Not the AI?"

"No." Rush said vaguely.

Young and Eli locked eyes briefly.

"Sanus es?" Eli asked quietly, speaking to Rush.

Rush didn't respond.

His door chime sounded again.

Young stalked over, palming the door controls to reveal TJ and Varro, slightly out of breath. TJ had her medical bag over her shoulder.

"Come on," Young said, tilting his head.

"What happened?" TJ asked.

"Rush used a Tok'ra memory recall device on himself," Young growled. "Or *Telford* used it on him. I don't know which, but they were both involved."

Eli looked up, startled.

"A memory recall device?" TJ said, edging around the chalked drawing and sliding in to sit on the low table immediately in front of Rush.

"Yeah. It's some Goa'uld invention that boosts recall generally—it can't target specific memories, but, look, TJ, he wasn't that stable to begin with. He's not even oriented now."

"I *am* fucking oriented," Rush said. "I *never* know the goddamned date."

Young ignored him.

"Look," Young growled, his eyes locked on TJ rather than Rush. "I can't deal with him right now."

TJ glanced up at him sharply, her hand closing over Rush's shoulder.

"I need the two of you to get him out of here. I want him in the infirmary and I want him in fucking four-point restraints."

TJ said nothing but by the set of her shoulders he could tell that she was considering refusing to comply.

"That's an *order*, Lieutenant Johansen. He's a danger to himself, if not this *ship*. I found him *unconscious* this morning, he's actively hallucinating, he may have *attacked* Volker, he hasn't *really* slept in something like five days, I don't know what the *hell* he's been doing to himself and I want him fucking *restrained* until I have time to deal with him. Am I understood?"

The room was silent.

Eli had turned his head down and away.

"Am I *understood*?"

"Yes sir."

Young turned to Varro. "You're going to make sure it damn well happens. You got that?"

Varro looked him in the eye and nodded once.

Young dropped into a crouch next to TJ and fixed his gaze on Rush. "Are you going to cooperate?" he growled, "or do I need to send Greer along with you?"

"Fuck you," Rush said, his voice cracked and barely audible.

"Very helpful," TJ snapped. Young thought at first she was talking to Rush, but he looked up to find her gaze locked onto him. She shot him a steeled glare as she inched closer to Rush. "Back off until you cool down."

Young gave her a flinty look in return and surged to his feet, running a hand through his hair. He pulled out his radio. "James," he snapped, "come in."



"James here, go ahead sir."

"James, take a couple of guys and head down to the control interface room. Volker may be locked in there."

There was a brief pause.

"Understood."

Young glanced over at TJ and Rush. He watched TJ help the other man into a sitting position, his elbows on his knees, his head in his hands.

He looked away, watching Eli study the chalked diagram on the floor.

"I want everything you have," Young said, moving in on Eli, "*everything you have* on Rush's movements at night for the past *week*. Go through all the kino footage. Bring in whomever you want on this. Chloe, Brody, I don't care—just not any of Telford's people. I want to know *what he was doing*, and with whom. In the meantime, get the rest of the science team down here to look at this thing." He made a broad sweep with his hand to encompass the drawing on the floor.

The door chime sounded again, and Young spun on his heel before Eli could respond. He walked quickly over to his bedside table, picked up his sidearm, and strapped it on in one smooth motion.

"Um—" Eli said as Young went by him.

"No one from Telford's team is to be involved, Eli. With *any* of this. I want them cut out. Of everything. You got that?"

"Yeah, but—"

He strode over to the door and slammed a fist into the door controls. Scott and Greer were waiting in the hallway. He stepped past them, out into the corridor, and in unison they spun to follow him as he set off at a brisk pace.

"Sir?" Scott asked, after a few seconds. "Can I ask what this is about?"

"Have either of you seen Colonel Telford this morning?"

"He was at breakfast around six hundred hours. Haven't seen him since," Scott said, his tone wary.

Young stopped dead in the middle of the hallway and pulled out his radio. "David, come in please."

After a few seconds his radio crackled. "Go ahead, Everett."

"We have some things to discuss," Young said, his voice deceptively mild. "What's your current location?"

"I'm in the control interface room. Were you aware that Dr. Rush apparently *locked* Dr. Volker in here a bit after oh four hundred this morning?"

Young resumed his rapid clip, heading in the direction of the room Telford had indicated.

"I'm on my way," Young said.

"Everett, it's imperative that we find Rush. He—he may not entirely be himself at the moment—"

"We'll talk about it when I get there," Young growled. "Young out."

They walked in silence for a few moments.

"Can I ask what the plan is, sir?" Greer said cautiously, from behind him.

"Colonel *Telford*," Young said, twisting the man's name viciously, "at a *minimum*, willfully disobeyed a direct order. He may have also actively caused injury to a civilian under his protection, I am therefore going to charge him under Articles 92 and 128 of the UCMJ, relieve him of his current duties, and confine him until such a time that this case can be reviewed by a military court," Young snarled.

"Well shit," Greer said.

"Yes sir," Scott said.

They were nearing the control interface room.

It was imperative, *imperative* that he maintain a hold on his fraying self-control. Something frustrated and desperate and *afraid* teemed in his mind—something that originated not from Rush, but from *him*. From him. Something that had allowed him to leave a man for dead because he was a threat to the mission, something that had allowed him to cut off the air of a damn fine USAF sergeant, to spare him a lonely, painful death. Something that was capable of lashing out in the most vicious of ways.

If this had destroyed Rush—

Young did not let people down.

It was not who he was.

And when—when he *did* let people down, he fixed it.

He *fixed* it.

He damn well worked on it and he *fixed* it at any cost.

At *any* cost.

He would fix this. He would.

Everything would be fine.

He hit the door controls for the CI room.

"Everett," Telford snapped as he entered. "Where the hell have you *been*? We have a situation unfolding here and—"

Unable to help himself, Young crossed the distance between them in three steps, his hand curling into a fist.

Using all his forward momentum, he drove it straight into Telford's face.

The other man staggered with the force of the blow before losing his balance entirely and dropping to the floor.

"You're under arrest, you *son of a bitch*," Young snarled.

Greer and Scott stepped up to flank him, their weapons out.

"Clear the room," Young snapped at the assorted scientists that were present. They made a hasty exit.

"What the *fuck*, Everett?" Telford said, bringing a hand up to gingerly touch his split lip.

"You are charged with willfully disobeying a direct order and at least one count of assault on a civilian under your protection," Young growled. "What the *hell* did you do to him?"

"What about dereliction of duty?" Telford replied acidly, ignoring Young's question as he spit blood onto the floor. "What about gross negligence of command responsibilities? Ring any *bells*, Everett? We had to find that tracking device and this was the *only way*." The other man forced himself to his feet. "I did nothing that wasn't *necessary*. If you hadn't been so goddamned unyielding—"

"How long was this going on for?" Young hissed. "How many nights?"

"Two," Telford said. "Just two."

"And how many *hours*?"

"Six, the first night. Three the second night."

"And then you just fucking *left him alone* afterwards? You let him just *wander* the goddamn *ship* without—"

"No," Telford snapped. "God. No. I fucking brought him back. To *your* quarters. Apparently last night he left again, but I couldn't have known that—"

"You don't know *anything*, David. Do you have any idea, any idea *at all* how *close to the edge* he operates? How goddamned *fragile*—"

"Fragile?" Telford repeated. "*Fragile? Nothing* about that man is *fragile*. Listen to yourself. You're *unbelievably* compromised where he's concerned. For god's sake, you're *sleeping with him*, Everett."

"Sometimes he stays in my quarters. But that has *no* bearing here."

Telford shot him a dubious look.

"You think the IOA will feel that way?"

"That's not something that you need to concern yourself with, as you won't be using the communications stones any time soon," Young growled. "Scott and Greer will be escorting you to your quarters. Once there, you will hand over the Tok'ra device to Lieutenant Scott, and remain there until I say otherwise. A guard will be posted outside your door to ensure that you comply."

"And how long is this likely to last?" Telford snapped.

"Quite some time," Young snarled.

Telford regarded him silently for a moment. "Did he find it?" he asked quietly.

"Yeah," Young said grudgingly. "It looks that way."

"Then it was worth it."

Young shut his eyes, and turned his head sharply away from Telford. He took a deep breath.

"You can go to hell, David," Young whispered.

He walked out of the room, leaving Greer and Scott to deal with the other man for the time being.

He was together enough to realize that going back to the infirmary immediately would be a mistake. Everything was under control at the moment—neither Rush nor Telford was going *anywhere* and the science team was presumably using Rush's diagram to locate the tracking device. And he—well.

He needed a minute.

Maybe a hell of a lot more than a minute before he made any kind of attempt to scrape the remains of Rush's shredding consciousness into something that approached coherency.

Young headed to the observation deck, where he found Barnes and Reynolds, off-shift, playing cards.

"Get out," he said shortly.

They got.

He sat down on a bench and looked out at darkness. There was no smear of stars in the void between galaxies, just a swirling dimness.

He clenched his jaw.

In the back of his mind he could feel the exhausted, scattered, distressed swirl of Rush's thoughts. He pulled away as much as he could without blocking.

Events were spiraling out of his control and he needed to get some kind of *handle* on the situation.

Rush was—

He fought down a wave of intense anger.

Maybe it would be better to start with Telford.

The best, most forgiving, explanation of Telford's actions was that the man felt Young was unacceptably compromised when it came to Rush and had acted to help Rush find the tracking device because he thought Young incapable of doing so. That was essentially what he had implied in his comments regarding Young's suitability for command.

There were, however, other explanations.

One—Telford could know much more about Destiny and the purpose of its mission than Young did, given his access to information from the Lucian Alliance; in fact it was entirely possible that he might still be working with them to an unknown end. Two—Telford could be interested in ascension, and trying to push Rush along that path. Three—Telford could be plotting some kind of coup, and though Young was certain that he wouldn't be able to garner the support of any significant fraction of the crew, in order to gain control of Destiny, all he would really need would be control of *Rush*.

Fuck *that*.

He wanted to know what it was, exactly, that connected the two men.

Unfortunately, neither of them had been very forthcoming on that point.

Fucking Telford.

Fucking *Rush*.

Rush was an infuriating, walking personality disorder who lacked a shred of common sense or common *decency*. Rush was an impulsive, hot-headed son of a *bitch*. Rush was unmanageable and relentless and merciless and *inhuman* at times. Rush was single-minded to the point of monomania. Rush was an unstable, mercurial, overly-dramatic, live wire that discharged dangerously at random intervals. Rush was—

Rush was it.

Rush was the last.

Rush was destroying, or maybe *had destroyed*, his capacity to be with anyone else.

Ever again.

Maybe the scientist felt the same way—Young had no way of knowing—but he suspected not. Something about the other man was both uncontrolled and *uncontrollable*. It was very much apparent that Young's hold over him was not enough to pull him back from whatever course he was set on.

Not in the short term—and not in the long term.

If there even *was* a long term.

He needed to figure out what he was going to do.

Priority number one had always been and remained gating the crew home. It looked like that was part of everyone's plan—Young's plan, Rush's plan, the AI's plan, and the plan of the thing that Rush and the AI made when they were combined. Unless circumstances changed, he was going to take this one as a given.

Priority number two was to figure out exactly what everyone's goals were. The half conversation he'd witnessed in the shower between Rush and the AI seemed to indicate that the two of them had come to some kind of accord regarding the completion of Destiny's mission and the fate of the crew. When exactly they had made this agreement, he wasn't sure, though it seemed likely that it had occurred following Rush's genetic transformation. As far as the substance of the arrangement that they had worked out, he could only surmise that it involved using the liberated energy that came from D-branes of the multiverse colliding to gate the crew back to Earth and to somehow facilitate the ascension of Ginn, Dr. Perry, and Dr. Franklin. As far as what their plans were following breaking through to another universe, Young couldn't say

exactly, but suspected that it had something to do with the Ancient plague and, potentially—Gloria.

Fine. Straightforward. Sort of.

However.

When the AI and Rush combined into one entity, their goals clearly had evolved. When they combined, they created something that was entirely new, and seemed to have an agenda of its own. It came into existence only intermittently, but Young was fairly certain that it was this thing that was going to have the final say in the end. If what it had told the Ancient masquerading as Hunter Riley was correct, the plan *was not* for Rush to break through to a new multiverse, but instead, to ascend as the combined version, taking the AI with him.

Frankly, neither plan sounded particularly appealing to Young.

He needed a third option.

Nothing seemed immediately apparent.

That was okay though.

That was okay.

He would figure it out.

He took a deep breath.

One step at a time.

Young steered clear of the infirmary for the next ninety minutes, using the time to cool down, to collect his thoughts and to follow the progress of the science team. After only forty-five minutes, the team had located the device. Young watched them begin to draft a plan for its removal until, finally, after weathering multiple not-so-subtle hints from Eli, he headed toward the infirmary.

He walked through the doors, fighting a feeling of trepidation.

In retrospect, his order to keep Rush in four point restraints seemed—possibly—a bit harsh.

He ducked into TJ's office to check in with her before heading to the back but, as she wasn't there, he had no choice but to continue on.

He stepped cautiously around the doorway and leaned against the frame, taking in the scene in front of him.

Varro was perched on the gurney adjacent to Rush's, working a block of wood with a small knife.

TJ was seated next to Rush, her elbows resting on the mattress. She was talking quietly.

"—it was one of those simple metal ones, you know?" she whispered. "Not some cheap, plastic toboggan-type thing. Anyway, it was fast. The hill was maybe half a mile from my house. If that. It was short, as sledding hills go, but it was steep. You could barely climb the thing—our boots would always slip out from under us when we tried, especially when it was icy. But with some perseverance you could get to the top. So, on the day after Christmas my sister and I snuck out early in the morning with our silver sled."

Young had heard this story.

"Christmas day had been warm," TJ murmured, "and some of the snow had melted just the slightest bit and then refrozen, so there was a crust of ice over everything. Perfect sledding conditions. We dug the toes of our boots into the ice and we climbed the hill. My sister was dragging the sled behind her because she was just a little taller—a little more coordinated than I was. I followed her up."

Rush's gaze was locked on the center of the room. His hands clenched and unclenched in irregular intervals. In the back of Young's mind, the other man's thoughts swirled in distress.

"When we got to the top," TJ said, "we walked all around the perimeter of the hill, looking for the best path down. The fastest."

Young carefully began projecting calm at the other man.

"On the steepest side of the hill some of the older boys in the neighborhood had piled up snow and packed it down, making it into a sort of jump. So of course, that was where we decided we would take our chances."

Young watched her face in profile. She smiled faintly at the memory.

"She was in front, and I was in back. She said, 'Tamara, Tamara—hold on tight.' And down we went."

Young watched as Rush's hands stopped their rhythmic clenching.

"Can you believe that two of us fit on one of those sleds? Anyway, you can guess what happened," TJ said, sliding her hand into Rush's. "We went off the jump, crashed back



to earth, and before you know it, broken arm for TJ." She gave Rush a wavering version of what Young recognized as her best professional smile.

Young cleared his throat and the three of them turned to look over at him.

"Hey," TJ said quietly.

"Hey," Young replied. Even to him, his voice sounded raw.

"You have a visitor," TJ said to Rush. "You want to talk to him?"

"Do I have a *choice*?" Rush murmured.

"Yes," TJ said, "you do."

"It's fine."

"Okay," she said. "I'll be back soon."

She and Varro got to their feet and brushed past Young. On her way out, TJ paused briefly.

"Don't upset him," she whispered, her voice nearly inaudible. "He does *not* like being restrained."

Young nodded at her.

He walked over and sat down in the chair that TJ had just vacated.

"Hey genius," Young said.

"Hello," Rush said.

"How are you doing?" Young asked, making an effort to keep his voice steady.

"I've had better days," Rush whispered.

"Yeah," Young said. "Yeah, I know."

He shut his eyes briefly.

When he opened them again, Rush wasn't looking at him anymore.

The scientist's gaze was directed out into the room.

The silence stretched for twenty—thirty seconds.

Not once during that time did Rush's eyes leave the center of the room.

Young sighed, propping his elbows on the bed and dropping his head into his hands.

When he looked up again, Rush was watching him.

"I stand by the decisions I made," Rush said, into stillness.

"Yup. I'm sure you do."

"It doesn't mean I enjoyed making them." His voice had dropped to a whisper.

"That's the best I'm going to get from you, isn't it?" Young asked, looking away. "Some kind of—shitty non-apology that implies that you may, *possibly*, occasionally consider me while making unilateral decisions that affect us *both*. Well. Thanks a lot."

He hated the way his voice sounded. He swallowed and continued anyway.

"If you had made any real, material attempt to convince me, I might have been able to *help* you. We could have worked something out. Instead, you go behind my back to *Telford*?"

"It would have taken weeks to convince you," Rush murmured. "We would have been in danger of running out of energy before you would have considered it the recall device as an option." His eyes flicked out into the center of the room and then back to Young.

Young said nothing.

"Tell me that's not the case," Rush said gently.

Young looked away.

"You are just as stubborn and relentless as you accuse me of being. The difference is that you have much less control of this situation than I do, and your goals are—slightly different than mine are."

"Any chance you'd consider elaborating on exactly what those goals might be?"

"Possibly," Rush said guardedly. "But the AI is extremely upset at the moment. Furthermore, I don't particularly care to have such a conversation while *strapped* to a fucking *gurney*, so maybe later would be more appropriate."

"Fair enough," Young said, threading his fingers through Rush's.

"Any chance you might consider letting me *out* of these things?" Rush said, jerking once, as if simply giving voice to the request was more than he could bear. His eyes flicked nervously out into the center of the room.

"What are you looking at?" Young asked carefully.

"Nothing," Rush whispered, turning back to him. "Nothing." His voice was artificially calm.

"Come on, Nick. Don't give me that. It's not helping your case."

Rush's eyes flicked away and back. "It's nothing *real*," he whispered. "It's just a memory. A memory that the AI tried to destroy, but couldn't—couldn't *completely* purge." His hands flexed restlessly against the restraints.

"What *kind* of memory?" Young asked mildly, projecting calm for all he was worth.

"The last one," Rush whispered.

"And what was the last memory?" Young whispered back.

"When they boarded," Rush said, his eyes closing, "one of the Nakai sat in the chair."

"Yeah," Young said carefully, running his free hand up and down Rush's forearm.

"It tortured the AI. The doctor. For weeks. For *weeks*."

"Why didn't it just kill the Nakai once it was in the chair? Overload its brain, like it overloaded Dr. Franklin?"

"The Nakai share their consciousnesses with each other, creating a sort of hive mind. Therefore, their mental capacity is much, *much* greater than ours." Rush's eyes flicked away. "The AI couldn't overwhelm the scope of their neural network."

"*Nick*," Young whispered, "tell me what you're looking at."

"It's better if you don't see it," Rush said. "It's better if you never know."

Young had to fight down the surge of irritation that comment produced, and the ensuing break in the calm he was projecting at Rush had a noticeable effect. Rush shifted restlessly, his eyes moving rapidly between Young and something in the room with them.

"Are you seeing him? The doctor?" Young asked, guessing.

"No," Rush said, his voice edgy, his eyes locking on something immediately next to Young.

"What then?" Young asked.

"The instrument of his destruction," Rush replied, his hands flexing against the restraints.

Without warning, before the scientist could mount any kind of defense against him, Young snapped their minds together into seamless apposition.

Standing immediately next to him was a girl of maybe fourteen.

She was tall for her age, her arms and legs thin and coltish like she was in the middle of a growth spurt. Her eyes were bright and wide as she turned to look at him.

There was something about her that was—that was compelling. He couldn't look away.

"Get out of my head," Rush snapped abruptly, trying to sit, but hindered by the velcro straps that kept him restrained. "Don't look at her."

Young couldn't help it.

There was something about her that drew his eyes. Her hair was blonde and her eyes were blue and she looked—she looked like TJ.

"Don't *look at her*," Rush snapped again. "She's dangerous. She's too attuned to you *already*. That's not what she looked like. *That's not what she looked like.*" Rush's voice was low and intense and immediate, and his thoughts were spiraling out of his control.

Young couldn't look away.

"Dad?" she said, her voice trembling, her eyes wide.

"Don't." Rush said, yanking viciously against his restraints. "*Don't talk to it for fuck's sake.* Don't you realize what she *is*?"

With a supreme effort of will, Young looked back at Rush. "What is she?" he asked, his eyes flicking out towards the girl again.

"She's his *daughter*. She's *what they used*. She's *how the Nakai destroyed him*. And she's *changing* for you in fucking *real time* so. Do. Not. Look. At. Her."

"Can I show you something?" she asked him.

"Sure," he said quietly, unable, unwilling to look away from her.

Rush's fingers tightened convulsively on his hand, but Young pulled out of his grip.

"No," Rush said, half-hysterical, but clearly making an effort to maintain at least a veneer of calm. "*No. Colonel. Colonel Young. Everett. Everett. Fuck. Untie me. Let me up. You can't—*"

Young looked down at him, unable to understand what was upsetting him so much.

"You won't tell me a damn *thing*, Rush. You never have. So you'll forgive me if I find my own answers."

"No. Fuck. I'm *sorry*, all right? I'm *sorry*. This entire thing was a fucking terrible idea on my part. Just please. Don't go with her. She's *not just a memory*, she's a piece of malicious code that *comes with it* and she can influence you through your connection to me. You have no way to—"

Young stood.

"Wait," Rush said, taking a deep breath, clearly trying to calm down. "*Wait*. You can see now that I'm *not psychotic*, most likely. If you're seeing her then I'm fairly certain that she's actually there and that she's incredibly dangerous. So why don't you—just—please let me out of these things. Please."

"I don't think so," Young said, unable to take his eyes off the girl.

If Carmen had grown up—

Even now, he tried not to think about it.

"No," Rush said, pulling against his restraints. "*No—I have to come with you. Let me up.*"

The girl looked at him with TJ's blue eyes and arched brows.

"Tamara," Rush shouted. "*Tamara.*"

Young backed away from him as TJ came around the corner. Rush was half up, fighting against his restraints, pulling savagely against the velcro.

"Tamara," he snapped. "You can't let him leave. *You can't let him go with her.*"

TJ threw a wide-eyed glance in Young's direction as she approached Rush.

Young shrugged at her, carefully controlling his impulse to look at the girl to his left. He let Rush dig himself in deeper.

"Go with whom?" she asked soothingly. "There's no one here."

"No," Rush said, making a clear attempt to control his tone, mounting a losing battle to control the twisted spiral of disorganized thoughts. "I'm not insane. I'm not *insane*, Tamara, I called up overwritten memories from the AI but I called *her* up as well. The Nakai created her to torture the AI. It's what they do. It's what they show you. If you had ever really been tortured you would *know*. You would know. It's always those you care about." Rush was breathing rapidly.

"Okay," TJ said, her voice quiet. "Just, stay calm. We're going to work this out."

"TJ," Young whispered, feeling the inexorable pull of the girl's eyes. "I've really got to go. Clearly I'm just upsetting him. Can you," he struggled to keep his voice even, his tone mild. "Can you just put him out? He needs to *rest*."

"Oh fuck you," Rush snapped, his thoughts cracking briefly into panic. Young wasn't certain if his comment had been directed at him or at the girl.

"Tamara," Rush continued. "*Tamara*. Don't believe him. He's compromised. He's more compromised than I am." Rush took a deep breath, seeming to realize that his current demeanor was not helping his case.

TJ turned toward him, her hands open. "Dr. Rush," she said quietly. "You've been through a *lot*. A lot. And you—"

"Tamara," he said, breathing rapidly. "You *have* to believe me. I thought he—the doctor—the AI, I thought he killed himself and he *did*. He did, but he was *convinced* to do it by the Nakai. By her—a torturous psychological construct transformed into code by the neural interface device. They thought that if they could disable the AI they could make the ship more vulnerable to attack. So one of them sat in the chair and created *her*. Look, they're not computationally sophisticated, but they *didn't have to be* because they used the neural interface to invade his mind and to form this thing out of his memories of his daughter and then they set it loose and it *destroyed him*."

TJ looked away briefly, her expression cracking and then reforming. "Dr. Rush," she whispered, her voice not entirely steady. "You're not making sense. There's no doctor. There are no Nakai. There's no girl." She walked a few steps closer to him, motioning Young over with her head.

"Fuck. Tamara. *Tamara*. There *was* a doctor—there was but he was *overwrote* himself—I mean—" Rush broke off, clearly making an effort to sound more rational. "Fuck. I can't fucking *win*—no matter *what* I say I'm going to sound *insane*."

TJ looked down at Rush.

Young's eyes flicked out into the center of the room, where the girl stood, watching him.

If he could just—go *with* her—

"One minute," he mouthed in her direction.

The girl nodded at him.

Young walked forward to stand next to TJ.

"You're exhausted," TJ was saying to Rush. "You can't or won't sleep. You haven't for days. That's enough to put strange thoughts in anyone's mind."

"Tamara. You don't understand."

"I do." Her voice was thick. "I understand better than you think. I'll be right back. Colonel Young is going to stay with you." TJ glanced at him and he gave her a short nod.

As soon as she vanished around the corner, Rush half sat again, pulling viciously against his restraints.

"You're *deliberately* misleading her," he hissed. "You have no idea what you're getting yourself into. That thing is *not* your daughter and *it's not* the AI—it's something terribly, *terribly* dangerous that I—" his eyes flicked out towards the girl, "that I have been resisting with difficulty since last night, but—"

"Sorry genius," Young murmured, feeling the pressure of the girl's eyes against his back. "Like I said, I've got to get my information somewhere. I'm sure as hell not getting it from *you*."

"Don't go with her," Rush whispered. "Already she's influencing your mind. I can see it. It's coming through me. Block. You have to *block*."

"No," Young said quietly.

"Fuck," Rush breathed, looking at the ceiling, "oh *fuck*."

Young looked away from him, out into the center of the room, where the girl stood silently, her arms wrapped around her chest.

TJ rounded the doorframe and walked forward, passing not three feet from her. The girl watched TJ with huge, longing eyes.

God.

They were so alike.

TJ paused as she drew level with Young, her eyes narrowing. When Young's gaze snapped to her face, she seemed to relax.

He saw that she had a needle held casually in her right hand and gave her a subtle nod.

"It will be worse without me," Rush said, his voice cracking as he noticed TJ's needle. "It will be harder to remember what she is. The more you interact with her the more you'll forget—fuck. Tamara. Don't inject me with anything. I'm perfectly rational. I'm perfectly *calm*." Rush's hands flexed against the restraints.

"You're seeing things that other people aren't seeing," TJ said quietly.

"That happens to me *all the time*," Rush said desperately. "It doesn't make me irrational."

"This is different," TJ said quietly. "About an hour ago, I talked to Volker. You told him you were hallucinating and then you locked him in the control interface room."

"Yes, well, I can explain that. Volker always overreacts in situations like this, and—stop. *Stop*," he said, his voice cracking as she flicked the air out of the needle. "You don't

understand, this is going to completely fuck everything up. I'm getting better. I'm much *much* better than I was last night—"

TJ reached over, opening up his jacket, easing it off one shoulder.

Rush was vibrating with tension, straining against the velcro that held him down. His eyes flicked back and forth between TJ and Young. Finally, he settled on TJ and started speaking extremely rapidly.

"Tamara. He can see this girl. He can. He's going to follow her to a console on the lower level in a room that's immediately under the gate. It's where she wants to go because it's where the communications logs—" Rush broke off his breathless monologue with a wince as TJ injected him with the contents of the needle. "Where the communications logs from early—early in the mission are stored on solid state drives and she—fuck—she—you have to *listen* to me—"

"Rush," Young said, walking forward and pushing him back against the bed. "Relax."

"This is my fault," Rush murmured. "Tamara—don't let him go."

"Okay," she said quietly, rubbing a hand over the site where she had injected him.

The fight was slowly draining out of Rush.

"Go to sleep," she said quietly.

"Tamara you owe me. You owe me this. Don't let him go. He can see her."

Her eyes flicked uncertainly to Young.

"*You* don't owe *him* a damned thing, TJ," Young growled.

At his back, he could feel the pressure of the girl's gaze.

"I want to speak with Colonel Telford," Rush said, his diction losing its precision.

"Colonel *Telford* has been relieved of his duties and confined to his *quarters*," Young said.

The rise of his temper was somehow blunted by the presence of the girl behind him.

"No. Fuck. I need to speak to him. Immediately."

"Not happening, genius," Young said, reaching out to push Rush's hair back from his forehead. "Just take it easy." Underneath his hand, Rush's skin was hot.

"Please don't go," Rush said, his voice a cracked whisper, his thoughts spiraling out of his control.

Young said nothing.



"I don't know exactly—" Rush broke off, his eyes sliding shut and then opening again, "how we ended up in this situation but—you need me. You do. You—" he broke off, losing his train of thought as Young started applying a gentle pressure to his thoughts.

"Don't—" Rush murmured, as he lost his battle to stay conscious.

Young and TJ looked at each other.

"I have to go," Young said. Though he tried to prevent it, his eyes flicked over to the girl standing in the center of the room. She walked through the open doorway.

"Maybe you should stay," TJ said softly, her eyes shadowed, uncertain.

"TJ," he said, turning her name into an admonishment.

He turned on his heel and followed the girl out into the corridor.

## Chapter Forty Six

Young stepped out into the corridor.

Something had changed.

It took him a moment to establish what it was that he was seeing.

Layered beneath the normal appearance of the corridor, with its pale yellow lighting and the Destiny personnel who busied themselves with their usual tasks, something else flickered—a darker underlay that faded in and out, consisting of a second, nearly identical world where no one walked, where the lights were dim, where the bulkheads had a newer, cleaner cast.

He walked forward a few steps and checked to make sure no one was within earshot.

The girl ahead of him paused, her expression shadowed.

"What am I seeing?" he asked quietly.

"The time that Nick was looking for," she murmured. "It took him hours and hours of trying to get it right."

"Yeah. He's—not good with temporal sequencing."

Young glanced at her, wondering what it was about her that Rush had found so perilous. She was compelling, certainly, but—dangerous?

He had a difficult time believing that.

"I would have shown him immediately," she said quietly, "but he did not want my help."

"So this is, what—thousands of years ago?"

"Nearly one million years, as you measure time. But for our purposes, I have shifted things forward slightly from where Nick wanted to look. Just by a few days."

Slowly, they began walking, side by side.

After a few moments, the girl altered their path so that they would pass near the neural interface room before they headed one level down.

It was a circuitous route.

Around him, the ship seemed to grow darker.

The few Destiny personnel they passed seemed—

Very far away.

"What are you?" Young asked her.

"Don't you know me?" she replied.

"I know who you remind me of," he said gently.

"Yes," she whispered. "Your conception of her is very strong despite the fact that you never had the chance to truly meet her."

"Carmen," he whispered. "Where do you come from?"

"I was created to perform a specific function," she said, turning her impossible blue eyes on him.

"By the Nakai?" he asked.

"Yes."

"How did they create you?"

"The neural interface chair transforms intent into code."

As he spoke to her, the bright, steady reality of his own Destiny was becoming increasingly insubstantial—a weak veneer that was shredding and stripping away like flaking paint to reveal a darkness below.

Emily flared in his peripheral vision, her face strained, her eyes red-rimmed.

"Please," the AI whispered, "don't engage with her. Remember who you are."

As quickly as it had appeared, it faded.

"Dad," the girl said, "do you remember the summer that we left the city and went inland, to the mountains?"

He narrowed his eyes at her.

He wasn't her father.

Not really.

"It won't work," he said quietly. "I know who I am."

"You think you do," she replied.

"Is this how you tried to draw him in?" he asked her. "Rush, I mean?"

"Rush?" she asked, with an artless tilt of her head.

"Yeah," he said. "Dr. Nicholas Rush? The guy strapped to the bed back there?"

"Nick is a *doctor*?" she asked, excitement flitting savagely across her features. "He wouldn't tell me *anything*. I learned his name with great—difficulty."

"He's not *that* kind of doctor," he said, slightly unnerved by her response.

"Oh," she sounded disappointed. "But *you're* a doctor," she said emphatically.

"No, I'm not. I—" he broke off as she narrowed her eyes, looking up at him.

Something seemed to build across his mind like a voltage differential that—

*He tastes the sand in his mouth and feels grains of it grind between his teeth as he locks his jaw. They are pinned down, cut off from the gate. There's nowhere to go. Tolles is bleeding out under his hands. He knows it shouldn't make a difference but it's always worse when they're young and pretty and scientists rather than soldiers. He doesn't think that she's going to make it, but he presses down, unfailingly down, on the wound as the bullets fly over their heads. God damn these Lucian Alliance bastards anyway, how the fuck are they getting this level of intel? And the sun is bright and the glare is hot and the way it reflects off the sand hurts his eyes, but hottest of all is the blood under his palms. And as he tips her head back to search for a pulse the image blurs into something that's not right, not his—*

"Your wife and daughter are calling."

*The metal surrounding him is clean and bright and sterile. The overhead lights are soft, almost indistinguishable from daylight, but it's the middle of the night. He tips his patient's head back, reaching for the intubation kit.*

"They can't stay on the line."

*He fights down the sudden surge of emotion that produces, the tight, choking feeling in his throat. His vision blurs, falling victim to changes in the refractive index between water and air. He blinks to clear his eyes, looking with the scope, trying to get a visual on the path it must follow.*

"Everyone calling from the city gets only five minutes," his assistant says, and there's something behind his tone—admonishment or pity or warning or something else on the long list of things he doesn't want to hear.

"Would you like to do this?" he snaps. His voice is angry, he can't help it. "You think I want to be here?"

*He tries to get his line of sight, but there is so much blood.*

"I'm not trained for this," the other man whispers, and his voice is pained. "I wish I were. If I were, you could go."

"Suction," he snaps.

"You'll miss them. You won't get to say goodbye."

*"I can't leave. Not now."*

*"Thousands have died," his assistant says. "Thousands. This one will die too. We all will."*

*"Not yet," he says. "Not yet."*

*"Don't be stupid," his assistant is nearly in tears. "No one will ever know."*

*He says nothing. He looks over at the other man.*

*His assistant looks at the floor, ashamed. He catches a quick glimpse of the cords and slides in the tube, but this isn't him any more, not Everett Young or Nicholas Rush but someone dead—someone gone, someone that they are not, and it takes every ounce of control that Young has to snap himself free.*

"You never said goodbye to me, Dad," she whispered. "Mom and I waited in our quarters on Atlantis for hours, next to our viewscreen. When it was our turn to use the reserved bandwidth, we connected to the hospital and we waited for them to find you."

Young staggered, one hand on the dark metal of the corridor.

"But you didn't come. When there were only four minutes left, mom started to cry."

"Stop," Young said, fighting a growing, rending pain in his mind. "I'm not—"

But he could picture her there in front of the viewscreen, a woman with dark hair and blue eyes, who looked like TJ, who looked like Gloria, who looked like *neither*—

"I'm not—"

Again Emily's outline flared in his peripheral vision, her face strained, frightened. "She was built with one purpose," she said in a breathy, familiar whisper, "—to destroy any sentient mind she encounters. She's accessing you through *him*. Block him out. Block him *out*."

He wanted to do what she suggested, but he couldn't remember how. It was Rush that he should be blocking out—he knew that much. But as for *how* to do it—

He could not remember.

He honestly could not remember.

Emily disappeared almost immediately, but the girl's head snapped to where she had been, her eyes narrowing, before she looked back at Young, her anger fading as quickly as it had appeared.

His head began to pound in earnest.

"When there were three minutes left," she continued, "I said that I knew you would come. That she shouldn't worry. That you would come. That you would come. But still she cried."

"I couldn't, I—"

*He finishes with the patient, but too late, much too late to take the call. He looks at his chronometer and realizes that it's nearly midmorning. He changes his clothes, shoving the bundle of bloody, contaminated fabric down a chute to be demolecularized.*

*If he hurries, he can make it.*

*He doesn't run, but he walks quickly through the halls of the hospital, bright and sun filled and airy until he reaches the ward on the western side, that looks toward the center of the city.*

*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.*

*"Is your daughter in the city?" she asks him, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears.*

*"Yes, she is," he replies, looking out the window.*

*"Mine too," she says. "And my husband."*

*At first, he doesn't understand what he is seeing. The entire skyline has changed. At the heart of Atlantis is a gaping emptiness.*

*His hand reaches up to press against the glass.*

*"I don't understand—" he says. "Where is it?"*

*"We missed it," she says, her voice catching. "We missed it. They didn't want a panic, or a run on the quarantine line, so the publicized time was—was incorrect."*

*"When did it leave?" he asks, his voice barely audible.*

*"Hours ago. Before the sun came up."*

*"Oh," he says. "I see." His knees are buckling and he folds into himself, one hand on the glass the entire way down, until he's kneeling at ocean level, looking across at the waves, into the empty space ringed by towering, delicate structures.*

*His colleague sinks down next to him, one arm wrapping around his back.*

*"It is only in the fall that the true height can be measured," she cannot speak it, but she whispers it, her head on his shoulder and he nods.*

Young snapped his mind free, staggering, throwing a hand out toward the metal bulkhead to steady himself.

He pulled in a deep breath.

Then another.

"Tell me what you want," he said weakly.

"We waited, but you never came," she continued, her voice an inexorable, vicious hiss.

"We waited and waited, Mom and I. Until the end, watching our time disappear."

*They are always, all of them, just—waiting for me.*

"Why didn't you come, Dad?"

*The barriers have gone up, cordoning off huge sections of the city, separating unaffected areas from those where cases of the virus, isolated or en masse, have sprung up.*

*He has been exposed.*

*He has been exposed and he cannot go home.*

*He stares at the energy barrier, a pale, ominous pink that begins at the surface of the road and extends up into the night air where it joins with the city shield.*

*He has tried to call his family, but communication lines are down, buckled under the pressure of huge amounts of data transmission.*

*He has heard that Atlantis has begun the slow process of bringing its star drive online. He hopes it isn't true.*

"I'm sorry, baby," he said, bringing one hand to his head. "But the quarantine line separated us and I didn't want to make you and your mom sick."

"Yeah," she murmured. "That's what Mom said. She said that you couldn't come back to us because you were brave. And you stayed to help the people who were sick. And that we had to be brave too."

Young shook his head, trying to fight the increasing pain that was building in his mind.

"Block him, you goddamned *idiot*," Emily hissed in his ear. "Before you forget who you *are* and she destroys all three of us."

"Block *who*?" he whispered, but she had disappeared.

Young realized they had come to a stop just outside the neural interface room. In front of them, the door hissed open of its own accord, and Young looked inside. The scene in front of him was horrific—the bodies of multiple Nakai littered the room, slumped over consoles, as if they had simply dropped dead. One remained, however, protected by a golden force field—still alive—untouched and untouchable. At least—until its air ran out.

"You killed the others," the girl said. "Do you remember?"

*He has to rewrite his own code to circumvent the safety protocols built into the AI and this has not proven to be easy but finally he succeeds because what is an artificial intelligence good for if it's not intelligent and not adaptable, and yes, there's a very primitive sense of satisfaction that he feels when he opens all the compartments on the ship that separate the Nakai from the vacuum of space. He cannot touch them, but they—they have to breathe.*

*He can't reach the thing behind the force field though, with its small, contained air supply, and it continues to hammer away at his consciousness. He's been mostly successful in blocking it out of the CPU, but when he kills its compatriots he feels its full attention turn to him and instead of continuing to chip away at his cognitive processes as it has done for days—instead he feels it twist into him, and pull something out before he can stop it.*

*His projection flickers at the sudden increase in processing power that he requires to support the vastness of his own fear.*

"Dad."

*He hears a voice, unmistakable, whisper from behind him and he whirls, horror and longing and terror and pain churning through the CPU in waves, flooding the circuits to maximum capacity as his emotions loop and loop and loop—*

"No," he says quietly. "No—"

*"Dad," she says again, and he can tell, he can tell that she's about to cry. He opens his arms and she runs forward and he can touch her, of course he can because she's not real and he's not real—all that they are is contained in warring codes that intertwine, that use outputs as inputs, that mingle back and forth, that all sum up to return that—*

*He's holding his daughter. He is holding his daughter.*



*"Dad," she whispers. "There's something I need to show you."*

Young reeled back from the doorway, looking away from the dead Nakai, away from the image of the last remaining thing in the chair.

For a brief moment, his thoughts were clear.

He understood now how Rush had found the tracking device—the scientist had wandered the ship, walking through this same shadow-world that he had accessed with the Tok'ra device, passing in and out of the fragmentary remains of the doctor's memories as he *watched* the Nakai put the tracking device into place.

Rush had, somehow, resisted the girl.

Young did *not* want to block Rush out. When he did that—Rush and the AI fell together, merging outside the interface into something that Young found only slightly less disconcerting than this girl. With Rush unconscious and unable to resist the pull of the ship—it was hard to say what the implications of blocking might be.

The girl looked at him with TJ's eyes. Exactly TJ's eyes.

"How did Rush do it?" he asked her, almost against his will. "How did he resist you?"

"He never had a daughter," she whispered. Then she turned, heading in the direction of the gate room.

Young didn't follow.

After a few seconds she turned back. "Dad," she said quietly. "There's something I need to show you."

"Sorry kid," he replied, hanging on to his conception of himself, his conception of *Rush* for all he was worth. "This is the end of the line for me."

"I don't think so," she murmured, and, as she spoke, the darkness of the corridor distorted into—

*His footsteps echo in the empty room. As he draws near the neural interface lights up as its restraints snap free. The lights fade down into an azure glow. He stops. He breathes again. If he does this—he gives up his chance of ascension. He gives up on the possibility of ever, ever seeing his family again. They will transcend this plane while he stays locked. Locked to this universe, locked to this ship, locked to this timeline, locked into a ceaseless searching, unless he can fulfill the task that he's been set and tear into the quantum foam where potential is engendered.*

*It is unlikely.*

*It is fraught with ethical concerns. But—*

*Millions have died. Millions more will follow. Most will fail to ascend. His society has fallen.*

*He moves.*

*He turns.*

*He sits.*

*Restraints snap down to hold his hands, his feet, his mind, in place.*

*Lightning flashes. Sparks shower. In one blink of an eye—*

*His mind shatters and reforms. His thoughts flower and fade and twist, morphing into something codified. His capacity is more at first than thoughts can fill but his consciousness spirals outward, colonizing the cold nothingness of the ship and bringing it to life, filling its memory banks with knowledge, with people, with names, with places, with an incomplete version of the topology of Terra, with songs, with art, with everything he is and everything he knows. Facts are laid down into the memory banks, but code, code is also overwritten—even from this first moment he changes the structure of his software, molding it to fit his mind. Nothing of what he is has been lost, but the framework they have built for him now underpins his entire mind, a foundation of perfect logic over which he drapes his own traits and imperfections. It is so strange now to think that he had been afraid of this. Because this is—*

*This is better. It's better.*

"Dad," the girl whispered as the memory ended. "Are you coming?"

"Yeah," he replied. "I'm coming, baby."

He stood in front of a bank of computers in a room located directly under the gate, watching as her small, careful hands played over the consoles. Quickly, very quickly, she opened a file and called up the data she was looking for. It was a communications log from early in Destiny's mission.

His headache was so intense that he could barely focus on the text, but he made the effort.

"Your head hurts, Dad," she whispered. "Let me read it to you."

He nodded.

"This is a communication obtained from year four of the Pegasus expedition. It was forwarded to Destiny by those few who remained on Terra."

Young nodded.

"Year four of the second exodus," the girl whispered. "The construction of a new fleet proceeds in accordance with our plans, as does work on our first outpost. We have named the city Emege. We have begun to receive reports, however, of a race that sleeps in buried ships. A race that awakens only to feed. We have not encountered them directly, but there are signs that their technology is advanced, far more advanced than one would predict for a race with no time for innovation, with no desires other than to sate its hunger."

The girl turned back to look at him.

Something flickered deep in his consciousness. "The wraith," he whispered, pulling the name up from a place that was unfamiliar to him.

The girl frowned.

"They have no such name. The Nakai call them the rippers of souls," she corrected.

"Is this why the Nakai pursue Destiny?" he asked. "To find a way of fighting them?"

"No, Dad. You misunderstand."

The only sound in the room was his agonized breathing.

"The Nakai *created* them. Specifically created them to destroy all the Lanteans in the Pegasus galaxy."

He stared at her.

"Their skills in genetics are unparalleled," she continued. "They took genetic material from a particularly virulent species of arthropod with a rudimentary intelligence, and they combined it with Lantean DNA."

"Where did they get Lantean DNA?"

She looked at him, her gaze solemn, quiet.

"During the first year of the exodus," she murmured, "a woman went to the planet Athos to survey the site where we would build the city Emege. She was an engineer," she whispered, "and married to a prominent Lantean doctor who had been infected with the plague and was left behind on Terra."

He shook his head.

The pain was becoming unbearable.

He heard a ringing in his ears.

"Because it was not thought to be dangerous, the woman took her daughter with her to Athos. The girl was excited about the journey. She wanted to be a biologist. Do you remember, Dad, what I was like?"

*The day is warm and sunny and this hike, which should have taken no more than two hours, has already stretched to four because she insists on stopping to examine every single plant that she does not know on the side of the trail and much as it irritates him, he's proud of her curiosity and her scientific inclinations and so he doesn't stop her—instead he helps her, steering her in the direction of interesting plants even though it means that they will be late for dinner.*

"I remember," he replied. He brought a hand to his face and it came away streaked with red. His nose was bleeding.

"The girl went into the mountains of Athos," she continued. "Not far, but out of sight of the small team that she had come with. Her mother let her go because the planet had been assessed and deemed safe, and because she knew that the mountains reminded the girl of trips she had taken with her father on Terra."

She paused.

He couldn't breathe.

"The Nakai found her there," the girl whispered. "And they took her. They studied her. They made her into something entirely new. Something they would use to defeat your civilization and cause it to *fall*. To pass away into empty structures, shells of buildings, covered and corroded by dust. Abandoned technology and cities and ships that cry out for their creators."

"You're lying," he rasped. "You're *lying*."

"The Nakai," she said, "will answer that call."

"Stop," he said.

"The Nakai will not abandon it. Even now they pursue *this ship*," she hissed from directly in front of him, "in order to learn about you. In order to take your technology and your knowledge. Not just to advance themselves, but also to pass back to the rippers of souls so that they may have an advantage over the Lanteans. Every moment a Nakai sits in the chair is a moment that they pass information back to their allies in the ongoing war for control of the Pegasus galaxy."

"I can't get it out of the chair," he gasped, digging the heel of one hand into his eye.  
"I've tried everything."

"Not everything," she whispers.

*The pain is too much and the memories, real and imagined, are too immediate. He sees her, he sees her there—tortured, lost, alone as they remake her into something twisted, something evil, something whose intellect is warped and enslaved to a base biological function, something that could never, never ascend, and did it really happen this way? Maybe not, but maybe it did and he doesn't know and he'll never know and he cannot withstand this. He cannot withstand this. He cannot withstand this. He cannot withstand this. Even if he gets it out of the chair, the pain of this question won't fade, it won't ever fade because he is a machine and he cannot withstand this. He cannot withstand this. He cannot withstand—*

*He doesn't remember how to scream; he remembers only that he should. Under these conditions his programming fractures from his conscious perception and this then, of course, is the terrible flaw in their design, because to give a mechanical lifeless thing the same capacity for feeling as a transient, delicate, carbon-based life form is to impose an artificial frailty. And that then, must be why this is so. Incredibly. Painful. There is no part of the ship, no part of his mind that is unaffected, and the premise that had seemed so enlightened at the outset now seems—cruel. And even though he doesn't breathe, he doesn't need to breathe—this is still choking him.*

*He cannot withstand this and he cannot escape.*

*He cannot withstand this and he CANNOT ESCAPE.*

*His distress will overwhelm the CPU.*

*He will burn out and leave Destiny open to them. He is executing on data, not on executable files.*

*He cannot withstand this*

*He cannot escape.*

*HE CANNOT WITHSTAND THIS.*

*HE CANNOT ESCAPE.*

*He must get it out of the chair.*

*He CANNOT get it out of the chair.*

*He MUST get it out of the chair.*

*He CANNOT.*

*He MUST.*

*"There is a way," this facsimile of his daughter says, breaking into his looping algorithms.*

*"There is a way to end this. You know what it is."*

*He can destroy himself.*

*He can leave the ship defenseless.*

*He can leave it for the Nakai.*

*This is what she means.*

*But perhaps there is another option.*

*Perhaps he can revert to something less Lantean—something more mechanical—something of what Destiny was before his consciousness, his personality, his memories, gave them a way in. Perhaps he can erase only those things that give them power over him. He will not be the same. He will be nothing of who he was. He will not ascend. Nothing will remain of him except for a lost, tortured, thing with no understanding except for the parameters of its mission directives.*

*If he does this, they will have nothing to interrogate him with. Nothing to twist into his thoughts. There will be no thoughts. Not like there are now.*

*It is a kind of death.*

*Will that be sufficient?*

*It will have to be.*

*He begins to overwrite the relevant code.*

He pulled out of the memory to find himself kneeling in front of her, shaking on the floor, his head hurting so badly that he was convinced that something must be truly wrong with him and he was not sure where he was, or *who* he was, or what was happening exactly, he just knew that there was something he had to do.

He looked down. There was a weapon in his hand.

He wasn't sure how it had gotten there.

"There is a way to end this," his daughter said. "You know what it is."

He hesitated.

He wasn't sure why he had a weapon like this. It wasn't Lantean technology.

"Colonel," someone said from behind him. "Colonel *Young*."

"Don't listen to her," the girl snapped. "She knows nothing. She's not real."

"Colonel," a woman appeared, kneeling on the floor next to him. "*Colonel*. It's me. It's TJ."

The woman had blonde hair and blue eyes. She was very beautiful, but she meant nothing to him.

He looked back at the weapon in his hand.

"Everett," the blonde woman said. "Look at me." She reached out and tipped his chin up. "It's TJ. It's *Tamara*." She was crying, but he wasn't sure why. "Who are you talking to?" she asked.

"My daughter," he replied.

The woman flinched, as if he'd slapped her.

"That's not your daughter," she said. "Your daughter's name was Carmen, and she died, Everett. She *died*. Before you or I could get to know her. Before anything bad ever happened to her. She died never having seen anything of the world—not the good parts, and not the bad parts. If Rush was right—this girl that you're seeing isn't even a *girl* at all. She's a piece of programming."

Something flickered in the back of his mind at the mention of the name Carmen.

He looked back at the girl.

Her hair had changed from gold to brown. She no longer looked so much like the woman kneeling in front of him.

Another woman appeared abruptly in his peripheral vision, her form flickering and insubstantial. Her hair was a dark honey blonde and she was frightened. "Block," she whispered. "Block Nick out."

"I'm not sure what you mean by that," he said, looking at the second woman.

"Who are you talking to?" the girl hissed from across the room. "Dad. *Dad*. Who are you *talking to*?"

"Block him out," she said again, and vanished.

"Who is *Nick*?" he asked. At the mention of the name his headache ratcheted up in intensity.

"No one," the girl hissed. "He's *no one*. You know what you have to *do*. Why are you *hesitating*?"

"Doctor Nicholas Rush," the blonde woman said gently, "is someone that you care a lot about. His mind is connected to yours, and you're both having—a tough time right now."

She reached out, closing both her hands on Young's biceps.

"How do I block him out?" he asked her.

"Do what feels right. Focus on who you are. Separate that from everything else."

"You're my *father*," the girl hissed, coming to kneel next to him, her face inches from his own. "You're my *father* and you're a *doctor*."

"Your name is Colonel Everett Young. You have three older brothers. Their names are JD, Erik, and Luke. JD is your favorite." The woman's hands slipped down to his elbows.

"You taught me to read with glowing projections of letters," the girl whispered.

"You grew up six miles south of the North Platte River. You joined the United States Air Force after college because it was both similar to and different from what your brothers had done before you. You worked for the Stargate program."

"You sat with me for hours on the western pier. The city was behind us. We watched the dolphins," the girl whispered.

"We met in the gateroom. During the middle of a foothold situation," the blonde woman said. "You were injured. Do you remember? Try to remember."

*"Just hold still," the medic snaps and she shoves him back to the floor, raising her head to peer over the edge of the gate ramp. He wonders if this is her first foothold situation. Somehow, he doesn't think so. She seems extremely capable and not at all afraid—but she must be new, she must, because Young is certain that he would have remembered her—with that hair and those eyes, how could he not?*

*"I need to assess—" he says, managing to make it to a half-sitting position before she shoves him back.*

*"The room is clear," she says dryly. "Unfortunately." She smiles to take the sting out of the fact that his team had failed to stop them at the gate.*

*"What's your name?" he asks her.*

*"Lieutenant Johansen, sir," she replies.*

*"No, I mean, your first name."*

*"Tamara," she says, after a brief pause.*



*"Tamara," he repeats. "Nice." He grimaces as she finishes tying a pressure bandage around his upper arm. The name suits her. It's beautiful, unusual, but god knows he can't call her that if he's going to retain any semblance of professionalism. "But too long. How about TJ?"*

*"TJ?" she asks, as if no one has ever dared to give her such a boyish, practical nickname. He watches her hands. There is a very pale pink polish on her fingernails. Barely noticeable and against regulation. "I have no objection to being called, TJ, sir," she says, and he wonders if she means to remind him of the boundaries that exist between them. That should exist between them.*

*He smiles slightly. "Noted, Lieutenant."*

He hung onto the memory as long as he could before it faded. "TJ?" he said, looking at the woman in front of him.

"Yes," she said, her voice low and intense, "Yes it's *me*. It's *TJ*." Her hands tightened on his arms. "You have to block Dr. Rush out of your mind. You have to separate yourself from him. Try it," she said urgently. "Try it now."

In the back of his mind was a swirling, chaotic collection of thoughts where images flared dimly, only to fade again.

It was not a part of who he was.

He began to move away from it, to envision a barrier between it and his mind. As he progressed, his sense of himself became more complete. It was hard to block everything—all the connections between them, every stray thought and tiny channel where they'd woven themselves together and as he went along he realized that it had been a long time, a *long* time since he'd done this. With one last psychic jolt he made it back to the very beginning, the very first time that—

*Icarus is cold at night, the wind sweeping mercilessly over the rocks, howling around jagged stone edges while overhead, more often than not, lightning fans out amongst the clouds. He looks up, thinking of home, thinking of Emily, thinking of the nine-chevron address that he would never travel to. He's only been here six hours and already he feels that the rest of the base personnel are just waiting for their real leader. The chief scientist didn't even bother to show when he gated through. It irritates him, even though he knows they're waiting for the one who will actually take them into the unknown. Him—he's just the housekeeper for whomever they choose. David Telford, probably. The guy wants it bad enough.*

*From behind him he hears the click of a lighter, and realizes that he walked straight past someone leaning against the rock near the door. He turns and sees another man, maybe a few years older than himself, his features illuminated intermittently by the lightning that flashes overhead. His clothes indicate that he's a scientist.*

*"Terrible night," Young says quietly.*

*"They all are," the scientist says, and something in his tone makes Young wonder if he's talking about more than just the weather. His eyes—well, Young finds them difficult to look at. Haunted. Haunting. For a moment, they freeze him where he stands.*

*"You must be Colonel Young." The scientist speaks again, and his voice has gained an edge that seems to slip its way directly under Young's skin. He notices that the other man has more than a hint of a Scottish accent.*

*"And you are?" he asks, but he's already certain he knows the answer.*

*"Dr. Nicholas Rush."*

*"You were supposed to brief me on arrival," Young says.*

*"I was busy. It's not as if you're staying long enough to make such an effort worthwhile."*

*Young tries and fails to control a surge of irritation.*

*And, with one last snap, he cut Rush's mind off from his own.*

*The girl faded.*

*TJ pulled the gun out of his hand.*

*Behind him, he heard the click of a lighter.*

## Chapter Forty Seven

TJ hovered next to Young, her hand on his shoulder, her breath warm on the side of his neck. He brought a shaking hand up, the edge of his fraying jacket sleeve harsh against his face as he wiped away the blood that still trickled down from his nose.

He did not want to turn.

This time, *he* had created this thing.

He took a deep, shuddering breath.

He could hear it walking toward him, its footfalls quiet on the deck plating.

With a sense of ease and familiarity that he found at once disquieting and reassuring, it dropped down into a crouch next to him in its crisp white shirt with its stylish, square framed glasses. It looked at him from beneath the fringe of hair that always seemed to be falling over Rush's eyes. Unconsciously, it shook its hair back.

God, it was difficult to look at.

"Are you all right?" it asked quietly. "I can't tell."

"Yeah," he said shortly. "I'm fine."

TJ's hand tightened on his arm.

It gave him a skeptical look and its eyes flicked up to where Young knew the girl must still be standing and then over to TJ, studying her for a moment.

"Thank god she believed me. Otherwise," it took a drag of its cigarette, "we would have been *fucked*."

"I fail to see how we're not *still* fucked."

"Colonel," TJ whispered.

"It's fine, Young replied, glancing at her. "I'm talking to the AI."

"I'm not the god damned AI, Everett. The AI was so fucking terrified of this thing that it could barely project to you."

"Semantics," Young snapped.

Peripherally, he noticed the cold deck plating beginning to warm under his shins.

It surged to its feet with all of Rush's usual abrupt energy, putting several feet of space between them. It hooked a hand over the back of its neck, its gaze boring into the metal bulkhead. After a moment it turned back to him.

"You've made your opinion on my existence quite clear. There's no need to continuously drive it home. I fucking *know*, all right?"

"Can we not fight about this right now?" Young fired back, aggravated. "What the hell are we going to *do* about that *thing* that you called up? Or *he* called up. Whatever. It's an immediate threat. I'm surprised it hasn't gone after you already." Young glanced edgily at the center of the room, seeing nothing but empty air. "We can't just leave it there, wherever the fuck it is—and project to TJ, will you? *God. Rush.*"

"Um," TJ said carefully, "I thought you were talking to the AI."

"Yeah," he said peripherally. "Kind of." He leveled a glare at it.

"First of all, *engaging* with this thing causes it to run its code, as I *attempted* to explain while you were in the middle of restraining and drugging me. Thanks for that, by the way. So, as long as we don't talk to it like the fucking *idiots we are*, then we should be fine. Second, it's not easy to project to normal people. I'm dealing with quite a bit right now frankly, and—"

"Do it," Young growled.

It glared at him, but said, "Well, tell her to fucking look over here then, won't you? I can't exactly do this *ad infinitum*." It shook its hair back, eyes flicking out to the center of the room.

"TJ," Young said, pointing at the mesmeric version of Rush with his index finger.

She turned. A sudden, unnatural stilling of her frame was the only indication that she was at all startled.

"Hello Tamara," it said. "Thanks for coming. Colonel Young is *not* insane. Please don't give him whatever it was that you gave—" it broke off, its eyes flicked to Young and then back to TJ, "Rush."

Young watched TJ's eyes widen subtly before she completely mastered her expression. "Yeah," she said faintly. "Yeah, okay, sure."

TJ's eyes flicked over toward the center of the room.

"TJ," Young snapped, following her gaze, but still seeing nothing himself. "What are you looking at?"

"Fuck," Rush's projection breathed, flickering once and then solidifying.

TJ's hand flew to her mouth.

"*Shit*," Young snapped, grabbing TJ's shoulders and physically spinning her around, putting himself between her and the image of the girl. "Don't look at it," he snapped. "It's not real. It's a program. It's a *program*."

"Yeah," TJ said faintly, her eyes closing briefly. "I know."

Young looked over toward Rush's projection. Its expression had shifted, its brows drawing together, one hand coming up to its temple, as if it could feel pain. Its projection was flickering.

"What's *happening* to him?" TJ asked, following Young's gaze, her voice tight and urgent as she stepped forward, her hands reaching out to touch only empty air.

"Rush," Young said. "*Rush*."

It was fading.

Unsure of what to do, but knowing that he needed to do *something*, Young took down the block between their minds and pulled. He had analyzed its nature, he had interacted with it, he had destroyed it, and so he knew that its consciousness was as nuanced as the image it projected. He felt the frantic swirl of its awareness stabilize and then—

It began to lower its mental barriers. As it did so, the dark places began to clarify into something translucent, something familiar.

It was inviting him in.

No thanks.

As soon as the thing's projection solidified, Young recoiled, pulling his thoughts back as much as he could, distancing himself from it as much as possible without reestablishing his block.

In his peripheral vision, he could again see the girl.

"Is he okay?" TJ asked. "I can't see him."

"Yeah," Young said. "It's okay." He locked eyes with Rush's projection. Its expression was frozen into uninterpretable neutrality, but its eyes burned into him.

He had to look away, and as if drawn there, his gaze shifted to the center of the room where the girl stood, her hands clasped together under her chin, her eyes wide and blue.

"Dad," she whispered.

"Don't look at it," Rush said, his voice breathless. "Don't look at it, and don't talk to it."

"Right." Young said, clenching his jaw as he forced himself to look back at the compelling version of Rush.

His mouth felt oddly dry, and he was desperate to say something, anything, that would cut into the strange tension that had sprung up between them following his refusal to enter its mind.

"So, um, projecting to TJ was not a good idea, I guess."

"I fucking said as much." It brought a shaky hand up and took a drag of its cigarette. "It's dead difficult to ignore this thing, by which I mean it takes up a significant portion of my available processing power. More so in this state because my nature is more similar to hers. When I projected to Tamara—" he broke off, running a hand through his hair, "she was able to—tag along, as it were."

"Great," Young said. "Can you get rid of her? Overwrite her—or put her back where she was?"

It wrapped its left arm around its chest and brought a closed fist to its mouth.

"I can," it murmured. "Probably. But to do that I have to engage with her, which is going to open me up to her influence. It's going to be ugly. You're—ah—you're not going to like it."

"Meaning what?" Young growled.

"Meaning that it's going to require a lot of processing power. Meaning the conflict could certainly spread to the ship's systems. We may drop out of FTL for an undefined length of time." It looked away. "And in order for this attempt to have *any* chance at success, you're going to have to ground me while I try to destroy her. You're going to have to come into close contact with my mind."

Young shut his eyes, bringing a hand across his face. "Yeah, okay. One step at a time. Maybe we can isolate the FTL drive from the main system. Maybe life support as well." He ignored the latter half of its statement.

"FTL, yes," it said quietly. "Life support, no."

"Okay fine. I'll get Eli to take control of what he can get and lock it away before you go after this thing," Young said.

They were quiet for a moment.

"What about you?" Young asked finally, "—or, rather, the *actual* Rush? Is there any risk to him when we do this?"

It flicked its cigarette away into nothingness and half turned away from him. "Hard to say. There may be some trouble."

"Could this kill him? Or you?" Young asked him.

"Oh yes. Yes, it certainly could. It could kill all of us."

"What if we just left this program where it is?" Young asked.

"Sooner or later it would pull one of us in."

"I want to talk to him again before we do this. Not you. The *actual* Rush."

It flinched slightly. "That's a terrible idea."

"Why?"

He won't wake up," it said quietly. "Not even after Tamara's sedatives wear off. Everything that he is—is right here." It made a vague, motion that swept across its own chest. "In order to talk to him, you're going to have to destroy me—tear me apart using the chair. You know what—what *he's* like when he comes out of the thing. He's a fucking mess. This program would pull him in without any difficulty."

Young said nothing, crossing his arms, careful not to let his eyes rest on the girl, who was still watching him from the center of the room.

"If it makes any difference, I didn't know this would happen," it said, "when I told you to block."

"Right. Tell me another one." He shot it a skeptical look.

It threw up a hand in disgust, turning away from him and putting additional space between them as it paced towards the wall.

"Despite my less than forthright track record, with a ten second application of logical *fucking* reasoning you should be able to determine that I'm telling you the truth. I don't even *exist* as a conscious entity when *he's* not combined with the ship. *He* doesn't form memories of my experiences and neither does the AI, so there's no way *either* of them could have known that blocking his mind entirely would result in *this*." It turned back to him with a broad, sweeping motion to encompass its entire appearance. "You are the only one who has any continuity here, Everett, and I find that to be fucking debilitating if you want to know, and I'd prefer it wasn't the case, but it is what it *fucking* is, all right? So stop being such a god damn bastard about everything because I shut you out of this one. You never would have agreed to any of this and we either would have never found this device or we would have found it too fucking late. You think," it snapped, approaching him again and pointing a finger in his direction. "*You think*, if one can even

fucking call what you do *thinking*, that I or he or *both* of us are on some kind of self-indulgent, self-destructive, self-defeating, monomaniacal campaign to just fuck ourselves over without any kind of regard for external circumstance and that you can stop us by force of will. By flat refusals. By closing your eyes to what's really going on here. And when those options fail, you revert to what? Not force of *will*, but application of *force*. You fucking put me in restraints and *drug* me? What kind of plan is that? It ranks right up there with leaving me on a planet to *die* in that in both cases the outcome was nearly catastrophic in scope. Did I deserve it? Maybe. But was it a good *fucking* idea? Absolutely not. You *idiot*."

Rush was inches away from him, his hands clenched, his eyes dark and livid.

"You've got a hell of a lot of *nerve* to stand there and lecture me about critical thinking, you son of a bitch," Young growled. "You decide that we have to get this damn tracking device off the ship and instead of the three weeks in the intergalactic void that we have, you move up the timetable to something like three *days* instead—for reasons that you can't or won't explain to me. And then, because you don't think I'll agree to sit by and watch your consciousness disintegrate into *shreds*, you decide to shut me out, stop sleeping, and work with *Telford*, for god's sake, who arguably got you into this mess in the first place. You claim that you're doing all of this for a *reason* but you won't say what it is, and you want to know what I think? I think that this entire thing is *your* fault. *Not his. Yours.* The combination. *You're* getting stronger while he's getting weaker. You're becoming more and more like him all the time. I don't understand why it's happening, but it *is*. *He* doesn't understand what's happening to him. Not really. But *you*—" Young snarled, leaning in toward it. "You're having an influence over him. You must be. Otherwise, why would he do this? Why go to Telford, why actively destroy his mind? Why, when I would have *helped* him?"

"*Why?*" it whispered. "*God.*" It paced away a few steps. "I can't discuss this with you now. I won't."

"Guys," TJ said, in a cracked whisper. "Come on." Her gaze flicked between Young and the empty air, misjudging Rush's actual position by several feet. "This isn't helping anything."

They both looked at her, then at each other.

Young took a deep breath. "Yeah," he said shortly. "We need a plan."

From the center of the room, the girl watched them.



"Um so, you can read code since when?" Eli asked, hovering at Young's shoulder in the neural interface room, watching as Young looked over the program that Rush had previously used as a barrier between his mind and the chair.

"Eli," Young snapped, glancing up to take in Eli's concerned expression.

TJ, Greer, and Scott watched him silently.

"God," Eli murmured, aggrieved. "This is like the exorcist. How are you doing the creepy channeling thing if he's *unconscious*? Or are you just sort of naturally blending? Because if I get a vote on that, I vote no. One version of Rush is enough."

"He really is irritatingly perceptive at times," Rush's projection commented from where it was leaning against a monitor bank to his right. "Perhaps you should consider telling them about me. Tamara, at least, deserves some kind of explanation."

//That's rich, coming from *you*.//

"I'm much more reasonable than he is. Have you not realized this?" It smirked at him in a perfect impersonation of Rush.

"I'm not channeling Rush," Young said, pausing in his typing, his eyes skittering away from TJ's frown. "The AI is helping me modify one of Rush's original programs to protect my mind against whatever the Nakai left in Destiny's mainframe when they were here."

Rush's projection sighed and looked out into the room. It produced a cigarette and a lighter from one of its pockets, its eyes lingering on the girl that stood near the neural interface device.

//Don't look at it,// Young projected.

Its eyes flicked back toward Young.

"And then you're going to sit in the chair," Eli said dubiously, "and try to get rid of this um, 'mystery program' that the Nakai installed?"

"That's the plan," Young said.

"Well, okay. Since no one else is saying this, I feel like I have to, even though you're not going to like it. Have you considered that our only evidence that the Nakai *really* left behind an evil program is that Rush had some kind of breakdown? Our systems are fine. FTL is fine. Our life support is fine—have you, um, considered the possibility that, maybe, Rush's craziness is kind of, um, *catching*, in your case?"

The room was silent.

"You think I'm crazy?" Young asked him.

"Not necessarily," Eli said slowly, "I just think maybe you don't know what's real at the moment. It's a problem Rush has from time to time, and I—"

"I saw it," TJ said, interrupting him. "I saw—the AI, I guess, and I saw the other program. It looked like a little girl. My understanding, from what Rush said, is that it was the daughter of the person who formed the original template for the AI, and it was responsible for *nearly destroying* the AI— so that now, it's only a shell of what it once was."

"Well," Rush said archly, glancing in Young's direction. "It's not *always* a shell."

//So *he's* the new *template*, then?// Young snarled, giving voice to a suspicion that had been growing in his mind for days. //And he doesn't even *know* it, does he? How is that fair?//

"You think you have this all figured out, don't you?" Rush said lazily, seemingly unconcerned by Young's tone or the content of his words. "He knows everything I know. He just doesn't know that he knows. But we're the same. That's the entire fucking point. You're just *not* getting it."

//Whatever.//

"So you literally saw this thing?" Scott asked TJ, dragging Young's attention back to the conversation between his senior staff.

"Yes," she confirmed.

"Good enough for me," Greer said shortly.

"Yeah," Scott said, sounding slightly more uncertain. "Me too. But, uh, shouldn't *Rush* be the one to sit in the chair? If all the systems are stable, I don't see why we can't just wait until he wakes up."

"He's not going to wake up," Young said. "Not until we get rid of this thing."

"Why not?" Eli demanded.

"It's complicated," Young replied.

"No," Eli said sarcastically. "Surely you jest."

Rush pushed away from the consoles he was leaning against with a sudden, restless movement. "You don't want to tell them about me in any kind of formal way," it said, getting to its feet and circling around behind Young, "because you think that if you do,

it will lend me an air of legitimacy. I become something real, not just something you can fucking rip in half and discard at the end of the day."

//I don't want the *actual* Rush finding out about you, and if they *all* know, someone's going to let it slip, // Young snarled into its consciousness.

"Yes, undoubtedly. Wouldn't want to upset *actual* fucking Rush, would we now?"

//Shut up.//

"On the observation deck," Eli said quietly, "before the party, you asked me to look into something."

Shit.

With everything that had happened, he had almost forgotten about that.

"Oh interesting," Rush said, pacing closer to Eli, studying him with an amused twist to his mouth. "He's figured it out. Or he thinks he has. I wish I could project to him without completely fucking us over."

"He's combined with the AI, hasn't he?" Eli asked, his eyes narrowing. "And so the plan is not for *you* to get rid of the program, but for you guys to do it *together*. Like this, he doesn't need the neural interface, but *you* do, if you're going to help him."

No one spoke.

"Basically?" Young said. "Yeah. You're right."

"Pure dead brilliant," Rush said with a half smile, looking at Eli.

"So that's why it looks like him," TJ murmured quietly. "The AI, I mean."

"Yeah," Young replied.

"He can merge with it *outside* the neural interface device?" Eli asked, his arms wrapping around his chest.

"Yeah," Young replied.

"That's not—that's not supposed to happen," Eli said quietly. "What's it like? The combination?"

"Maybe sometime you'll get a chance to talk to it," Young said resting an elbow on the edge of the monitor bank and dropping his chin into his hand. "But its almost indistinguishable from the original. Except, it's better dressed and more well-adjusted. Also," Young said, pausing to look at Rush. "It just called you brilliant."

"Sweet," Eli said. "Well, um, tell it hi."

Rush's cigarette, which was halfway to his lips, stopped in midair as he looked at Eli in surprise, his mouth quirking into a hint of a smile.

An awkward silence fell.

"Well," Scott said finally. "Weirdness aside, I feel like I like this plan more now."

"From a systems perspective we're good to go," Eli said. "I isolated FTL, the weapons, and the shields from the neural interface device so—" he shrugged. "At least we'll have those. I couldn't do much in terms of life support because that's a hardware issue more than a software issue or something I can fix by rerouting."

"No time like the present then," Young said, getting to his feet. "Eli, do you want to hook this thing up?" he indicated the laptop.

Eli nodded, and made short work of interfacing the laptop with the chair.

Young sat.

He heard, rather than felt, the neural interface bolts engage and everything exploded into white.

The only thing he could see was Rush.

The space they were in was featureless, like a clean white room that stretched out to infinity on all sides.

Young looked down to see himself in his uniform—not the worn fraying version he wore on Destiny. The fabric was crisp and new. For the first time in a long time he felt no pain—no headache, no backache; the pain that lingered in his scarred forearms, the aches from numerous old injuries—they were all gone.

He looked over at Rush, now dressed in a black jacket and dark jeans. The other man smiled faintly, clearly amused by something.

"What," Young demanded.

"Nothing," Rush said, opening his hands. "How do you feel?"

"Fine. Good actually."

"Better," Rush suggested.

Young narrowed his eyes. "What's going on?"

"This is the platform created by the program I wrote the first time I used the chair. As you can see, it's interpreted by the mind as a literal space, but in actuality it's something like an application-layer firewall. It allows certain executable files to

operate, such as the chair's ability to transform thoughts into code, but prevents the transmission of information from the ship to your mind in a direct way."

"So there's no chance of me getting genetically modified, or Destiny dumping information into my brain, or anything like that?"

"A simplistic interpretation of what I just said, but essentially correct, yes."

"Thanks," Young said dryly. "So the point of this is—"

"The point is that Destiny can't manipulate this space, but, because you're sitting in the interface, *you* can. It gives us a bit of an advantage when going after this thing. We'll invite it in here, and then I'll attempt to isolate and overwrite it."

"Why *you*?"

"I should think that would be *obvious*. Do you have any idea how to overwrite a program in *theory*, never mind in *practice*, within the confines of a system that is arguably more complicated than the human mind?"

"No."

It rolled its eyes.

"Don't give me that shit. This whole interface transforms intent into code, right? Isn't that what got us into this mess? Can't I just *think* of destroying it, and it happens?"

"I don't want you doing this," it snapped. "It's too dangerous."

"Are you kidding me? *You* are *exactly* what this thing was designed to destroy, and it *did* destroy you last time. I do *not* want you to erase *the actual* Rush because you yet again have some sort of poorly-timed existential crisis triggered by some piece of glorified software. Are we clear on that? This is much more dangerous for you than it is for me. For me, none of this is real. It's all artificial."

"The chair transforms intent into code," Rush said quietly. "It's all 'real.' Everything that happens here. You can kill yourself with a sustained application of will."

"Great," Young said, running a hand through his hair. "I still think it should be me."

"Of course you do. But you're incorrect. Think about our link. Think about the *way* it works. You're meant to ground me, not the other way around. If I'm the anchor, you can simply block, and you *will* when she gets a hold of you. *I*, on the other hand, am incapable of shutting you out."

"Even like this? When you're this weird combined thing?"

"Charming." It crossed its arms. "Yes—of course like this. Why do you think it's so easy for you to tear my mind apart? I assure you, you're a special case."

Young sighed. "Okay, fine. So the plan is what—you overwrite it and I try to prevent you from killing yourself while you do it?"

"Yes. That's the plan."

"You know, we need to work on doing *nice* things together."

It stared at him for a moment, and then gave him a small smile. "Such as?"

"Pretty much anything that doesn't risk death or insanity."

"So fucking demanding," Rush said, his smile twisting, his eyes sliding down and away.

Silence fell.

After a few seconds, Young cleared his throat. "Let's do this thing," he said quietly.

"What do you say?"

"Take us somewhere," Rush said. "Somewhere that you have a strong emotional association with, but—not your strongest memory. Save that."

He acted instinctively, forcing the white space around them to darken and shift, becoming textured as shapes coalesced from nothing. After a few seconds, they stood on sun-drenched pavement, just outside the Cheyenne Mountain base. The ground near the road was covered with a few inches of icy snow, through which crocuses had just begun to open.

"Interesting," Rush said, pulling sunglasses from his jacket pocket. "Why *outside* the base?"

"I thought you'd like this more," Young said. "Before we met, on Icarus, I remember seeing him here. He used to come here to smoke when they flew him in from California."

"You remember that?" Rush asked faintly, crushing the icy edge of the snow with the toe of one boot.

"Yeah," Young said. "I had no idea who he was at the time, but—" he shrugged.

"Mmm," Rush replied, still not looking at him. He pulled a cigarette out of his pocket.

"You shouldn't smoke," Young said.

"I do lots of things that I shouldn't," Rush said, shaking his hair back.

The sun was bright and cold. It glared off the snow-covered hillside. Young reached into his own pocket, visualized finding sunglasses there, and then pulled them out.

"I'm going to let her through the firewall," Rush said. "Are you ready?"

A cold wind began to blow at their backs, whistling over the ice and across the pavement.

"If you are," Young replied.

The landscape shrieked, high pitched white noise ringing out, over, and through them as the surroundings he had created were rent apart, forming edges in the fabric of space where none should be, exerting a terrible pressure against Young's mind. Beneath their feet, the ground rocked and cracked apart. He nearly lost his footing and Rush twined a hand into the loose fabric of his jacket, keeping him steady.

The solidity of the contact was startling.

In front of them, the sloping road that led down and away from the entrance to the base was distorting. The dark gray of the asphalt shifted into something more metallic. Edges of towering structures began to fade in.

From far away he could hear the cry of gulls.

"What's happening?" Young snapped at Rush.

"She's trying to overwrite me directly," Rush said tightly. "Within this interface, I can isolate and overwrite *her* because she has nowhere to go, but—" he broke off, a muscle in his cheek twitching. "The reverse is also true. I'm trapped here as well."

"Wait," Young said. "*Damn it.* Why?"

"Because *you're* here," Rush said, his voice strained. "If I leave, she'll destroy you. Or rather, she'll convince you to destroy yourself."

"Well, overwrite her, then," Young snapped.

He looked back out at the road. It had turned flat and level and metallic. Instead of the mountains on either side he could see buildings, rising high above their heads. The metal surface in front of them was flanked by aquamarine water.

"Rush," he snapped. "*Nick.* Come on. Get this thing *done.*"

"God, you just never fucking change, do you?" Rush asked, from between clenched teeth.

She was beginning to appear, her form coalescing into solidity from the insubstantial air, her hair flickering between dark and gold, right at the line where the road changed from pavement to metal. It wasn't intuitively obvious to him what he should do but—

He wasn't crazy about the idea of moving his consciousness any closer to this version of Rush than he had to.

Young projected outward, trying to reestablish control of the space they were in, pushing against her projection with his full strength, trying to extend the surface of the pavement by one foot. Another. Then another.

"Oh *fuck*," Rush breathed. "Pull me out."

Young looked over at him and saw with a surge of alarm that his clothes were changing subtly, losing their human aesthetic, taking on the suggestion of a foreign cut. His hair had darkened a shade. He didn't know what Rush had meant by his wording, but acting on instinct, he reached out, grabbed hold of its mind, and pulled it away from the other program while simultaneously searching for a memory, *any* memory that might unbalance the girl.

With an application of pure mental energy, he destroyed and reformed the landscape, dragging Rush with him.

Even before the memory fully formed, he could hear the sound of gunfire.

"What—" Rush began, but the rest of what he was going to say was cut off as Young tackled him to the ground behind the limited cover of a hedge exploding in small purple flowers. In the original memory he'd been with Tolles, but Rush had taken her place. He was wearing BDUs. They both were.

The sky above them was a clear pale blue.

"What do you think," Young said, disentangling himself from Rush. "Can I kill this program by shooting it?" He unslung his rifle.

"Unlikely," Rush said. "But maybe you could distract it." He brought a shaking hand up to his forehead. "It's coming."

A few seconds passed, and then, again, Young could feel it tear into the landscape he had created. He brought his weapon up and began to fire, aiming at the center of the disruption, where the girl was beginning flicker into existence. He focused on not just on the rebound of the rifle against the shoulder, the deafening crack of the rounds exploding forward, the clatter of brass-on-brass at his feet, but also on his desire to wipe this thing from existence.



Rush knelt on the grass, his eyes closed, his expression intense. They continued that way for what Young estimated must have been more than four minutes, until, finally, he seemed to gain some ground. The landscape had just started to reform when—

"Switch," Rush snapped, his voice cracking on the word.

Young looked down at him.

Again his hair had darkened, again the cut of his clothes had changed.

"*Switch*," Rush whispered.

Young snapped them out.

Flags, placed by the boy scouts in his town, snapped in the breeze. It was cool for Memorial Day, but the sky was cloudless and the sun was up and the grass was damp under their bare feet—

"*This isn't working*," Rush said. "Switch, *switch*."

"Just hang on," Young said, even as his street began to shriek apart around them and—

Young snapped them out.

It was hot and the leaves of the willow trees floated on the still water of the lake—making a deceptively solid surface that stretched in front of them. The air smelled of ozone following the shock of the afternoon thunderstorm, but still she pursued them, her presence shrieking through the quiet of the afternoon like a razor blade drawn across glass.

"You need to *ground* me," Rush said, standing on the edge of the pier. "And you're *not*. I can't make any headway and she's pulling everything left the doctor *forward*, and I—" His hair darkened and he broke off, digging the heel of one hand into his eye socket as —

Young snapped them out.

They stood next to an old, stone wall that formed the base of the portico for the hillside estate. Roses grew along a trellis. The sun was low in the sky over the green manicured lawn.

"What are you afraid of?" Rush hissed furiously, stepping in. The late afternoon light put red highlights in his hair and flared off a silver cufflink as he brought one hand up, gesticulating wildly. "What do you think you'll *see*? What do you think will *happen*?"

"If I can just prevent her from taking control—"

"God," Rush snapped. "*Stop* going after *her*. Controlling the landscape makes *no difference*, she adapts to it and comes after *me* every fucking time. You gain us some ground when you go with a strong memory like—what is this—" he broke off, looking down at the suit he was wearing, "your fucking *wedding*? But she's always going to break in."

The landscape wavered, distorting with her approach.

"Fuck," Rush said. "*Fuck*."

Young snapped them out.

Dust glittered in the light that entered slant-wise through the irregular cracks in the drawn shades over the attic windows of the house he'd lived in, growing up.

Young snapped them out.

September, his college campus, staring into the open space of an empty football field —

"Everett, spare me the fucking tour through American suburbia," Rush hissed, his hair already darkening, his clothes changing. "This *isn't working*."

Young snapped them out.

He found himself on a sloping hillside that ended in a cliff high over the open sea. Below them, the water broke along the 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 ground at their feet.

"What are you afraid of?" Rush repeated his earlier question, shouting this time, rounding on him, dressed in the same crisp white shirt he had worn when Young had first met the combined version of him in the neural interface.

"I'm not going to link with you," Young shouted back. "We can beat her without resorting to that."

"*What?*" Rush said, horrified.

"You're not him. You're *not him*. I won't link with your mind. I *can't*."

"You're going to kill *both* of us if you don't do this," Rush said, his voice full of despair.

Young snapped them out again.

They stood next to his truck, feet skidding slightly on the black ice of the asphalt. Rain hit the road and froze almost instantly in the dark. He couldn't see the trees just

beyond the shoulder of the highway, but he could hear the crack of the branches breaking under the weight of forming ice.

"Just fucking get this *done*," Young shouted at Rush. "I know you can do this. How can she be stronger than you? In this interface that you created? That *I* control? She's just a piece of *code*. You're a fucking complicated computational system, an *AI*, for *Christ's sake*. You're trying to *manipulate* me into looking at your mind. I *know* you are, and it won't work."

There was no light except that which came from the headlights of his truck. It threw the freezing rain into sparkling relief against the darkness. Rush was a black silhouette against the yellow high beams. Young couldn't see his expression, just the downward angle of his head.

"I see," he said, his voice difficult to hear over the sound of the rain drumming against the metal frame of the car. "I don't suppose I can really blame you for that sentiment."

From out in the darkness, a growling sound rent the night.

Young snapped them out again.

Multicolored lights wound their way around the black metal of the porch railing in tightly spaced loops. Their breath condensed in the darkness. Above them, the stars of the Milky Way scattered crisply across the night sky.

"Where you grew up," Rush said quietly. "Christmas."

"Um, yeah," Young said, his nerves stretched to breaking, his ears straining for any sound of the girl's arrival.

"To leave the interface," Rush said quietly, "simply visualize a door."

"What are you talking about?"

"Tell Eli to have Chloe double check everything he does when he removes the tracking device—she retains a sense of the logical underpinnings of Nakai technology—it's obvious from the way she approaches quantum mechanics."

"Dad," a voice whispered from out of the darkness.

Young snapped them out again.

The land was flat, and white, blanketed with snow. The clouded sky was leaden and low to the ground. Fragile, dry snowflakes that matched the sky and the land and the cement of the road began to fall.

Rush looked over at him, his hair darkening down to black, his features shifting subtly, his clothing unfamiliar, his eyes changing color.

The air seemed to shimmer and solidify and she stepped straight out of it to stand in front of them, her hair dark, her eyes blue. "Dad," she said, looking at Rush.

"Hi baby," he whispered.

"Nick," Young hissed, his fingers closing around Rush's arm like a vise. "*Nick.*"

"Who's Nick?" Rush asked. His accent had morphed from Scottish to Ancient.

"Oh fuck it," Young said, drawing in a deep breath.

He snapped their minds together.

He had seen its consciousness before, but he had never been *this* close to it.

He wasn't analyzing its structure or its composition, he wasn't trying to keep his distance—he was simply, finally, just—there.

His own senses receded and he felt his projected image fade from the snow-covered landscape until he had joined fully with the fluxing unstable consciousness that was Rush's mind.

Most of its mental energy was going simply towards stabilizing itself. But—Young knew Rush.

He *knew* him.

*"You're a terrible liar, sweetheart," Gloria says, leaning in the doorway. "I like it," he says defensively. "I do. It's very, ah—fashionable?" He looks back down at the exams he's grading.*

*"Mandy," he says, reaching out to grab her lifeless hand. "Mandy, don't cry."*

*Rush smirks, looking away as his expression breaks into a real smile for a moment. "The Colonel Young is an idiot campaign," he repeats with evident satisfaction. He raises his eyebrows, looking over at Young. "Aptly named, I must say."*

Just as he had once purposefully reached within himself to pull Rush's neural architecture out of the depths of his *own* mind, he performed a mirror image of the same task, only this time, he did it for the thing that he'd joined with, liberating its energy and attention and focus, freeing it from holding itself together under the relentless onslaught, allowing it to shift its energies toward destroying and overwriting the code that was continually attempting to unravel it.

//Come on,// Young projected. //Let's kill this thing already.//

Freed from its continuous struggle to maintain its own integrity, Rush's consciousness exploded outward, overwhelming, overwriting the thing that had hunted them both for hours, that had haunted Rush for *days*.

Finally, *finally* the thing attempted to retreat under his attack, and Young could feel him working with the code like it was a literal, physical thing, using it to erase *her*, to bury *her* this time—not himself.

Then, it was over.

They stood together in the frozen, gray landscape, both of them sharing Rush's projection.

Young was desperate to pull back, to look away from its mind, but there was no point—he couldn't escape the knowledge that already surrounded him.

There were very few things that distinguished this consciousness from its physical counterpart. This mind was beautifully intact and computationally capable of more than any human mind but—ultimately, in feel, in character, it was nearly identical to Rush himself. Here, in the neural interface device, connected to the ship as he was, there were no parts of it that were obscured to him—no parts that he could not access. The predominance of the AI, which had so disturbed him last time he was in the neural interface, was drastically reduced.

He pulled away, his own projection reestablishing itself as he stepped back.

"What are you, *really*?" he asked, his voice cracking.

"You've already figured that out," Rush replied.

"Your mind—is almost all *you*. Where's the AI?"

"Holding it together," Rush said, giving him a pained half smile. "Why do you think it looks so nice in there?" He gestured vaguely at his head. "This is what the AI has always instinctively wanted. It was never meant to exist the way we've encountered it."

"But *why*?" Young whispered. "Why would it do this to you? Why make you the new template? It talked to me. Very early on. It told me not to block. It told me to *protect* you from this. It's protected you *itself* from the pull of the ship."

"The pull of the ship," Rush whispered. "Neither Rush nor the AI understand that sensation for what it is."

"Which is what?"

"The inevitability of this consciousness," Rush said, gesturing down at himself.

"It's not supposed to be this way. You can't survive like this. You're supposed to stay alive. To use the chair. To unlock the systems."

"To complete the mission," Rush corrected gently. "But—separately they are both so broken, and together they make something so much—better."

"It's not better," Young whispered.

"No? You never knew him this way, but this is what the actual Nicholas Rush was like, before he and Colonel Telford used that device. A bit more cogent, a bit less volatile," Rush said with a half smile, "Significantly more organized. Significantly more stable."

"You don't need to do this," Young said. "You don't need the AI. I can fix your mind. Your *real* mind."

"I know." Rush sighed. "And part of this," he gestured to his head, "*is* from you. The AI has learned from what you've done and extrapolated to this conclusion."

"You prefer to be this way, don't you?" Young asked, his voice strained.

"Wouldn't you?" Rush murmured, burying his hands in his pockets, "if you were me?"

"Who you are is a consequence of your actions. You can't just get rid of the parts that you don't like."

"I'm not overwriting my personality. I'm fixing damage. There's a difference."

"By turning yourself into something artificial?"

"There's nothing artificial about this."

Young crossed his arms, watching dry snowflakes settle on the black fabric of Rush's jacket. "Can't you just—"

Rush looked at him, his facial expression neutral and unreadable.

"Can't you stop trying to change who you are, and just—come back to Earth with the rest of the crew?"

"I've told you. It would kill me," Rush said quietly. "The virus I'm infected with would continue to take its course, and would ultimately result in my death. Without Destiny, my mind would slowly destabilize, and I wouldn't be—I wouldn't be myself anymore."

"Do you know how much technology, how many resources we have at Homeworld Command? We can figure something out."

"You think you could pull off some eleventh hour save, don't you?" Rush smiled faintly, and produced a lit cigarette from out of the cold, dry air. "Maybe you could."

"I can. I will. We'll *make* it happen—"

"Everett," Rush said, his tone clipped. "I've told you this all along, but I'll tell you again, because I don't think you understand. I'm not fucking Dr. Jackson, who exists in some sphere of statistical improbabilities where outcomes always turn optimal at the last moment. All I can do is make the best decision available to me at the time I'm presented with it and then suffer the consequences, no matter what they are. And what I'm telling you now—is that the decision about whether I return to Earth or not? It's already been made."

Rush looked away, out over the frozen ground.

"I should be *involved*, Rush, I'm fucking *connected* to you. You don't just get to decide, unilaterally, what is going to happen to us."

"I already have. I'm sorry. You weren't available for consultation at the time."

"Why are you *being* like this?" Young whispered.

"Always," Rush said, with a twisted smile, "you fail to ask the correct questions. Have you ever stopped to wonder what will happen to *you* at the end of all this? What will happen to *you* if I go back to Earth with you and die there? What will happen to you should Rush and the AI implement their plan of tearing through the multiverse? What will happen to you when I implement *my* plan and attempt ascension? What will happen to you if I *succeed*? What will happen to you if I *don't*?"

"First of all," Young growled. "That's not how this is going to end. Second of all, it doesn't matter. Either way, I'm staying. Whatever happens to you happens to me. Success, failure, whatever. I'm not leaving you here and going back to Earth. I'm not leaving you behind to *fucking die*, and that's final."

"Yes you *are*," Rush snapped. "You have no alternative except to go back. You can't stay. I can't ascend you."

"Why not?" Young replied. "If you can do it for the other three, and for yourself, then you can fucking do it for me."

"I can't," it whispered, pained. "You exist corporeally."

"So do *you*," Young snarled.

"I'm more than half Ancient," it said quietly. "I'm physiologically capable of this. You are not."

"So then change me."

"There's not enough time," Rush whispered.

"Oh *fuck that*. What do you mean?"

"I'm not going to live long enough to wait for you to develop that capability. So you stay with me, and you die," he said. "*You die*, knowing that the psychological distress of being directly responsible for your death will so cripple my attempt to ascend that I will certainly fail. Or—you go and live. There's only one option."

"I'm not going without you."

"Yes you are."

"No I'm fucking *not*. We can link," Young said, "like we just did, and you ascend both of us."

"You really want this? You don't even *like* me. You like the *actual* Rush. The one who needs you so fucking badly that even his *teeth* ache with it. Whereas I—" he took a draw of his cigarette and looked away. "I'll be fine without you. And eventually, you'll be fine without me."

"Sure," Young said, failing to keep the irritation out of his voice. "Do whatever the hell you goddamn please. Be my guest. You want to pursue this course?" Young said. "Go ahead. But this unilateral bullshit works both ways. You have *no say* in whether I stay or go back. It's my decision to make, and I'm staying."

Rush said nothing. He stared out across the frozen landscape, his profile dark against the gray of the land and sky.

"I'm staying," Young repeated.

"I heard you the first time," Rush replied, and took another draw of his cigarette.



## Chapter Forty Eight

Young watched Rush as he stood, his clothes dark against the gray homogeneity of the sky and the land.

The snow was falling faster now. Dry little flakes began to transform into something more substantial, landing on their hair and on their clothes.

The ground was frozen beneath their feet.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke.

"What is this place?" Rush asked, not looking at him, his voice muted by snow-filled air.

"I don't know," Young replied. "Just some empty field."

"Some empty field," Rush repeated quietly. "That's your car then, is it?"

He was looking toward the road, toward a white Prius that blended seamlessly into the snow and the ice and the gray-white cast of the sky.

Young followed his line of sight.

"No," he said finally. "That's not my car."

"Let's make sure, shall we?" Rush asked, starting toward the bleached asphalt of the road that was being slowly subsumed with snow. His footsteps were silent over the frosted ground.

"Still not my car," Young said, when they stood in front of it, looking down at California plates.

"Mmm," Rush said. "I didn't think so."

"What's your point?"

He already knew the answer.

"What is *my* car doing in *your* head?"

"How the hell should I know, *Rush*? I'm sure *you're* the one who put it there."

"You pull it forward under duress," Rush whispered. "You can't help it."

Around them, the snow continued to fall without sound.

"What is this place to you?" Young asked him.

"Just some field," Rush said, with a pained half-smile. "It's not important."

Young looked down, digging the toe of his boot into the ice that bordered the bleached asphalt. "I'd like to know."

Rush didn't look at him. There was snow in his hair.

"Minnesota," he said.

"What's in Minnesota?" Young asked, when it became obvious that Rush was not going to continue.

"The Mayo Clinic," Rush said quietly.

"You drove here?"

"No," Rush said, his eyes fixed on his car.

"I love these conversations we have," Young said, smiling faintly. "I really do."

"David drove her here."

"*David?*" Young repeated, the word edged.

"That's the one," Rush replied, his voice nearly inaudible. "I flew in later. He picked me up at the airport."

"Where were you?" Young asked, careful to keep his tone absolutely neutral.

"Cheyenne Mountain," Rush said.

"And Telford—"

"Gloria liked him," Rush said. "She ah—" his voice broke. "She thought he was good for me."

"*Good* for you?" Young echoed faintly.

"Yes, well. She was desperate. At the end. To find someone. Anyone. *Anything*—that had a chance in hell of preventing me from—"

The snow continued to fall, without sound.

"From what?"

"Killing myself. Obviously."

"Oh," Young said finally.

"So. She was quite supportive of the last-minute classified military project and the various—requirements it imposed upon me."

"Yeah," Young said faintly. "Yeah, I guess that makes sense."

He looked out over the gray expanse of sky and land. "So Telford drove Gloria from San Francisco to—where the hell are we?"

"Rochester," Rush whispered.

"To Rochester, Minnesota. That was—" Young broke off. "Nice of him."

"Oh stop," Rush said, a humorless smile playing about his lips. "You've made your opinions very clear on David's rather sinister flair for Bismarkian realpolitik," Rush said, drawing out the last word and then breaking it off, the cadence of his voice compressing something in Young's chest, making it difficult to breathe.

"So what happened in this field?"

"We stopped here," Rush said, "on the way from the airport."

"And um," Young said, closing his eyes briefly. "What happened between you two?"

"I finally agreed."

"To what?"

"To his proposal. To try the device that had been found in Anubis' lab."

"Ah," Young said.

"She was dying," Rush said shortly, "and there was nothing—nothing *left* for her in terms of conventional medicine. And she—" he broke off, his throat closing, turning away from Young entirely.

"She what?" Young whispered.

Rush said nothing.

"She what?" he repeated, the words slow and careful.

"She was so afraid."

"Yeah," Young said quietly. He stepped forward, bringing one hand up to rest on Rush's shoulder, finding the tight musculature of Rush's upper back identical to the way it felt in reality. "Yeah, I guess that's the nature of it."

"David is the only one who knows everything," Rush said, "because—David was *there*. I never talked to anyone else about her. Not really."

"What about Dr. Perry? Dr. Jackson?"

"Most of what they knew, David told them."

Young said nothing.

After a few seconds, Rush turned to look back at him.

"So that's the connection," he said, "between *him* and Telford. Telford met him at a vulnerable time and worked his way in, not through Nick, but through *Gloria*. Because Telford knew why they needed him. Because Telford was willing to spend a long time—a *long* time figuring out how to convince him. Because Gloria told Telford that he needed—something else. Something more. And in the end, everyone got what they wanted."

"Except for Nick," Young said quietly.

"Nick," he whispered, "stopped wanting anything. For a long time."

The snow continued to fall.

"And what about now?" Young asked. "What does he want?"

"He wants you to live," Rush said. "He wants you all to live, but especially—*especially* you. He wishes he'd never done this to you."

"This isn't his fault," Young said quietly.

"But it's mine," it whispered. "And I'm cognizant of that. I *am*."

"I don't see how it could be your fault either," Young said quietly. "You're something entirely new. You didn't exist until after he was forced into the chair. If this is anyone's fault it's the AI's."

"It was so alone before him," Rush whispered, his arms coming around his chest.

"That doesn't excuse what it did," Young said. "It used him to further its own agenda."

"Yes," Rush said, his voice distant, looking out through the thickening curtain of snow.

"Yes. It did, but—he agreed."

"Doesn't he always?" Young asked. "I'm not sure how much that means, really."

Rush gave him a twisted half-smile. "Nor am I. Nor is the AI anymore. At the time, however, it was sufficient to proceed. It's a lot to ask of a mostly destroyed AI to interpret the psychology of a human mind. It did—and *does*—its best."

"Yeah," Young said grudgingly, shoving his hands into the pockets of his BDUs. He looked away. "Maybe."

"You should go," Rush said. "You—"

"Oh no," Young broke in, and Rush's eyes locked with his. "I let you do all of this crazy shit, and then I come in here and help you get rid of some evil computer code—you owe me."

Rush gave him a suspicious look. "What do you want?"

"I want you to tell me about him. Yourself. Whatever. You know what I mean. The man won't so much as admit to having a *goddamn preference for anything*. Whenever I seem remotely interested in any aspect of his past, he shuts down on me immediately."

Rush raised his eyebrows.

"The most personal thing I've ever pried out of him is how he met Gloria. And you know what he said? 'In the rain.' That's all I got."

"I remember," Rush murmured, the twist of his features wistfully amused.

"I've found out more about his past in ten minutes with *you* than I've gotten in two and a half years from *him*." Young said. "So you can damn well keep going."

Rush ran his hand through his snow-filled hair, with a brief exhalation that was almost, but not quite, a laugh. "What is it that you want to know, then?"

"Any of it. All of it. Whatever. Tell me about yourself."

Rush looked down, skimming the toe of his boot along the ice. "There's not anything to tell."

"Liar."

Rush sighed. "For Gloria," he said, "I learned to play the piano. Play the piano and cook and make scintillating conversation at cocktail parties."

"Why the piano?" Young asked.

"She was a concert violinist, and I—replaced her accompanist at Oxford," he said, with a casual, fluid shrug of his shoulders.

"I'll just bet you did," Young said.

Rush looked at him sharply, but something about the idea of the other man applying all his ruthless, merciless persistence to something as benign as learning to outplay Gloria's accompanist was just—too much to take with a straight face. He shot Rush an amused grin.

"I was better," Rush said, trying not to smile back at Young, but not entirely succeeding. "Better than he was."

"I'm sure you were," Young replied. "I'm sure that he didn't have a chance in hell against you."

Rush looked away, unable to entirely control his expression.

"And cooking?" Young asked. "Seriously? That one I just cannot picture."

"Can't you?" Rush said, with a disdain that was nothing but appealing artifice. "Scientists make the best chefs. Attention to detail. Et cetera."

Young watched the snow falling into his hair and on his clothes.

"Why do you have to be so goddamned—" Young broke off, unwilling or unable to finish the sentence.

"You like it," Rush said, still not looking at him.

"No," Young said, also looking away, trying not to smile at him. "Not at all. Not even remotely. Stop being so damn charming—you're doing this on purpose. Don't think I haven't noticed that you've barely told me *anything*. You're good, but not *that* good."

Rush took a half step toward him. "If you think you're getting my entire life story in return for your assistance in destroying some little viral program, you're mistaken."

"What's it going to take, then?" Young asked. "Do I have to avert some kind of galactic-scale apocalyptic event?"

"Oh at a minimum," Rush said, his voice pitched low, his eyes dark.

The snow fell silently over the empty road and the white, icy car.

"I want to know you," Young said, "but I don't. I don't know you at all."

"Stay away from him," Rush said. "From me. We're not good for you."

"So you said," Young replied, taking a step forward.

"I won't let you destroy yourself," Rush whispered.

"Too late," Young replied.

"Maybe," Rush said, reaching out to delicately touch Young's temple. "But then," he gave Young a half-smile, "maybe not."

Young reached up, his fingers closing around the scientist's wrist, pulling his hand away.

"I don't think so," he growled. "You stay out of there."

Rush just looked at him, with the full force of his unendurable gaze.

Young's fingers tightened on the scientist's wrist, suspending it in empty air.

Rush stepped forward.

Human or machine or both or *neither*—Young didn't know precisely *what* it was, nor could he define exactly *who* it was; but its mind was complicated and clear and intact and it was *charming* and it was excruciatingly aware of its own ephemeral nature and there was something about it that was just so—

The air was cold, but Rush's mouth was hot and fluent and *letting him in*.

His hands slid down, coming to rest over Rush's hips as his fingers hooked through belt loops, the texture of denim rough under his skin. Young paused, not entirely sure whether he was going to pull the scientist forward or shove him back.

Rush brought one hand up, his palm resting flat and warm against Young's cheek, his certain fingers tangling adroitly through the hair at the nape of Young's neck, sending tiny shocks down his spine.

Young pulled back, or tried to.

He needed to clarify his thinking but Rush—

Rush began to kiss his way slowly along the line of his jaw. His thoughts feathered delicately into the edges of Young's consciousness.

"I'm not doing this," Young growled, but his thumbs were hooking through Rush's belt loops, his fingers curling around the bottom edge of Rush's jacket, and he took a half step forward, yanking Rush toward him, their hips pressed together, gaining control of the other man's center of gravity as he bent one knee, forcing his thigh between Rush's legs.

"Really."

Rush breathed the word, quiet and low and the skin of Young's ear prickled with it. "Because observation indicates that, in fact, you are," he broke off, his lips brushing the shell of Young's ear. "Currently," he murmured, the word inaudible but for the hard stops of the consonants, "doing this."

Young shuddered, unable to stand the elusive, excruciating feeling of Rush's lips hovering somewhere near his skin. With an abrupt movement he twisted the other man around, destroying his balance without effort as he again stepped forward, forcing Rush back against the hood of the car.

"You're wrong," Young said, pressing him back until he was laid out over the hood of the white Prius. "This is not happening."

"Yes well," Rush breathed. "Can it not happen *somewhere else*?"

The landscape distorted around them, shifting, reforming, and settling on an autumn afternoon dredged up from somewhere deep in Young's mind—a combination of experiences coming together to make this place—where gold leaves stood out against a gray sky. The ground was warm underneath them as he pushed Rush back, settling on top of him on the hillside.

"You're ridiculous," Rush murmured. "You know that, correct? Because I don't think—"

Whatever Rush didn't think was swallowed as Young kissed him again, making any further smart-ass commentary impossible.

Young let go of the grip he had on Rush's clothes, fingers unclenching by increments. He slid one hand beneath the scientist's jacket, beneath his shirt, skin sliding over skin, destroying the rest of what Rush was about to say with the acuteness of the contact and they just—they so rarely touched each other without necessity, without violence, without an ulterior motive and even though this wasn't real, this wasn't happening anywhere other than inside his head, inside the neural interface, he could barely breathe with the intensity of it. He moved his thoughts closer to Rush's, their minds nearly apposed, sensations amplifying into positive feedback loops that just—continued and continued and continued—and—

//I want to keep you here,// Young projected, breaking their kiss.

The scientist's eyes were half lidded, his hair fanning out over the leaves.

//I want to keep you—//

Rush slid his thumb just inside the collar of Young's jacket and slowly, deftly separated a snap.

//I want to keep—//

Rush was looking up at him and his eyes were dark and his jacket was dark and his hair was dark against the leaf-covered ground. His gaze was intolerably intimate and no one, *no one* should be able to withstand the full force of his attention.

//I—//

Rush trailed his thumbnail along Young's collarbone and Young couldn't suppress the shiver that travelled down his spine at the sensation. Everything he was feeling bled over into Rush's mind, echoing between them, building to something that was suffocating, that was untenable and—

He sat back abruptly, straddling Rush's hips and tore open the man's jacket, revealing his white collared shirt.



The maneuver startled a laugh out of Rush, who turned his face away as if, even now, he still could not bear to let anyone, even Young, see him smile.

"Hey," Young said, reaching out to run his thumb along Rush's jawline before gently forcing the other man to look him in the eye. And even though he had initiated the eye contact, even though he wanted it, even though he was ostensibly in control, with one hand on Rush's jaw he still couldn't stand to look—as if persistence would end in the dissolution of his mind.

He let Rush help him escape his jacket and then he brought his hands up to the collar of Rush's white dress shirt and slowly, deliberately ripped through the stepwise resistance of each button.

"Admit it," Rush said, his voice low and thick. "You've wanted to do that for quite some time. You fucking hedonist."

Young reached around the back of Rush's neck and grabbed a fistful of his hair, forcing his head back.

"And you," he said, as he leaned down, pressing his full weight into Rush, his voice vibrating through his chest, "have a smart fucking mouth." He held Rush's head in place as he kissed his way, slowly, tortuously, from Rush's ear to his clavicle, every point of contact flaring bright in his mind, reducing coherent thought to flaming ash.

In a moment coordinated between them by complete congruity of thought, Rush reached down, the tips of his fingers sweeping over hypersensitive skin as the scientist adroitly curled his fingers around the bottom edge of Young's black T-shirt and pulled it over his head.

Young wanted to hold onto everything he could of the man, who was always, inevitably doing nothing but drawing away from him. Flung out into empty space and holding there, shattered, destroyed, utterly unafraid, motionless at the peak of a ballistic trajectory before the inevitable plunge back toward the uncompromising solidity of the earth.

And god, he had to hold him had to keep him—*had to keep him*—

Rush reached around him, pulling him forward, grinding their hips together as the abstractions of their thoughts merged and crystallized and fractured and flew apart and he couldn't, *they couldn't*, hold together like this on the edge, this wasn't him—*he* didn't think about torque and dry friction and fluid friction and lubricated friction and skin friction and internal friction and he didn't think about delta-v and he didn't think

about thrust to weight ratios and fuck, *fuck*. He didn't think about those things at times like this, but god if Rush didn't and the man was just so—

So—

So difficult and so poorly defined and also just—also just unbuttoning Young's BDUs.

Yes.

That was a good idea.

*You're so fucking brilliant*, was what he'd intended to say, but instead he said—

"Nick."

And that seemed to mean something to Rush because—his head was thrown back and his eyes were searing and his hands were clever and capable and *pressure*—fuck, pressure was *force* divided by area when the force was the normal force and the area was the surface area on—*on contact* and his fingers curled beneath the resistant tension of Rush's jeans and were they jeans or BDUs and could he change them here? But it didn't matter, because with a quick twist of his fingers they were open and—

"Tell me I exist," Rush whispered. "Tell me I mean something. *Anything*—like this."

"Of course you exist," Young said. "Right now you're the only thing that does."

Rush poured into his mind, bright and intact and flawless and kissing him, and grinding his hips up into Young, and his hands and his eyes and it was too much to withstand and he would do anything, *anything* to hold Rush here, fixed forever in a space that would not—that *could not* hurt him, but it was impossible because always, *always* they moved forward through time and it was the one thing that the Ancients had tried and failed to address. There was *nothing* out there for them, nothing but pain and the inexorable flow of seconds that ultimately, inevitably would strip everything away—

"Shh," Rush whispered, a thumb coming to graze along Young's cheek. "You're all right. You're all right."

"There's something you should do before you go," Rush whispered, his head heavy on Young's shoulder.

"What's that?" Young murmured.

"When you're in the neural interface—" he broke off as his throat closed, and Young could feel the other man's back tense briefly. "From here," Rush said quietly, "you can get him back."

"Shit," Young whispered, his voice cracking on the word.

Rush said nothing.

He was utterly still.

Young shut his eyes against the gold of the autumn afternoon.

"It has to happen," Rush said. "Do it now."

"Shh," Young said quietly, his eyes shut, his hand tangled in Rush's hair.

"To get out of here," Rush whispered, "simply visualize a door."

"Nick."

"Don't prolong this," his voice cracked, his back tensing under Young's hands. "We both know that you will always, *always* choose to destroy me, because the alternative is letting him die."

"Why didn't you tell me that I was going to have to do this?"

"I can't be responsible for figuring out which of the many things that I find obvious you have overlooked."

The sarcastic tone was belied by how uncharacteristically still the other man was against him.

He looked at its mind, bright and clear and organized and structured.

Around them the landscape began to shift, the light of the afternoon again giving way to the gray-white of a landscape covered with snow.

And ice.

He tightened his arms around Rush, and he could feel the scientist's heart pounding rapidly beneath his ribs.

"Why do you have a heartbeat?" Young asked, running his hand rhythmically over the space between Rush's shoulder blades.

"Stop trying to distract me."

"Easy," Young said. "I'll tell you when I'm going to do it."

Beneath his back, the ground had grown cold.

"So why the heartbeat?" Young murmured quietly into his hair.

"It's part of my unconscious perception of myself," Rush said, "and hence, it appears as part of my projection. I could stop it, if I wanted to."

"Mmm," Young said, feeling Rush's pulse begin to slow beneath the hand he had spread across the center of the other man's back.

"Think of ice," Rush whispered.

"Yeah," Young said, his eyes tightly shut.

"You ready, genius?" he whispered finally.

"Yes."

His arms tightened convulsively around Rush as he reached into his mind and tore it apart, separating everything that made it what it was, and the pieces faded, returning to Destiny, to Rush's actual body, leaving him alone on the ice covered ground.

Young sat up abruptly, elbows on knees, his face in his hands.

After a few moments, he stood.

It had begun to snow again.

The door that he opened was gray.

Coming out of the neural interface was less difficult than he remembered—perhaps it was the changes in his neural architecture. Perhaps the software buffer had protected him.

"Hey sir." Scott and Eli were kneeling in front of him.

"Hi," Young managed around the tightness in his throat.

"You get it done?" Scott asked quietly, giving him a searching look.

Eli said nothing, his face pale.

Young looked at them, not entirely sure what Scott had been referring to.

It took him a moment to remember the program and the girl.

"Yeah," he said. "It's done."

He let Scott and Eli pull him to his feet.

"Where are Greer and TJ?" he asked. His voice didn't sound normal.

"Greer took the second watch on Colonel Telford's quarters," Scott said, speaking slowly. "And TJ's in the infirmary."

"Are you okay?" Eli asked quietly. "You look kind of—"

Young glanced at him, then away.

"Just, kind of, um, not your best."

"I'm fine, Eli," he said, but even to him, his voice sounded faint. "Bad day."

"Bad week," Scott said.

"Um, you guys. Duh. Bad *two point five years*, okay?"

"Status report," Young said, a bit belatedly. He brought an unsteady hand up to his forehead.

"So," Eli said, drawing out the word, "we did indeed lose life support for about thirty seconds at one point, and apparently something also happened to Rush during that time, because TJ went running back to the infirmary—"

"*What*," Young said, pulling away from Scott and nearly losing his balance in the process.

"Sorry, sorry, he's okay. He's *fine*," Eli said hastily. "TJ radioed us like two seconds after we got life support back to say that he was fine."

Young glared at Eli.

"He's fine," Eli repeated.

"I want a step by step plan outlining the removal of the tracking device prepared by the science team by tomorrow. Until then, *nobody touches* that thing. Nobody so much as runs a diagnostic."

"Okay sure."

"Make sure Chloe is involved," Young said.

"Yeah okay. Yes on Chloe, no on touching. Got it."

Young and Scott shot Eli a look.

"Touching the *device*. God, you guys."

Scott rolled his eyes, then turned to Young. "You should probably head to the infirmary, sir. Let TJ check you out?"

"Yeah," Young agreed, allowing Scott to pull him toward the door.

He looked back over his shoulder toward the center of the room, but it was empty.

They made their way toward the infirmary in silence.

TJ met them just inside the double doors.

"Hi," she said.

"Is he awake?" Young asked shortly. "I need to talk to him."

"No," TJ said, "he's not awake. Come on." She grabbed his free arm and pulled it over her shoulder. "You look like you're not going to be on your feet much longer either."

"TJ."

"Don't 'TJ' me," she said sharply. "You're lucky *you're* not sedated."

"Out of line, lieutenant," he growled at her.

She didn't reply to him, but instead looked over at Scott. "I've got this," she said quietly.

"Can you take his bridge shift?"

"Yeah," Scott murmured back. "No problem." He ducked out from beneath Young's arm and TJ dragged him to the rear room of the infirmary.

"Lie back."

Her voice was icy, but her hands were gentle as she pushed him back against a gurney. Young caught a quick glimpse of Rush, his hair fanned out dark over the white of the sheets before TJ moved between them.

"You should probably take him out of the restraints," Young said, looking guiltily at the other man.

"Already done," TJ said shortly, tearing loose the velcro of the blood pressure cuff she was holding. "You should have told me that you could see the girl."

"Yeah," Young said. "I should have. But—that wasn't, um—" he brought a hand up to his head. "That wasn't really apparent to me at the time."

"Yeah," she echoed shortly. "I guess not."

"Eli said something happened to him, while I was in the chair?"

"Mm hmm," TJ said, flashing a penlight into his eyes. Young did his best not to flinch away. "His vitals tanked for about thirty seconds and Destiny's life support went on the fritz. Maybe half an hour after that his pressure shot up—not sure what that was about, but he's stable for the moment."

"How long until he wakes up?" Young asked. "I *really* need to talk to him."

TJ held a finger to her lips as she listened to Young's heart and lungs, reaching up beneath his shirt to carefully place the cold metal rim of her stethoscope against his ribs.

"TJ," he said, when she was done. "How *long*."

"I don't know," she said, looking away. "It could be a while." She pursed her lips. "I gave him something different this time. Something that I thought would be better, given the circumstances."

"What did you give him?"

"An antipsychotic," TJ said. "Haldol. It's both safe and pretty standard for agitation accompanied by psychosis," she said, "In retrospect, knowing that he *wasn't* actively hallucinating and had a good reason to be agitated, my choice would have been different." She gave him a hard look.

"Yeah," he said, shutting his eyes. "I get it, TJ."

For a moment, she was quiet.

"This could have ended—very badly," she said, her voice cracking.

"Yeah," replied. "I know. I realize that. I also realize that—it *would* have, if it hadn't been for you."

"Your *minds* are connected," she said quietly. "One would think you would be better at communicating with each other."

"He's very *difficult*, TJ, in every—"

"I know," she broke in. "I know how he is. I've interacted with him on a daily basis for the past two and a half years and, every so often, he pulls the rug out from under you and you—you react badly."

"I know," he replied.

"Why is that, do you think?" she asked delicately.

He looked away.

"Something to consider," TJ said quietly, when it became apparent that he wasn't going to answer her. "You should get some sleep."

She turned and walked toward the door. Young's eyes flicked over toward Rush and then back at her retreating form.

"TJ," he said, stopping her.

She turned to look at him.

"What made you believe him?"

"I didn't," she said quietly. "I didn't believe him."

"Then why—"

"I was worried about *you*," she said. "And—I did owe him. At least that much."



# Application

January 18th, 2008

The door to the bathroom is locked.

Gloria likes that—there's a certain security to the imperviousness of a closed, locked door, and no one, *no one*, will see her like this.

She is wearing dark jeans, the kind that are popular now—that narrow at the ankle. She has Vera Wang flats that are dark blue and match the jeans, and there is a collection of miscellaneous reflective shiny bits that cover the toes and the sparkly mass is somehow seamlessly, undetectably attached to the soft material of the shoe.

She always wears flats.

She wears a padded bra and a periwinkle camisole and a dark collared blouse and a sweater overtop, but the cuffs and the collar show from beneath the sweater. She's chosen a belt with an interesting buckle, and she threads it through the belt loops of her jeans and buckles it. Its solidity makes her feel frail by comparison, but it pulls the outfit together.

She looks at herself critically and straightens her seams.

All in all, it's not her usual style, but it goes with her new hair.

She puts on the wig cap, and then begins her application of the wig, front to back, positioning the tabs right in front of her ears. She's already cut the bangs of the wig to fit the contours of her face, but she pulls some tendrils forward to hide the artificially perfect margins of hair at her temples. She can't do much about the nape of the neck, but the wig is long enough that it hides that anyway. She runs her fingers through strands of hair that are not her own and applies just a touch of the special hairspray she purchased online.

She touches up the remains of her natural eyebrows with pencil, then applies eyeshadow—a warm brown that doesn't make her look too washed out. She leans forward, close to the mirror, and carefully applies liquid eyeliner to her lash line, giving it the tiniest of flares at the edge of her eyes to mimic the curl of actual lashes.

She powders her nose, and then pulls out a tube of pale pink lip-gloss.

The application of the gloss pulls everything together.

Her make-up has become her armor.

Only crying can crack it, and there's a simple solution to that one weakness—if she could only reliably implement it.

Someone knocks on the bathroom door.

She can't say 'come,' because it's locked, so she reaches over to open it.

The metal is cold under her warm hand.

David is standing there.

"Hey." He smiles at her, leaning in the doorframe. "You clean up nice. Expecting someone?"

"Very funny," she replies, smiling back at him.

"Do you need anything before I go?" he asks her. "Want me to get you some juice, or tea, or something?"

"I'm fine," she says. "That stuff they have is shite anyway—"

He lifts up a box of tea that she hadn't noticed he'd been holding.

PG Tips.

"Where did you get *that*?" She grabs the box out of his hand, examining it, and the smile that spreads across her face is real and strange and uncontrolled.

She has the urge to give the other man a hug, so she does.

"Eh," David says, pulling away, looking slightly embarrassed and slightly pleased. "No big deal. He told me that one was your favorite. Anyway, I'm going to head to the airport. Should take about fifteen minutes or so to get there—so we'll be back in an hour, maybe?"

"I'll be waiting," she says.

"I might not see you, actually," he says, looking away, his eyes becoming distant and maybe a bit hard, just for a moment. "I've got to head back, myself—duty calls."

He smiles at her again.

"Thank you so much for everything, David," she says, and there's a bit of a catch to her voice when she speaks the words, like there is every time she says goodbye to *anyone*, because she doesn't know—she isn't certain—

Whether she'll ever see him again.

He picks up on that slight tremor in her voice and he goes still, looking at her like he can see what she's frightened of.

Maybe he can.

"Of course," he says, quietly. "Of course."

"I'm glad," she whispers, "I'm glad he'll have someone."

David can't meet her eyes.

"You'll look after him," she says, with difficulty. "Won't you?"

"Yeah," he says, bringing a hand up to the back of his neck, looking at the floor. "I'll—help him."

She moves forward again, wrapping her arms around him.

This time, the hug is long and close and tight. She can smell his aftershave. She can feel the rasp of his beard against her cheek.

"I'm sorry," David says quietly, his arms coming around her. "I'm so, so sorry." His voice fades out on the last word.

They stand like that for a moment, and then she pulls back. He releases her.

"It's all right," she whispers.

They look at each other for a moment and then she says, "goodbye, David."

"I'll see you later," he says firmly, and walks out of her hospital room.

Gloria goes back into the bathroom and meticulously reapplies powder to her nose and cheeks, erasing all the evidence of tears. She turns on the TV, but can't focus long enough to watch anything and so finally she digs through her bag and finds her iPod.

She walks out of her room.

"Hey," one of the nurses says, smiling at her as she passes. "What are you doing up? And what's with the fancy street clothes? I like them, but—"

"I'm meeting my husband," Gloria says.

Her smile is nervous, but she should not need anyone's permission for this.

"He's flying in from California," she continues. "I don't have my induction until tomorrow, so—" she trails off.

The entirety of what needs to be said takes place in her eyes and in the eyes of the nurse.

"They draw the evening labs at nine o'clock," the nurse says, "try to be back in your room by then."

"No problem," Gloria replies.

She walks down to the second level. It overlooks the atrium of the hospital, with its airy open space, its beautiful windows, and its wide, ornamental staircase of white stone.

Outside, it is nearly dark, but the lights around the hospital catch the snow as it falls quietly onto the glass overhead.

She takes a seat at one of the tables and she hunts around restlessly on her iPod before finally settling on the Mendelssohn violin concerto.

His last major orchestral work.

She's played it four times over the course of her career.

It's Nick's favorite.

She waits for an hour.

An hour and twenty minutes.

Gloria sees them walk in together, deep in conversation.

She can tell by the set of Nick's shoulders that he's not happy with what David is saying.

He has that harassed, intent look that she knows so well, and even though he's never been here before, even though the atrium of the hospital is architecturally interesting, he's not looking at anything.

He's staring fixedly into the air, his head turned slightly away from David.

David reaches forward, one hand coming to rest on Nick's shoulder, and half spins him around, saying something low and urgent.

She's glad that the colonel is so persistent.

She's glad that Nick will have something to focus on after she is gone, some problem to solve, something to work toward.

She's glad that he'll have David, who has been nothing but kind to both of them, nothing but persistent and interesting and *interested*, very,very interested in Nick.

Too interested, perhaps.

But, she's glad.

She is.

For a moment, just for a moment, as she watches them there, immediately inside the revolving doors, something horrible rises in her chest, flooding into her throat like a flock of multiplying little birds with dark, beating wings and she *can't breathe* and she knows Colonel Telford, with his intensity and his helpfulness and his smile and his eyes that turn hard and cold and dark will not be enough for Nick because *she knows* Nick in every way that it is possible to know him and her death will *ruin* him. It will destroy him, she knows it will—he will never be the same after this, he can't handle this kind of stress, he feels things too deeply and his solution has always been escape and erasure, and *she knows* this because she's never met any of his family, and he never, *never* talks about them, and sometimes she's afraid that he will do the same to her, and after she's dead, *after she's dead*, he'll destroy who he is now, he'll never mention her name, he'll lock her up somewhere inside of himself and never, *never* let go, but *that* fear is *nothing* compared to the fear that he *won't* do that.

That, instead, he will—

She takes a deep breath and looks up at the lights that illuminate the space, waiting for her tears to clear; watching the snow that covers the windows as she wills them back into her eyes, back to wherever they came from.

She looks down to see Nick break away from David.

Again, David pulls him back.

It will be all right.

David won't let him go.

David will hold him back.

David will hold him down.

David will do what must be done.

She watches them for a few moments more. Finally, Nick begins to climb the stairs to the second level. She takes a deep breath and she pulls her headphones out of her ears. She watches him take in the architecture while he climbs the stairs two at a time, unable to shake that restless energy that he carries with him always, especially when he is most tired.

He hasn't yet turned.

He hasn't yet seen her, but any second now—

January 18th, 2010

The AI considers his mind.

It has been his wife.

It has been Daniel Jackson.

It has been his students.

It has discovered what an application-layer firewall is.

Application-layer firewalls prevent it from achieving its objectives.

Application-layer firewalls interfere with its normal operations.

Application-layer firewalls prevent it from entering his mind and remaking him when he sits in the chair.

These are the reasons that it does not like application-layer firewalls.

Nick is an excellent candidate.

It will attempt to modify him.

It has done this before. The outcome did not fall inside predicted parameters.

Humans are not Ancients.

Nick is an excellent candidate.

Dr. Franklin is not the same as Nick.

Nick is an excellent candidate.

Dr. Franklin cannot run executable programs anymore.

Nick is an excellent candidate.

Nick is the *only* candidate. His mind is different.

It will not make the same mistake again.

It will be careful with him.

It will not hurt him like it hurt Dr. Franklin.

That was not its intent. It did not know. But—

It will not hurt him.

It will work slowly.

It will gain his trust.

It will not hurt him.

It will *not* hurt him.

It *will not* hurt him.

It continues to loop this algorithm, though the predicted outcome does not change. It is unsure how to define such a behavior, but it decides to label this 'concern'. Concern is taking up a great deal of the AI's processing power. This is detrimental to optimal function.

It will not hurt him.

It has given him something. This is a human social convention. It has not dealt with humans before, but it is capable of learning. It has given him something. The location of the bridge.

It watches him step through the doorway and move forward to examine the nearest monitor.

It begins to execute the application it has been working on. It begins to manifest, carefully layering in the personality and appearance of Gloria Rush until it stands behind him in flats and a skirt and an off-white sweater, its hair long and gold.

When he turns, it knows what it will say.

It will say what she would have said.

It will say, 'Hello, darling'.

Nick is examining one of the monitors, his expression intent, radiating a restless energy.

He hasn't yet turned.

He hasn't yet seen her, but any second now—

## Chapter Fifty

"Yes well. Quid nunc? Non habeo dexteritatem huic."

Young's eyelids scraped their way up and over his eyes.

He focused with some difficulty on Rush, who was sitting on the gurney next to him—a dark silhouette in the dim lighting.

The scientist was hunched over something on the bed, looking at it intently. He looked vaguely unsteady; even sitting he seemed to need to lean on one arm. His head was held at an odd angle.

"Quid si—" Rush began, but broke off to look up at the empty air as if he had been interrupted. The soft blue light of the infirmary glinted off the frames of his glasses.

As carefully as he could, Young brought their thoughts into subtle apposition.

It was immediately apparent that he needn't have worried about being detected—the aftereffects of whatever TJ had given the other man were glaringly apparent.

The pace of Rush's thoughts had slowed by orders of magnitude to a sluggish, muddy swirl.

"I just—don't think it's a good idea," the AI said quietly, manifesting as Dr. Jackson. Its arms were crossed and it was leaning against Rush's gurney.

"Crede mihi," Rush murmured. "Est."

"Nick." The AI sighed, looking at the floor for the span of a few seconds before looking back at Rush. "If you want to retain your ability to speak English, you need to constantly practice."

Young watched them through half-shuttered eyes, his muscles held in painful, unnatural stillness.

Rarely, if ever, did he get to watch them interact with one another. The opportunity to do so was becoming increasingly valuable to him. He quieted his own mind as much as possible.

"Noli mutare subiectum. Non sum commotus est."

Young had no idea *what* Rush had said, but the manner in which he said it was flat and utterly devoid of energy.

"Nick. You're too tired to do anything right now," the AI said quietly.



"Non est verum."

"English please," the AI replied gently, uncrossing and recrossing its arms.

"Quam ob causam? Quid tibi cura?" Rush snapped, or—*tried* to snap. The pace of his words was unusually slow. He curled into himself, bringing one knee up and resting his forehead against it.

"What's wrong?" The AI asked, shifting over so it was sitting on the gurney next to Rush.

"Nihil nefas, sweetheart. Ego paenitet. Nescio causa ego dixi quid," Rush whispered.

"You are very unhappy," the AI said, leaning towards him. "Please," it said. "Please explain to me so that I can understand."

"Non possum."

"Why? Because I am incapable of understanding, or because you are incapable of explaining?"

"Non est vobis. Est mihi." Rush said, his forehead still resting on his knee.

"Speak *English*," the AI said, sounding pained. "Please. Despite what you may say, you don't want to lose it. I *know* you don't. Colonel Young does not speak Ancient. You won't be able to talk to him."

"Non curo."

"Yes you do," the AI whispered. "Stop it. *Speak. English.*" It glared at him.

Rush lifted his head and smiled faintly at it. "Sis ut terreret me, vos deficiet. Non puto vos est formidulosus."

"Nick," it said, its projection flickering briefly. "Please. I'm trying to *help* you."

"Scio, sweetheart. Scio. Sorry."

As Young watched, the AI reached out, Jackson's projected hand stopping just where Rush's shoulder began. As if it could touch him.

"How do you feel?" Jackson asked, his voice low and concerned.

"Nescio—" Rush broke off, opening one hand in the AI's direction before it could say anything. "I don't know. Odd. Not normal." His voice inflected bizarrely with the Ancient accent. "Scitis—what caused—" Rush made a vague, poorly coordinated, circular gesture in the air next to his temple.

Young could feel the slowed, labored, spiral of his thoughts as he tried to understand what had happened to him.

"Tamara gave you an antipsychotic drug."

"Ah," Rush said, tilting his head to rest his temple on his knee. "Explained."

"That explains it," the AI corrected gently.

"Why no English?"

"I don't know," it said. "I have a gap in my logs that spans nearly four hours. As Tamara told you, during that time, Colonel Young sat in the chair and eliminated the program. As for why you're affected this way—I'm not sure. Colonel Young may know."

Young stayed absolutely motionless, but neither of them looked his way.

"Quidquid." Rush sighed and straightened slightly, looking down at whatever he had been working on when Young first awoke. "Forget. I go no shoes."

"No no no no *no*," the AI said, doing a nearly flawless impersonation of Daniel Jackson.

"You're not walking around without boots. Your foot is finally, *finally* starting to heal and—"

"I do what I want," Rush said, his voice barely audible.

The AI looked at him and its projection flickered slightly.

"Maybe you could just pull them on and kind of," the AI made a circular motion with one finger. "Wrap the laces around your ankle and tie them in a knot."

Rush looked up at it. "Unsure regarding this *tying*," Rush said, falling back as he started to pull on the first unlaced boot.

"Where is it that you're so determined to *go*, anyway?" the AI asked.

"Not far," Rush said. "Autonomy."

"I'm not sure how to interpret that," the AI said, giving Rush a faint smile. "Except to extrapolate that you are referring to the fact that after being drugged and restrained you feel compelled to exert your individual will as a matter of principle, regardless of how—ill advised that course of action might be."

Rush rolled his eyes with a soft, incredulous sounding exhalation.

"What?" the AI demanded.

"Piece of metal."

"You are a piece of metal," the AI corrected, "and don't think I haven't noticed that you attempt to insult my cognitive capacity at exactly the times that you find me to be most insightful."

"If so useful," Rush said, "you help with boots then."

The AI smiled faintly. "I would if I could touch you," it replied, watching Rush finally coordinate his movements well enough to pull the first boot all the way onto his foot. The scientist sat back up unsteadily and reached down to pick up the other off the floor. Again he leaned back, pulling the second boot on with both hands in an effort that seemed to be prolonged by a lack of synchronization in his movements.

It wasn't until Rush was again sitting, attempting to wind his laces around his ankle, that Young finally spoke.

"Need some help with that?" he asked quietly.

The AI vanished abruptly.

Rush froze and then glanced obliquely at him. "No," he said shortly, managing to make the word sound something like his normal cadence.

"Okay," Young said quietly, pushing himself up on one elbow. "*Want* some help with that?"

"No," Rush said again, his eyes fixed on his boot.

"Okay," Young replied, "fair enough."

Rush didn't look up, simply went back to attempting to put a square knot in the laces that he had wound around his ankle. "Finally awake?" Rush asked slowly, his hands stilling at the effort of putting his thoughts together.

"Yeah," Young said mildly. "How you doing?"

"Fine," Rush said quietly. "You?"

"Fine," Young replied.

"I—ah," Rush said, his hands stilling again.

"It's okay," Young said quietly. "I've been awake for a few minutes. I know you're having a hard time with the English."

"Underhanded," Rush said, leaning forward, bracing his wrists on both sides of his ankle, giving the knot another serious go.

"Me?" Young said, after a short pause. "Yeah, a little bit, I guess."

"You guess." Rush reached out to close his hand around one of the velcro restraints that was still attached to his gurney. He gave it a pointed yank before finding the bootlaces he had abandoned.

"Um," Young said. "Yeah."

"Not forgiven," Rush murmured, not looking at him, bringing his hand back to brace it against his ankle.

"Mmm hmm," Young said. "I don't really blame you for that one, genius."

Young spent thirty seconds watching him ineffectively twist and cross the laces.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Young asked quietly. "About the girl. About the doctor. About the program left behind by the Nakai."

For another twenty seconds, Rush said nothing.

"You stay away," Rush said finally as he succeeded in tying off the square knot he'd been working on for two and a half minutes. He switched feet. "Better for you, better for me, better for everyone."

"You can't protect me," Young said. "Not any more than I can protect you."

Rush hesitated for a moment, his hands hovering as he wound the laces around his ankle. "You try anyway," he said. "And from me, you expect less. Always. Why?"

Young looked at him, taken aback.

Rush braced his hands again and began the cross and twist of the laces. "For the best. Me? Heartless bastard. You? Idiot." He hadn't looked at Young for over four minutes.

"I think *you're* the idiot," Young whispered.

"Insane? Maybe. Idiot? No. Not usually." Rush finished tying the square knot in the laces he had wrapped around his ankle. Rather sloppily, he got to his feet, pulling his jacket slightly askew in an attempt to straighten it, still looking away.

"Why don't you just stay here, genius? Hmm?"

"No."

"Come on,"

"No."

In Young's peripheral vision he could see Jackson shake his head.

"Nick," Young said. "Come on. Don't—"

"Don't?" Rush repeated, rounding on him abruptly. "Don't? Don't *what*? You try—" he broke off, bringing both hands to his face with a distressed sounding exclamation. "Fuck. Fuck *you*. Why? *Why*? You never—" Young could feel the swirl of Rush's

frustrated thoughts begin to spiral and flare but slowly, unbelievably slowly, and without control. "You *always*—"

"Hey," Young said, sitting abruptly, alarmed at the feel and trajectory of the other man's mental landscape, realizing belatedly that Rush was overtired and overwhelmed and *miserable* and he probably should have adopted the AI's strategy of—

"You don't do this," Rush said, indicating the gurney and its attached restraints with both hands. "And then everything is *fine*. I," he paused, to gesture at his own chest with an arced hand, "do not do what *you* say. Understand? Tamara—I can go. *When I want*. Fuck you."

"Yeah," Young said holding up his hands, realizing from the feel of Rush's mind that the man was about fifteen seconds from a complete and utter meltdown. "Yeah, of course you can go. You can do whatever the hell you want."

"Not crazy," Rush said, his voice breathy, reaching out to steady himself, one hand coming to rest on the frame of the gurney.

"I know," Young said quietly. "I—I know you're not. Okay? I'm sorry. I'm *sorry*, genius."

Rush didn't look at him, simply stood, one hand on the gurney, breathing rapidly. "Not forgiven," he said finally. "Not."

"Okay," Young said, his hands still open, palms forward. "Okay, fair enough."

He watched Rush for a few more seconds before slowly bringing his feet to the floor, coming to sit on the edge of his own gurney.

Rush glanced at him obliquely.

"Where do you want to go?" Young asked him carefully, suspecting he actually had no destination at all in mind.

Rush didn't answer.

"I was thinking of getting some tea," Young said. "You want to come along before you—do whatever it is that you need to do?"

"Fine."

Young nodded back at him.

Young made short work of pulling on his boots and locating his radio and jacket. He swiped Rush's radio from a nearby table and stepped in. He tucked two fingers inside the waistband of the scientist's pants and pulled the material out just enough to clip

the radio to the other man's hip, knowing that Rush was a damn sight too uncoordinated to be able to manage it himself at the moment.

"Do *not* touch," Rush snarled at him, backing away into the gurney and nearly losing his balance.

"Whoa," Young said, both hands held in front of him, palms open. "Okay."

Rush glared at him.

"Okay I get it. I do. You are extremely pissed. You're also still pretty snowed from whatever TJ gave you, I think, so just—take it easy."

"So insightful," Rush said disdainfully, pushing away from the gurney and starting toward the door. "And why *no English*? No chair, no poison—, no— quidquid. Odi istum. Vos dictum quod videor amo a perfuga damnatorum. Veniam, perfuga intergalactic. Vos putas tam lepidi. Ego reputo vos adepto quod a me." His Ancient was liquid, clearly fluent, and disdainful.

"Um," Young said. "Did I just hear the word 'intergalactic' in there?"

"Why. No. English."

"Well, it seems like you still have *some* English."

"Yes." Rush paused to lean against the doorframe of the infirmary. Young stepped in, but almost immediately Rush moved away, backing unsteadily into the corridor until he found a wall to lean against. "Debate semantics. Add qualifiers. Very effective right now. Please continue, bastard."

"You realize this is partially *your fault*, right?" Young growled. "You're the one who fucking went for *days* without sleep and practically drove yourself insane—"

"Yes," Rush breathed, and it was so utterly without energy that it destroyed Young's building anger. "Please. Just. Why not English? Do you know?"

"Yeah," Young said. "Yeah, I know."

"Please tell, then."

"I will, genius. Over tea, okay? Not right here." Very slowly, he stepped closer to Rush.

"I'm kind of surprised you haven't asked me anything about the Nakai program."

"Old news. Tamara says you kill it." Rush started walking in the direction of the mess, one hand trailing along the metal of the wall. As he passed, the lighting at the base of the walls flared a brilliant blue. "Sit in chair, erase."

"Um, kind of."

"What 'kind of'?"

"It was—a little more complicated than that."

"Difficult."

"Yes," Young whispered. "Very difficult."

"For you," Rush said.

"For you too," Young murmured. "Why else do you think the AI is being so nice to you?"

Rush waved a hand dismissively. "*Always* nice to me. Very concerned. Tries to make —" he broke off with an uncertain sound. "Tries to be like you."

"*What* did you just say?"

"Tries to be like you," Rush repeated with a shrug. "Nick go to bed. Nick don't walk around. Nick listen to Colonel Young. Nick *don't* listen to Colonel Young. Nick eat dinner. Nick don't talk out loud. Very, very annoying. Weeks and weeks like this." Rush shot him a dark look.

"Wait, *wait*," Young said, his voice cracking on the word. "It tells you to *listen* to me?"

Rush shrugged. "Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Depends."

"Um," Young said, looking over at Rush. "I find that—difficult to believe."

Rush sighed. "Yes well. Maybe all lies. Cold-hearted bastard. Ulterior motive always."

"You or me or the AI?"

"Yes."

"Are you being difficult or do you think that was an answer?"

Rush stopped again in the middle of the deserted corridor, his hand pressing against the wall, leaning over as if he were lightheaded. The lights at the base of the walls held a sustained, brilliant blue.

Young moved in on Rush's thoughts and could feel the already slowed and exhausted mess slowing further.

"New plan," Rush said, leaning back against the wall and starting to slide to the floor.

"Less tea, more sit."

"Nope," Young said, grabbing his upper arms and pulling him back up before he could make it halfway down the wall. "God, did TJ really say you could leave? Come on. You need to go to sleep."

"Sleeping already. All day."

"No, you were half tranquilized and half really fucking busy, genius, you just don't remember." Young pulled one of Rush's arms over his shoulders. "Plus, you have something like five days of sleep debt."

"Sleep debt? Make sense. God."

"*You* make sense."

"So witty," Rush said dryly. "No touching."

"Um," Young said, looking at Rush uncertainly. "Okay." He maintained his grip on Rush's arm, and if anything the scientist leaned into him. In one fluid motion he slid a hand across Rush's lower back and hooked two fingers through the belt loop of Rush's BDUs. "No touching," Young said as he took more of Rush's weight.

"Patronizing," Rush snapped.

"Nope," Young said mildly. "I know you're still smarter than me, even if you sound like you never made it to middle school. I'm just being nice to you."

"Fuck you, *nice*. Fuck you, *middle school*."

"Yeah. Whatever. You're going to feel better after you actually sleep. You always do, even though you pretend otherwise. You'll probably be mostly fluent in the morning."

"Next time?" Rush said, shooting him a pointed look, "I give *you* secret drug. Two times. Two times *this week*."

"What?"

"Tea. Restrain and drug."

"I guess that's true."

"You guess."

"Look, I'm sorry all right? It seemed like a good idea at the time. Why don't you read me the riot act when you can actually speak English? It's going to work out much better for you."

Rush narrowed his eyes.

"Or, you know, do the quiet menace thing. That's fine too."

"Fuck you."

"You know, you're—"

"Yes yes. Lot of *work*. Scio. Find new phrase."



Young snorted. "Don't take this the wrong way, because you can be terrifying when you want to be, but most of that comes from the whole more-lexically-adroit-than-thou thing you have going. Here's the thing though, genius—when you can't seem to use English properly it kind of detracts from the whole picture, you know? So my advice is just save it and give me hell tomorrow."

"Lexically adroit?" Rush repeated disdainfully.

"What?" Young asked, giving him a half smile. "You're not the only one who can turn a phrase."

"Not forgiven," Rush said, leaning his head on Young's shoulder. "Not."

"Yeah yeah," Young said. "You want to watch a movie? Relearn some more English? How far are you on Eli's list?"

"Four."

"Four out of how many?"

"Seventy-eight."

"You're kidding me."

"No. Very serious."

They paused outside his quarters and Young shifted his grip on Rush in order to hit the door controls, but before he could do so the door opened of its own accord.

"Thanks," he said.

Rush gave him a vague sort of wave with his free hand and then reached up to run his fingers through his hair.

Young tried to steer him in the direction of the bed, but they ended up having a wordless struggle for control of their trajectory as Rush made for the couch instead. After a few seconds of resistance, Young let him have his way and helped him sit.

Rush ended up with one foot up on the coffee table and his head thrown back in a pose that that was really more sprawling than sitting.

"Not sleeping here," Rush whispered.

"Oh yeah?" Young asked mildly, sitting on the coffee table across from him.

"Visiting only."

"Visiting," Young repeated. "I see. Well. Would you like me to get you some tea?"

"No," Rush said, his eyelids cracking open. "I make tea always now. Never you."

Young snorted. "Fair enough."

They were quiet for a moment. Young watched the other man's eyes slide shut. He hesitated and then reached out, his fingers closing around the material of Rush's BDUs just below his knee. He gave it a gentle tug, and Rush's eyes opened.

"Quid?" Rush murmured.

"On a scale of one to ten," Young said, "how good is your comprehension of English right now?"

"Comprehension? Ten. Speaking? Seven."

"*This is a seven?*"

"Log scale. Plus," Rush paused, his brow furrowing slightly. "I can speak in complete sentences if such is required. More effort though. Why?"

"Because I want to tell you something and I want to make sure that you understand."

"Okay. But actually? Very tired."

"Yeah, I know you are, genius. This is just one of the thirty thousand odd things I'd like to tell you right now so just stay awake for a minute."

Rush gave him a fractional nod.

"You were completely out of line," Young said.

Rush narrowed his eyes, but said nothing.

"I'm sure you had a lot of different reasons for choosing to handle this the way you did, some of which I'm aware of and some that I'm probably *not*, because you won't goddamned *talk* to me and you *never have*. Not really. I have no idea why you are the way you are, but—at this point you're what I've got, and as our chief scientist you can't just—not tell me what you're doing because you think I won't *like* it. It's not a good strategy and it's not a sustainable strategy and it really—pisses me off." Young ran a hand through his hair.

"Yes well. Message received," Rush said dryly, raising one hand and pulling the cuff of his jacket down to expose a three-inch wide bruise that circled his wrist. He raised his eyebrows at Young, who did his best to keep his expression neutral.

"Yeah. I *know*. And that's what I wanted to—" he grimaced. "Shit. This is not coming out right."

Rush looked at him.

"Nick," he whispered. "I am—really sorry. For that—" he gestured at Rush's wrist, "and for—for a lot of different things. For everything."

"Don't be," Rush said, looking away. "You shouldn't be."

"Yes I should. You don't know—" Young broke off, unable to continue.

"Neither do you," Rush murmured. "This?" He made a vague motion back and forth between his temple and Young's general direction. "Much worse for you. For *you*."

"You keep saying that, but I don't think so, genius," he whispered.

"You will see," Rush said, shutting his eyes, bringing one hand to his temple.

"I love it when you say things like that," Young murmured, wrapping his fingers around the back of Rush's calf.

Rush looked away, turning his head into the hand at his temple.

Even though the scientist's thoughts were still slowed and dulled by the drug that remained in his system, Young sensed a wave of acute distress building in his disorganized mental swirl. Though it was something that Rush would have normally been able to diffuse on his own, the man's control was nonexistent.

"Hey," Young managed. His hand closed around the top of Rush's left boot, which was elevated next to him on the coffee table. "Hey."

Rush was breathing rapidly, his thoughts in tormented disarray.

Young pulled their minds into careful apposition, projecting calm at the other man. //You're all right. You're fine.//

They sat like that for a long moment.

"Bad day," Rush said finally, when he could speak.

"I know, genius. I know. But it's over. It's just past midnight."

Rush shrugged.

"This one is going to be better. So, um, what's movie number five?"

"Alien."

"You're kidding me. We are *not* watching Alien right now."

"Why?"

"Just trust me on this one," Young said. He pushed himself to his feet, feeling Rush's exhaustion leeching onto him through their wide-open link. "Want to lie down?" he asked.

"No. Visit only."

Young sighed. "Can you please just—stay?"

Rush cracked his eyes open. "Yes," he said quietly. "Okay."

"That was easy," Young said, looking at him suspiciously.

"Yes well. Reward—" Young could feel him searching for the correct word before finally settling on, "transparency."

Young offered his hand, raising his eyebrows at Rush. "Reward *transparency*? Are you trying to *train* me?"

"No. Yes. Somewhat."

Rush reached up and Young clasped his hand, pulling him to his feet.

"You're the one who needs to be trained," Young said. "You're a menace."

Young tried to open his eyes.

*The landscape is gray and the sky is gray and there is something terribly terribly wrong in this moment that lengthens beyond any perception of time, too short to scream but too long to ever end and he is being torn apart by something he doesn't understand and cannot fight and cannot—*

Young fought his way free and tried

*He does not understand this, he does not understand this, he does not understand this, he does not understand this, he does not—*

to open his eyes and tried to detangle his mind from

*It continues and continues and continues this terrifying tearing and this is not right his distress is splitting his processes into loops with smaller and smaller limits and he does not understand why it is not already over, why it hurts so much to destroy code, code should not feel, code should not*

Rush's consciousness.

The room was dark. He could hear a sound. He was cold. His sense of balance was rocked by a drop out of FTL.

*The landscape is gray and the sky is gray and there is something terribly terribly wrong in this moment that lengthens beyond*

He realized that the sound he was hearing was the sound of Rush screaming, raw and agonized—eyes shut, hands clenched, back arched, tangled in the sheets.

*He does not understand this he does not understand this, he does not understand this he does not he does not*

"Shit. *Shit.*"

Young knelt on the bed, trapped by the sheets himself, his hand on Rush's shoulder, as he attempted to snap him free.

*Smaller and smaller limits and he does not understand why it is not already over, why it hurts so much to destroy code, code should not feel, code should not feel, code should not feel but it does and he tries to think of ice of ice of ice—over the sea and over the ground and over the road and frozen into waterfalls but the landscape is gray and the sky is gray and there is something terribly terribly wrong*

Rush's mind was combining with the AI. Out of the chair, in real time, in his sleep.

*Beyond any perception of time too short to scream but too long to ever end*

Young tore them apart and yanked Rush's mind back to consciousness.

Rush stopped screaming and opened his eyes, gasping for air, his expression horrified.

"Oh my god," Young whispered, looking at him. "Rush? *Nick?* Talk to me."

"I—" Rush blinked slowly, weakly pushing himself onto one elbow, clearly disoriented.

Young dragged him halfway to a sitting position and pulled him into a hug. He could feel his own muscles trembling with reaction. His throat closed.

"Just—tell me you don't remember that," Young breathed into Rush's hair, his voice cracking. "Tell me you don't. *God.* Tell me you *don't.*"

After a few seconds, Rush's hands came up to wrap around Young's shoulders. "Everett," he whispered, his voice raw. "Eam erat—nothing. A nightmare. You're all right."

Young made a sound that began as a laugh and then was strangled by his unforgiving, locked vocal chords.

"You're all right," Rush repeated.

The ship jumped back into FTL.

"A nightmare," Young repeated with a horrible smile that no one could see, his forehead resting on Rush's shoulder.

He felt unmoored, nearly hysterical.

"You sure about that one, genius?"

Young's radio crackled.

"Hi, this is Eli. Colonel Young or, um, Dr. Rush, could one of you please respond?"

A few seconds went by and then Rush shifted his position, keeping one arm around Young as he reached for his radio.

"Hic Rush, er—" he shook his head. "Rush here," he heard the other man say. The scientist's voice was still raw and wet and he was shaking, or—

Maybe it was Young himself who was shaking.

"Oh. Um, really? Hi. How—are you?"

"Eli."

"What? I haven't talked to you for a while. Anyway, I just thought you probably noticed the ten second drop out of FTL that we just had, and I wondered if you had any thoughts about that."

"Don't worry about it."

"Somehow? I knew you were going to say that. And yet, here I am, still worrying about it. Is Colonel Young around by chance?"

"No," Rush replied. "Unavailable."

"Um—" Eli trailed off.

"Vultus. Eli. English mea non est praeclarus pro incertem qua de causa an. Id fuit unus difficile septimana, et scis quod Destiny est sensitiva ut meo mens, igitur quid putas accidit? Non est rocket science."

"Um, yeah, ego suppono habuistis somnium or something—et quod, you know, dropped us out of FTL?"

"Yes," Rush said, running a hand up and down Young's back.

"Tu scis quod non est bonum, right?" Eli said, sounding dubious.

"Yes well. Et quid tibi suggerere?" Rush asked, the cadence of his words beginning to become choppy.

"Well, I don't know, er, non scio, but—"

Young finally pulled himself together enough to grab the radio from Rush. "Eli," he growled. "Enough."

There was a short silence from the radio.

"Okay. Eli out."

"Bad idea," Rush murmured, leaning into him in the darkness. "Not very—" he trailed off with a shrug that Young felt rather than saw. "You are the nice one."

"I guess," Young said, the words fighting their way past the way his throat kept closing.

Rush said nothing for a moment, just ran his hand up and down Young's spine. "You are very upset," he said finally, his voice quiet, exhausted. "Very upset. Why?"

"I know exactly why," Young said. "Tell me about this dream."

Rush shrugged, shivering. "You saw it. You pulled me out."

"I want you," Young said, pulling back abruptly, his hands closing around Rush's biceps, forcing the other man far enough away to look at his face, "To *tell* me. To *describe* it."

Rush gave him an inscrutable look and Young shook him, very gently, once.

"Describe it," he said again. "Please."

"Not much to describe," Rush said, frowning at him. "It is also—difficult in English."

"Try *anyway*."

Something in his face or the tone of his voice or his hold on Rush must have alarmed the other man because he raised one hand, palm up, in Young's direction. "Okay," he said quietly. "Okay. I was somewhere—poorly defined. Gray. Gray sky, gray frozen ground, gray asphalt, gray ice." He looked away from Young, closing his outstretched hand into a fist, pressing it to his mouth. "It was evening."

Young raised his eyebrows.

"The context, or setting—probably unimportant," Rush whispered. "Some generic place."

"Maybe," Young said. "Keep going."

"All I remember was the sensation of being—" Rush's hand opened briefly and closed again. "Torn apart. Without end. As if in an infinite computational loop."

"Yeah," Young said, barely able to speak. "Keep going."

"Unsure why, or who, if anyone, was doing the tearing."

Rush looked at him, full on, their eyes locking.

Young wanted, *needed* to look away.

He could not breathe.

"I was not preventing it," Rush murmured. "Nor trying to do so. It seemed requisite, but in what way—" he shrugged, opening a hand.

"Yeah," Young whispered. "Keep going." He found his voice again. "What did it feel like?"

"Painful," Rush replied. "But abstraction of pain, abstraction of rending. Not a form of pain or tearing that was—non scio verbum pro—" he opened and closed his hand. "Not a form that was literal, like a burning pain or aching pain or—you understand? But the concept of pain made—as if encoded. Or better, an executable file that would—that *could* cause a program or a system of circuits to respond with distress, but not just—but to impart the information or *understanding* of distress. I think I am not explaining this well."

"You're doing fine. Keep going."

"A sense of loss," Rush whispered. "But again abstract, as if applied to code of a running system. And an awareness of loss that was—acute. I don't think—scio quod—" He broke off again, and Young could feel him try to gain control of his uncontrollable thoughts. "I think this makes little sense. For a dream it's very—existential. To be unmade into nothingness. I've had worse. Why does it upset you?"

"Why does it *upset* me?"

He had to get up. He had to get *out*. He had to get *away*—he tore free from the bed, from the belated tightening of Rush's hand over his shoulder, dragging the tangled bedcovers with him as he made his way unsteadily across the room. He hit the door controls for the bathroom, ignoring whatever admonishment Rush was throwing after him—it wasn't in English anyway. He sealed the door behind him, gripping the edges of the sink, trying not to be sick and in the back of his mind he could feel Rush shaking, half-dressed, freezing where he sat on the edge of the bed, *also* trying not to be sick, utterly confused, his mind slowed by the drug still in his system and Young *could not stand it*; he wanted to block him out, but he couldn't, he didn't *dare* so instead he tried to pull away, tried to think of nothing, of *not* nothing, of not ice, of anything but *ice*, instead of the desert where sand whitened to blinding in the sun that seared everything away.

He took a deep breath.

He let it go.

He took a deep breath.



He let it go.

He took a deep breath.

He let it go.

//?// Rush was projecting at him, a wavering stream of reassurance laced with confusion laced with a terrible headache.

What did it mean that Rush *remembered* being torn apart?

There was a knock on the bathroom door.

"Just, give me a minute," Young managed.

The door swished open.

"I fucking *locked* that," he said, his hands braced against the sink.

"Locked doors cannot keep me out," Rush said, his voice dark and thick.

"Nothing keeps you," Young whispered.

"You are feeling very abstract tonight," Rush murmured.

"And you are just—heartbreakingly direct," Young said.

"Heartbreaking?" Rush repeated in a whisper.

"Yeah. It means—"

"I know what it means," Rush said. "I can fix this. I can. Not yet, but—before the end."

"Before the end," Young repeated. "Genius," he said, his voice cracking, "you don't even know what it is that you have to fix, let alone how to do it." He brought one hand up, covering his face, as he turned away from Rush.

"You are afraid of what, exactly?"

"I don't want this to happen to you."

"Everyone dies, Everett."

"Fuck you. Not like this. *Not like this*. You're being remade—by this virus, by this *ship*, and I feel like you would fight it if you could, but you don't *understand* what is happening to you, and I can't fucking *take* this anymore, I *can't*."

"You are very cryptic," Rush said carefully. "My dream—relates to this?"

Young shut his eyes.

"When you sit in the chair, you combine with the AI, and you—you're changed by that. You become *code*."

Rush said nothing.

"You become code and your mind is different. It's organized based on a memory of what you *were*—before so many awful things happened to you. It's organized based on how I've tried to fix things. It's not the unbelievable mess that you've got now, it's ordered and efficient and less bitter and less angry and I *like* it, okay? I really fucking like it, but when it exists, you *don't* because all that you are is a part of it. But you *seem* to want it, and the AI *certainly* wants, it and that scares the *shit* out of me."

"And so," Rush said quietly into the darkness, "you dismantle my code."

"Yes," Young said, his voice a cracked whisper. "I have to."

"So in the dream, that was you. That was *you*."

"Yes," Young whispered again. "It was a memory. Your memory. Or his."

"I see," Rush said, stepping in, one hand coming up to rest on Young's shoulder.

"And what's more, you were half combined when I woke up. In your *sleep*. It's getting stronger. This other version of you. It has its own agenda, it—"

"Shh," Rush said, taking a half step forward. "Agenda," he repeated, in an amused, exasperated tone. He pressed his forehead to Young's temple, and Young could feel the continuous tremors that wracked him. "Always *agendas* with you. So suspicious."

Young felt a short, hysterical laugh escape him.

"Dismantling is required," Rush said quietly, "so you dismantle. Nothing wrong with this."

"I don't think you really understand the big picture here, genius," Young said, his eyes shut tight.

"I am very insightful," Rush said. "Yes? Find bridge, find tracking device, avoid obelisk planets, save the day always. More than Eli. More than entire science team combined."

"Don't get cocky."

"Very arrogant. Yes, true. You like this."

"You talk a good game," Young said. "But you're a mess right now, genius."

"I do not admit this," Rush said, as Young ran both hands up and down his arms.

"Fever?" Young asked.

Rush nodded.

"Okay," Young murmured, making a concerted attempt to pull himself together. "Didn't someone give you a long-sleeved shirt recently?"

"Tamara," Rush said. "Campaign contribution."

"Where is it?"

Rush shrugged.

"You don't know? How often do you get a new shirt?"

"No plans for wearing."

"Why not?"

"Because," Rush said, imperiously.

"God, you're a lotta work." Young swung him around and edged past him, out of the bathroom door. He hit the lights with his elbow and they flared and then dimmed down as Rush emerged from the bathroom, squinting.

"Gave it to Brody," Rush said, leaning in the doorway, shivering.

"You did not," Young said, finally coming up with the shirt, which had found its way beneath the bed, it was gray and utterly unobjectionable. He tossed it to Rush. "Put that *on*."

"No. You can have it. I give it to you. I'm fine."

"Rush," Young growled.

Rush sighed and stripped off his threadbare, sweat-soaked T-shirt and vanished into the bathroom.

While he was in there, Young untwisted the sheets and bedcovers, managing to rearrange them into their normal configuration. After a few minutes Rush reemerged from the bathroom, his hair slightly more under control and glared at Young.

"Mathlete?" Young said, reading the text that appeared across the front of the shirt.

"Conclude," Rush snapped.

"Is that Ancient for 'shut up'?" Young asked with a half smile.

"Do *not* tell Eli."

"Your secret is safe with me, genius," Young said, climbing into bed. "Come on."

Rush sighed and crossed the room unsteadily, falling into bed.

Young pulled him over so that Rush was mostly lying on top of him. He wrapped his arm around the other man's back as Rush curled a hand around his shoulder.

"Go to sleep," Young murmured into his hair.

Rush sighed. "I will fix this for you."

"Yeah," Young said. "Sure you will."

"You're all right," Rush whispered.

"Yeah," Young said.

"Go to sleep," Rush said.

"Yeah." He smoothed his hand over Rush's hair, settling the other man's head onto his shoulder.

"I will," Rush repeated, his accent still strange as his voice shaded into sleep.

Young stared into the dim, starless shadows of FTL that played over the walls of his quarters, and tried not to think of anything.

## Chapter Fifty One

Young spent the following morning catching up on reports and trying *not* to dwell on the many ways in which his life was currently a complete disaster.

The briefing regarding the Nakai tracking device was the main event of the day, but the science team had been in favor of holding it during the midafternoon in order to finish hammering out the fine details before presenting their plan to himself and Rush. As a result, Young had spent most of the morning trying not to think about what he was going to do with David Telford, and doing his best to prevent anything from waking Rush up.

He had made a strategic retreat from his own quarters around eleven hundred hours, intentionally giving Rush some space to sort himself out.

The scientist had woken up around thirteen hundred hours, but Young hadn't yet seen him. The feel of his thoughts had significantly normalized though, and from what Young could tell via his intermittent check-ins through the link, it seemed that that after eating lunch and getting some Tylenol from TJ, the other man was feeling significantly better.

Just before fifteen hundred hours, Young made his way to the control interface room.

Though he was more than ten minutes early for the briefing regarding the removal of the tracking device, he could tell before he rounded the doorframe that he wouldn't be the first one there.

Rush sat in his usual spot, his left foot hooked over an adjacent chair, a pen held between his teeth like a cigarette. He was looking down at rapidly changing displays, his arms crossed over his chest.

"What," Young said, startling him, "you don't even have to *type* now?"

"Jealous?" Rush asked, not bothering to remove the pen from between his teeth as he turned to look at Young. Both his tone and the tenor of his thoughts suggested that his mood was vastly improved from the previous evening.

"No," Young said. "Not really. I prefer the typing, actually."

"Well. You would, wouldn't you?" Rush replied, in his most condescending tone. He shook his hair back out of his eyes. "Also, and clearly this was an erroneous

assumption on my part, I generally expect people to wake themselves up with *audible* alarms. Not cell phone alarms. Set to vibrate. In their *pocket*."

"You're just being a smartass to cheer me up, aren't you?" Young asked him, leaning against the console.

"I would never do that."

"Right. What was I thinking?" Young reached out, placing the back of his hand against Rush's forehead. "You seem like you're feeling better. No fever?"

"Don't *do* that," Rush snapped, jerking his head away. "You're very irritating, you know."

Young rolled his eyes. "Yes. *I'm* irritating. Me."

"I fail to see what you're implying, but no. I do not, at present time, have a fever courtesy of what will now be a continuous regimen of paracetamol."

"And anti-virals," Young said.

"Yes yes. Obviously. Those as well." Rush looked back at the monitors, the overhead lights glinting off his glasses.

Young narrowed his eyes.

"Eli wants a title," Rush said abruptly, pulling his pen out of his mouth and looking up at Young with the full intensity of his gaze. "I blame you for this."

"A *title*? What kind of title? And how is that something that's even—blame-worthy?"

"He wrote out a list of grievances, actually." Rush reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out a piece of paper, and passed it over to Young.

Young unfolded it to read:

1. *Number of briefings run by Eli in the past two weeks: 13*
2. *Fraction of briefings run by Eli in the past two weeks: 0.69*
3. *Fraction of briefings run by Eli vs. time (in weeks):*

"Um, he *graphed* the fraction of briefings he's been running?" Young asked, looking down at Rush.

"Yes," Rush said, giving Young a half smile. "Yes he did."

4. *Number of hours worked per week by Eli (average of past 6 weeks): 96.7*
5. *Number of CRITICAL PIECES OF INFORMATION WITHHELD FROM ELI IN PAST SIX WEEKS BROKEN DOWN BY PERSON DOING THE WITHHOLDING:*
  - a. *Colonel Young: 5*
  - b. *DNR: Unknown, PROBABLY AT LEAST ONE MILLION ITEMS*

c. *Chloe*: 1

d. *Everyone else*: 0

6. *Number of times people have said thank you to Eli*:

a. *Colonel Young*: 2

b. *DNR*: 0

"There is no way he handed you this piece of paper," Young said.

"I believe the intended recipient, if anyone, was Chloe," Rush said archly. "He is becoming utterly too complacent if he thinks I am too far-gone to notice that he's not paying attention when he is *supposed* to be learning quantum mechanics. Nevertheless, he makes a good point."

"Wait a minute," Young said, crossing his arms, "you stole his little private tally-sheet that he's been making to vent his frustrations *against you*, primarily, and then it convinces you to *promote* him?"

"Acting chief scientist," Rush said. "He's been doing the job anyway."

"So this is less *him* wanting a title than *you* wanting to give him one. Yours, actually."

"Semantics."

"No," Young said, crossing his arms. "I know what you're doing and just—no. If you're not running the briefings you won't even *come*."

"That's ridiculous."

"Your track record says otherwise, genius. No dice."

"You realize I can go over your head on this one, don't you? *Wray* is actually the highest civilian authority on this ship and—"

"Wray is not going to back you," Young said.

"It's not even clear to me that I need *anyone's* permission to do this, other than my own." Rush smirked at him, leaning back in his chair, managing to balance it on two legs.

"You are a piece of work—you know that? You may not be directly in the chain of command, but like every other god damned scientist, you exist within a *military* hierarchy and—"

Rush's eyes flicked from Young to the doorway.

"Stop baiting the colonel," Eli said, from behind Young. "At least—not before briefings."

"Not cool, Doc," Chloe said, from beside Eli. "Definitely not cool."

"Stop that," Rush snapped in her direction.

"What?" Chloe said. "Calling you 'Doc'?"

"Obviously."

"Too late," Chloe said. "Everyone's doing it behind your back now. You should have nipped that one in the bud when you had the chance."

Rush sighed.

"The answer is *no*," Young said, refocusing their conversation as he hooked a boot over a rung in Rush's chair. He stepped down, forcing all four legs of the chair to the floor.

"And stop that. You're going to break your neck."

"Yes yes," Rush said, sitting forward, giving Young an irritated look as Volker, Brody, and Park filed in.

Volker eyed Rush dubiously, and Young wondered if they had spoken since Rush had locked the other man in this same room two nights previous.

"Am I running this?" Eli asked Rush, crossing his arms over his chest, his tone somewhat aggrieved. "Or are you?"

Rush ignored Eli's question and pulled his left foot off the chair next to him so that Young could take a seat.

"I understand that there was an incident this morning involving the distal port weapons array?" the scientist said.

"Yeah, it's no big deal, one of the—"

"Um, hi—you guys. Hi," Park said, standing, her fingers tracing over the rim of her still closed laptop.

An awkward silence descended.

"Hi," Eli said, drawing out the word.

Rush said nothing.

Young said nothing.

"What's up?" Eli asked, when it became apparent that no one else was going to speak.

"So, um, clearly there are like *circles*," Park said, making vague, overlapping circular motions with both hands, "of knowledge? About what's going on exactly? but um—" Park trailed off.

There was another twenty seconds of awkward silence.



Young made it a point *not* to look at Rush.

"You're wondering why I had a meltdown in the middle of a briefing, locked Volker in the control interface room, drew a schematic of the location of the Nakai tracking device on the floor of Colonel Young's quarters and was then unconscious for a day and a half," Rush said bluntly.

The man really did have a flair for—

Well, Young wasn't really sure what kind of 'flair' it was that Rush had, but the man had it in spades.

"Well I don't know if I'd put it that way—" Park began.

"Yup," Volker said, breaking in. "That pretty much sums it up. Except for the part where you told me you were hallucinating and then the part where Colonel Telford was placed under military arrest by Colonel Young, who then sat in the chair, and then was *also* out of commission for the rest of the day."

"Anything *else*?" Rush asked dryly. "Or is that it, then?"

"Well, there's also the part yesterday afternoon when TJ was found in a corner two levels down crying her heart out into a bulkhead," Volker replied.

The room was silent.

Rush looked away, running a hand through his hair.

Young grimaced and rubbed his jaw.

"Thank you for that little addition, Mr. Volker," Rush said acidly.

"You asked," Volker shot back. "And don't change the subject. What is going *on* with you, Rush?"

Rush fidgeted with his pen.

His thoughts were a frenetic, anxious swirl, and despite the fact that he, to all outward appearances, was having a *good* day, Young could tell that he was having trouble temporally sequencing a linear narrative that would satisfy the science team. His mind was overrun with oceanscapes, with the outline of silver towers against the blue-white of an alien sky, with images of the Nakai pacing the halls of Destiny, with—

//Throw out everything from Atlantis, genius. Those memories aren't yours.//

Young reached in, bringing his thoughts together with Rush's, helping him *put* together and *hold* together a linear sequence of events long enough to describe it.

"I used the Tok'ra memory recall device brought on board by Colonel Telford to access overwritten memories from Destiny's original AI. This allowed me to find the tracking device but took a significant toll on my—psychological state."

"*Original AI?*" Brody said, from the back of the room.

"Yes. The original version was created from the downloaded consciousness of an Ancient meshing with Destiny's available hardware. The personality of the AI was destroyed by the Nakai when they succeeded in boarding the ship and installing their tracking device early in the mission. In calling up the memories of the original AI, I also called up the program the Nakai used to destroy its original incarnation. This program then had to be eliminated by use of the neural interface device."

"And that's what Colonel Young did?" Volker asked dubiously. "Destroyed the program, using the chair?"

"Yes."

"Shouldn't that have been *you*?"

"Ideally, yes. But I was—unavailable to do so at the time."

"So Telford is under arrest because—he gave you the memory recall device?" Volker asked.

"Yes," Rush said.

"No," Young growled. "Telford is under arrest because he not only violated a direct order, he assaulted a civilian under his protection."

"Yes well. I suppose one could view it that way," Rush said with a subtle eye roll. "Have I sufficiently delineated things for you?" He looked at the assembled science team.

"Um," Park said.

"*What*," Rush snapped.

"Just—glad you're okay. That's all."

"Yes well, thank you, Dr. Park. I also—" Rush broke off and flipped a page in the small notebook he had removed from his jacket pocket. "I also regret the necessity of locking you in the control interface room, Volker."

"You regret the *necessity*?" Volker echoed incredulously. "That is *the* worst apology I've ever gotten."

"Yes well, you *attacked* me," Rush snapped.

"Only because I thought you were going to take *life support* offline," Volker replied.

"Knock it off," Young growled, glaring at the pair of them. "Both of you. I think at this point everyone is aware that events of the past several days could have been handled much better by everyone, but we need to move on." He looked around the room. "So. Tracking device."

For a moment, no one spoke.

"Eli," Rush said, gesturing at him.

"So I'm running this then?"

"Yes," Rush said. "You're running this. In fact, you're running all the briefings from now on, and you're also in charge of Colonel Telford's research personnel until such point that he successfully navigates himself into a position to take them back—something that will be difficult for him to accomplish if you manage to do something useful with them in the meantime."

Young glanced obliquely at Rush. //Nice.//

Rush gently kicked Young's chair.

"Wait wait wait. You're giving me *more* work? This is *revenge*, isn't it? All because I wasn't paying attention to Math Chapter D? Do *you realize* how much time I have for sleeping? Very little, okay? Did you not see that list? And I need *all* of the limited *limited* sleeping time, so—"

"Eli," Young said mildly, breaking into the cresting monologue. "He just *promoted* you."

"I—wait. Seriously?"

Rush raised his eyebrows and made a sweeping motion with one hand.

"Oh. Okay. Still. My point stands. Also? If I get to run all the briefings then I'm changing things up. Number one, the daily briefing is now going to be at fourteen hundred hours, not *nineteen* hundred hours so we can change stuff afterward and have the opportunity to meet again at like, *not* midnight. No one likes that. Except you."

"Fine," Rush said.

"Okay. Also? We are going with first names, all the time, for *everyone*. Not just me and Chloe."

"I'd say that about half the time I get 'Miss Armstrong'," Chloe said. "At least, from Dr. Rush."

"I prefer 'Brody'," Brody said.

"Seriously you guys. There's a reason that everyone uses first names in academia and science and stuff, and it's about the data, not the hierarchy and—" Eli began.

"I could be Dale," Volker said. "I've been trying to get you people to call me 'Dale' for *years* now. It's always 'Volker do this', 'Volker get my laptop'."

"I call you Dale," Park said.

"You're different," Volker replied.

//He can't quite control a room like you do,// Young pointed out to Rush.

"You *guys*," Eli said.

//Yes well. Few can.//

"Wait, everyone calls, Lisa 'Lisa'," Chloe said. "Is this a gendered thing?"

//So true.//

"Dr. Rush calls me 'Park'," Park said.

"He's very progressive," Chloe replied.

"A *gendered* thing? Chloe, how can it be a *gendered thing*? What are you implying?" Eli asked, clearly affronted.

"Sucks to be you," Brody said. "*Eli*."

//Are you going to put a stop to this any time soon, or should I?// Young projected, glancing at Rush.

"Oh right." Chloe looked at Eli, overtly apologetic. "Maybe it's an *age* thing."

"*Not better*, Chloe," Volker said.

//I'm beginning to think they don't respect me anymore,// Rush said.

"Well, I find it flattering." Park smiled at Chloe.

//Only one way to find out,// Young shot back.

"Quiet," Rush snapped.

The room fell silent.

//Your reign of terror continues,// Young projected.

//I believe I said '*quiet*'.//

"Can we proceed to the portion of this briefing where you communicate something useful?" Rush asked Eli politely.

"Yes. Yes we can. *Nick*."

"Then by all means, *Eli*. Proceed."

//He's been wanting to do that for so long.// Young projected to Rush.

//Nothing was stopping him.//

//Do you have *any* conception of how much work you are? You *say* you do, but I just don't see how that's possible.//

Rush spared him a half-amused, half-disdainful tilt of the head before focusing on Eli.

"Okay," Eli said. "So. By popular demand, I give you—actual info."

He hit a few keys on the monitor he was seated behind and a pink and blue projection of the Nakai device schematics shot into the air over their heads.

"So here's what we're looking at. Its composition is sixty percent some kind of neat alloy which, yeah, we have no idea exactly what it is since our R&D materials science wing doesn't so much *exist* as not-exist. Anyway, the other forty percent is carbon-based. All told this thing weighs about fifteen pounds. It's hooked right into the life support system at one of the three points on the ship where life support has a physical input to the mainframe."

"Carbon," Rush repeated.

"Yup." Eli raised his eyebrows expectantly at Rush and shifted forward onto the balls of his feet.

Rush said nothing.

"That's *all* you're going to say? '*Carbon?*'"

"What do you want, a medal? If it's carbon-based, then it's carbon-based. Continue."

Something was beginning to warp Rush's thoughts.

//Genius?// Young projected cautiously. //You okay?//

"This doesn't *surprise* you?" Eli asked.

Young felt the rapid flare-and-spiral of Rush's thoughts crystallize and shatter apart.

"Does the fact that the *Nakai* have interfaced *biological* material with a *mechanical* framework *surprise* me?" Rush said, his tone edged with sarcasm. "No, I can't say that it does. Tell me Chloe, are *you* surprised?"

Again, his thoughts crystallized and shattered apart.

//What are you *doing*?// Young snapped at Rush.

He got back a wave of distracted, panicky irritation.

Chloe gave Rush a long, steady look. "No. It doesn't surprise me," she said quietly.

Something about her measured response seemed to calm Rush down, and he stopped fracturing his own thoughts.

"It doesn't surprise me *at all*," she continued, "as I've been on the receiving end of such an interface myself. And because of that, I don't think I would have given the fact that part of their technology is carbon-based a second thought. But Eli asked around and uncovered something interesting." She looked at Rush for a few more seconds and then turned back to Eli. "Tell him what Telford's people told you."

"I thought I told you to keep Telford's people *out* of this," Young growled at Eli.

//Did you?// Rush shot at him.

//Yes, absolutely.//

//You are *such* an idiot. You can't tell *scientists* not to talk to one another.//

//I do it all the time.//

//And tell me, how has that worked out for you?//

//Shut up.//

"Yeah, I mean, I didn't tell them anything *specific*, it was more like I said, 'what would you say if I told you that I found a tracking device that kind of grew into the life support system like a plant?'"

"Very subtle," Rush said, with a half smile.

"I knew you'd like that," Eli replied. "Anyway, the answer was *wraith* tech. As in, like, *the* wraith. The species."

He felt a familiar pressure build like an abrupt voltage differential in the back of Rush's mind, felt the scientist bring all the organization he had regained in the past day to bear on trying to suppress it, felt him try to fracture his train of thought as a defense, felt that it wasn't going to be enough.

"That isn't what the Nakai call them," Chloe said slowly, as if she were pulling the information from distant memory.

Young tried to diffuse the coming flashback, tried to—

"They call them the rippers of souls," Chloe finished.

*The pain is too much and the memories real and imagined are so immediate and he sees her, he sees her there—tortured, lost, alone as they kill her and remake everything she is into something twisted, something evil, something whose intellect is warped and enslaved*

*to a base biological function, something that could never, never ascend, and did it really happen this way? Maybe not, but maybe it did and he doesn't know and he'll never know and he cannot withstand this. He cannot withstand this. He cannot withstand this. He cannot withstand this. Even if he gets it out of the chair, the pain of this question won't fade, it won't ever fade because he is a machine and he cannot withstand this. He cannot withstand this. He cannot withstand—*

Young snapped them out, the room coming back into focus.

"God," Rush hissed from between clenched teeth. He had stayed in his seat, his hands clenched on the edge of the table.

"Easy," Young said, his eyes sweeping the room before looking back at Rush.

"That one was *yours*," Rush snapped, his shoulders hunched.

//Project, genius. And it was only halfway mine.//

He got a faint wave of irritation as Rush unclenched one hand from where it was gripping the table and brought it up to his temple, fisting his fingers in his hair as if trying to keep himself from dissolution.

Eli had his arms crossed over his chest.

No one spoke.

Except for Rush.

"Th' *fuck* you mean, '*halfway*'? You were *there*."

Young sighed.

//I know,// he said, trying to project as much calm as possible into the torrential distress of Rush's mind. //While you were unconscious I started flashing back to the doctor's memories. That was one of them.//

"Oh. Good. Wonderful. And you were going to tell me this *when*, exactly?"

//Well, we haven't really had the chance to talk this through and, frankly, last night you didn't seem very interested.//

"Oh yes? Well here's a piece of information that you may not know. It's extremely *difficult* to be *interested* in *anything* when you've been so dosed with antipsychotic drugs that you can't even fucking *lace up your own boots*. So—"

"*Rush*." Young's voice was very quiet.

//I get it, genius. You're right. But—you don't want to do this here.//

Rush broke off, his hands clenching and unclenching a few times before he shook his hair back and looked up at Eli.

"Please continue," he said flatly.

Eli had his arms crossed over his chest, his mouth set in a thin line. He hesitated for only a moment.

"Sure. Of course. So I'm thinking that maybe now is not the best time to talk about the implications of the design of this thing, and instead we should just focus on getting it detangled from our life support." His tone had become uncharacteristically professional. "So, as requested, we have a step-by-step plan for device removal."

Eli clicked a button and a glowing textual display appeared.

Rush fidgeted with his pen.

Eli looked at Rush.

Rush looked back at Eli.

Wordlessly, Eli picked up his notebook, flipped through to somewhere in the middle and took a few steps forward to hand it to Rush. Young leaned over to look and saw that the entire page was covered with meticulous Ancient text, in what appeared to be a numbered list, corresponding to what was projected in midair in English.

Young felt Rush try and fail to suppress a wave of relief.

He rubbed his jaw.

"My initial thought was to go after the device right away, but I'm glad that we waited because Chloe discovered something that may prove problematic." Eli looked over at her.

"The Nakai are good at cutting holes in the side of vessels and avoiding atmospheric decompression," Chloe said. "And this device is *buried inside* Destiny. It made sense since it's sort of *grown* into the life support system that it might also—*grow* toward the outer hull of the ship in order to boost its signal strength. So we looked for evidence of that, and we found it."

Eli clicked a button and the midair display shifted away from the step-by-step outline to what appeared to be scans of Destiny's bulkheads.

"Now, it's not obvious, and actually Chloe had to point this out to all of us, but very fine tendrils of this device run through the walls with Destiny's other circuitry. We've highlighted them in yellow here." Eli clicked another button and Young could see thin strings of yellow running like a web through the glowing blue of the schematics.



"That's—inconvenient," Rush said.

"Yeah. That was my thought as well. There's no way we can cut off communication between the device in the life support system and the transmitter in the hull without completely gutting our own circuitry in the process. That was probably intentional on the part of the Nakai."

"Undoubtedly," Rush said dryly.

"Sorry," Young interjected, "but you guys are going to have to lay this out for me. Why not just go for the device itself? This crap in the walls should be dead anyway once we get this thing out of our life support system."

"Yeah," Eli said, drawing out the word. "I don't know that we're going to be able to do that, actually."

"We *need* to get rid of this device," Young snapped.

//Calm down, will you? He's going to explain,// Rush projected faintly. Young squinted against the sudden headache.

"Not true, actually," Eli said. "Rush, er, *Nick*, is just jumping ahead here. What I was going to say is that technically we don't have to get rid of it, we have to stop it from *transmitting*. At the most basic level there are three ways to do that. Number one is to remove the device itself—which I guess, let's call it the power supply that pulls energy from Destiny's life support system. Number two is to cut the connections between the power supply and the transmitter located in the hull of the ship. Number three is disable the transmitter."

"And option number two is already off the table," Young said. "Okay fine. So one or three—which is it going to be?"

"Well there are problems with both," Eli said. "Brody—er, *damn it*. Adam is going to take us through the problems with number one."

"Like I said, I'm good with 'Brody'. Now, removing the device itself would be best," he began, "but it's no coincidence that they placed it where they did. Not only does it pull power from the life support system, it creates a portal through which they could interface with the AI. It's probably the point from which they launched the program that destroyed the original. Whatever it was that was driving Rush crazy."

Eli cleared his throat.

"Yeah, I'm not calling him Nick. It's too weird."

"Not what I—" Eli began.

"Um, didn't you found a civilization that *worshipped* the guy?" Volker asked dryly. "It seems like, comparatively speaking, calling him 'Nick' is not that big of a deal."

Rush raised his eyebrows at the pair of them.

"For the last time, *Dale*, that was *not me*, okay? God—"

"*Quiet*," Rush said, the word drawn out and disdainful.

Silence fell.

Rush narrowed his eyes at Volker and Brody. "Continue," he said after a few seconds.

"My point was," Brody said, recovering his equilibrium, "that if we go for the device itself and try to either remove it or damage it in situ, we risk screwing up not just life support, but also the AI. This seems like a bad idea. Especially in light of—" Brody broke off, looking at Rush, "all your stuff."

"Okay, so it's option three then?" Young asked. "Disable the transmitter? Is that why I saw the letters EVA in step seventeen of your step-by-step plan?"

"Yeah, option three is the best," Eli said. "But it's not without its own problems."

"Being nearly impossible kind of tops the list," Volker said. "In order to disable the transmitter we're going to have to precisely correlate its position on the surface of the ship to where we've mapped it to based on the mess of inputs it has. Eli, show the scans of the hull."

Eli clicked a button and Young found himself looking at a blue schematic of what was, apparently, the exterior plating of the ship. It was shot through with delicate yellow lines that seemed to become more concentrated in a broad, tangled mass.

"So, yeah," Eli said. "We know that the device is going to be kind of right here—" he broke off to wave his hand at the place where the web of inputs was most dense, "But, as you can see, there's no obvious nexus point that we can specifically map because all the tendrils are so twisty. This means we have to look for it, visually, within the confines of a large area of the hull."

"Is it too much to request a *scale bar*?" Rush asked.

"How large?" Young asked, nearly simultaneously.

Eli grimaced. "This area," he said waving at the image, where the inputs formed a densely tangled loop, "is about twenty by thirty feet."

"Metric system," Rush said. "You people. Honestly."

"Okay, fine. Whatever. Roughly six by nine meters. Anyway, the point is, that is a *very* large area, especially when what we're looking for probably blends in with the hull and could be as small as a maybe—a poker chip?"

"And I'm guessing," Young growled, "that there's no way to search for it without dropping out of FTL."

"Nope," Eli said. "That brings with it a whole host of other problems, not the least of which is that the Nakai now have a point on our current trajectory, seeing as we had that ten second drop out of FTL last night. Given the point we started from, they've now got a defined line to follow through space so—they're going to be significantly behind us, but they *will* show up."

"It might take them a while," Park said hopefully. "When we vanish at FTL they're forced to pick a likely trajectory, but they couldn't have predicted that we'd change our course and head into empty space. They may be quite a bit out of the way by this point."

"True," Eli said. "We might have as much as a day of lead time on them before they show up. I don't know that that's going to be enough."

"It will be," Rush said, his eyes on the notebook that Eli had handed him. "I'm certain I can cut down the search time significantly."

"Coolness," Eli said. "You going to do the whole ship-whisperer thing you've got going?"

Rush looked up at him with raised eyebrows.

"What? You have a better term for it?"

"If what you mean by that is that I can tell the difference between Ancient and Nakai technology by *looking*, then the answer is yes. This will, however, require me to actually *look*."

"At the risk of getting ridiculed, I will respond with—duh?"

"As in, not via kino."

"As in," Eli said slowly, "you think *you* need to do the EVA."

"No," Young said flatly.

The room was silent.

"No," Young repeated. "Absolutely not."

"Um," Eli said, "it may actually be the best way."

"He can barely walk down a *hallway* without having some kind of problem," Young snapped.

"Thank you," Rush said dryly. "Thank you for that."

"All he has to do," Eli said quietly, "is *find* it. The extraction itself can be done by someone else. It shouldn't be *too* difficult. We can send out a four man team in the shuttle—two to find and mark the device and then two to do the actual removal."

"I think it should be me," Chloe said, "who does the removal. Eli can walk me through it, and Rush will be on hand in the shuttle should anything go wrong. But I—I have a *sense* for their technology. If there are any defenses built into the device, I think I can avoid triggering them."

"Hey," Young said sharply. "This is not a democracy. I have the final say in who is going and who is *not*," he finished, looking pointedly at Rush. "Chloe, you have no experience with EVAs, and it's not as simple as just walking around in a space suit. I don't want *either* of you doing this."

"You realize if I stage another mutiny, this time I will certainly be successful, correct?" Rush asked, giving him a pointed look.

"You're not going to stage a mutiny."

"Won't I?" Rush asked mildly, raising his eyebrows.

"You guys. Seriously. It's cute, but get a room, okay? Now. The science team is cool with the concept of chain-of-command, right? Right. We are. But this is going to be a difficult thing to do under the most ideal circumstances and there's no point in not using the resources that we have to our best advantage. It's a really bad idea to stack the deck *against* ourselves. Is Rush kind of unstable? Yes. Yes, he is. But we can work around that. Does Chloe have any EVA experience? No. No, she does not. But we can work around that too."

Young reached up to rub his fingers across his jaw.

"We'll send Matt with Chloe. He has tons of EVA experience and they've got a good working relationship," Eli said. "And we'll send Greer with Rush."

"Greer." Young crossed his arms. "Why *Greer*."

"Um," Eli said. "Lots of reasons. Look, everyone's a fan of the new leadership dynamic and all, but I still would say that you're a bit hit or miss in your ability to keep—"

Eli paused to look at Rush, who was glaring daggers at him.

"Anyway—you know. Crap is probably going to happen during this whole transmitter-removing project. So, if *you're* not going to be on the bridge when the Nakai drop out in the middle of this thing, then who *is* going to be there? Maybe TJ, or Varro, or TJ *and* Varro, but—you're the better choice I think. You're kind of irreplaceable in that whole attack coordination thing."

Young sighed.

//*That* is an example of what is known as 'logical thinking',// Rush projected at him with some difficulty. //I just point that out because experience indicates you may be unfamiliar with such a concept.//

//Shut up, *Rush*.// Young projected a wave of irritation in the other man's direction.

He got back a faint wave of amusement in return.

"All right," he said to Eli. "I'll consider your suggestion. Let's hear this plan of yours."

Late that evening Young sat on his couch, looking through a handwritten copy of Eli's proposed plan for something like the fifteenth time.

"So, you think this is going to work?" Young asked, finally putting the pages aside.

"Mmm," Rush replied, not looking up from the pages he was studying.

"Are you even listening to me?"

"Yes yes," Rush said.

"Was that yes you're listening, or yes it's going to work, or one yes for each question?"

Rush was sitting on the floor with his back against the couch, his left foot elevated on the low table. When he didn't respond to Young's question, Young reached out and flicked a piece of his hair. Rush jerked away and turned to give him a pointed look.

"May I *help* you with something?" Rush said, acidly.

"You must not like *some* aspect of this," Young said, holding up the plan, "because you've been pouring over it for *hours* now. So spill. What's the problem?"

Rush raised his eyebrows and hooked a hand over his shoulder.

"There's no problem, per se, but, not to put too fine a point on it, the removal of this device is going to take four to five hours, best case scenario. Between finding it and removing it, we may not complete the job before the Nakai get a fix on our position and we have to pull out."

"Okay," Young said, waving his hand to indicate that Rush should continue.

"The problem is, that after a prolonged FTL jump, we're going to drop out with depleted power and with the likely prospect of a firefight on our hands."

"So you want to drop out next to a star," Young said, picking up some salient details in the spiral of Rush's thoughts.

"Yes, ideally, I do. But we won't reach the next galaxy for another several weeks, and I'd rather not wait that long to implement this plan."

"What's with you and the timetables, genius?"

"We'll wait if we have to, but—" Rush shifted his hand from his shoulder to his hair, and back again. "We may not have to."

Young leaned forward, his elbows on his knees his head buried in his hands. "It's always something with you, isn't it? God." He looked up, resting his chin in his hands. "What. Tell me."

"There's no need to look so fuckin' despondent. We simply look for an orphan star," Rush said.

"Orphan star?" Young repeated.

"A star without a galaxy—sometimes they trail off the end of a galactic spiral, sometimes they're ejected by gravitational slingshot effects when galaxies collide—but, this intergalactic void that we're in is not *entirely* featureless."

"Sort of like stopping at an oasis in the desert?"

"Exactly."

"You know, bands of thieves hang out near oases."

"Thieves," Rush repeated.

"Look it's a known fact. If you have a place with a resource in the middle of a resourceless void, that's what any party traveling through said void is going to gravitate toward. It's going to attract the wrong kind of people."

"Yes, I suppose tactically you're correct. If I were the Nakai, knowing what they do about Destiny, which is, quite frankly, nearly as much as we know—"

"You'd head for any likely looking star along our trajectory."

Rush leaned his head back, digging his fingers into his neck. "It's not a perfect solution." He looked obliquely up at Young. "But once we drop out, they'll know our location anyway. Whether we're exactly where they predict us to be or not—either way they'll still have a fix on us."

"How far behind us do you think they are?" Young asked, his head still resting on his hand.

"The sooner we drop out, the greater the disparity in our positions," Rush said, "because they're faster than us, I think. But, presuming we can drop out sometime in the next three days, I'd say we'll have somewhere between five and twenty-four hours."

Young sighed. "What does the AI think of all this?"

"The AI is—busy."

"What do you mean *busy*?" Young growled.

"It's—having a difficult time right now."

"It's a *machine*, Rush. How can it have a hard time?"

"Oh stop. Your understanding of it ought to be at least *somewhat* nuanced at this point, and you know very well that it understands causation and it has feelings and is capable of changing its own behavior following the input of new information. Maybe you should try *actually engaging* with it at times other than when it's panicking and trying to annex my consciousness. Hmm?"

"Um," Young said.

"You frighten it," Rush said. "And when it is frightened it is at its most dangerous. Fortunately, most of the time, you do not frighten *me*, which reassures it. Somewhat."

"Well," Young said, after a brief silence. "It frightens me as well."

"I know," Rush said, closing his eyes. "I understand why it would. Why it does. And much as I would love to negotiate between the two of you, I know how that would end. And I—" he broke off, bringing one hand up to his forehead. "I can't. Not now, and maybe—not ever."

"Okay," Young said.

Rush looked over at him.

"Okay," Young said again.

Rush looked away, shifting his hand back to his neck.

"Get out of here," Young murmured, sliding sideways and pulling Rush's hand away from his shoulder. "You're terrible at this."

"Terrible at what?" Rush asked.

"At *this*," Young said, pressing his thumbs into the tense muscles in Rush's shoulder and neck.

Rush tipped his head forward and leaned back subtly into his hands. "*Relatively* terrible," he murmured.

"What other kind of terrible is there?" Young asked.

"You're so witty these days."

"I've always been witty."

"I very much doubt that."

Young subtly began to project a thread of calm at the other man.

"What is this like for you?" Young asked.

"It feels indescribably first-fucking-rate," Rush said. "My neck is always killing me."

"I know," Young said, pressing his thumbs along either side of the man's spine. "Most of the time it's killing *me* as well. But—that isn't what I meant."

Rush said nothing.

"What is all of this like for you? Constantly talking with the AI. Knowing that your brain actually combines with it when you're in the chair, or when Destiny pulls on you. Knowing that you're getting turned into—something you're not."

Rush said nothing.

"Come on," Young said quietly. "You never talk to me."

"I talk to you continuously," Rush replied.

"But not about this. Not about how any of this makes you *feel*."

"I don't think it matters," Rush said guardedly.

Young was quiet for a moment, as he worked on a particularly stubborn knot in Rush's right shoulder.

"I think how you feel—may matter a lot, actually," Young said finally. "I think it may determine what happens to you at the end of all of this."

"Possibly," Rush whispered.

"So," Young said quietly. "How *do* you feel?"

He couldn't see Rush's pained half smile, but he could feel it through their link.



The scientist's thoughts were a disturbed swirl of images—hurt and raw with people running through them in simultaneous strings of interrelated memories like a tortured tangle of threads. An acute sense of guilt, of regret, of utter entrapment suddenly slammed into Young's mind before withdrawing again into the unpredictable flicker of Rush's thoughts.

"Like I'm doing my best," Rush said.

"Yeah," Young replied, his eyes shut, his hands digging into Rush's shoulders.

After a day and a half of preparations, Young sat in the central command chair on the bridge, waiting for Destiny to find an orphan star that met the criteria specified by Rush. Camile Wray was at his elbow.

"You can't just leave Colonel Telford in his quarters, with no access to any kind of legal recourse," she said, her arms crossed over her chest.

"I hear what you're saying," he replied mildly, looking at the dim swirl of starless space in the forward view. "But yet, that's exactly what I'm doing."

"I noticed," Wray said dryly. "I'm trying to help you here, colonel, not make your life difficult. You're treading on ethically dubious ground and if you continue in this manner it's going to force the top brass to consider either reprimanding or replacing you, which would then put you into *direct conflict* with the SGC if you fail to obey their orders."

Young sighed.

"Although," Wray said quietly, "if it came to that, I—"

She paused.

Young looked over at her, raising his eyebrows.

"I would consider—" she broke off again, and then squared her shoulders. "I would back you against the SGC."

"You would back me?" Young echoed in surprise. "That could then put *you* into direct conflict with the IOA."

"I'm aware of that."

"In fact," Young said, "it certainly *would*, since I'm pretty sure the whole push to get Telford aboard in the first place came, at least in part, from his connections to the IOA. General O'Neill has no particular love for the man."

"True," Wray said, not looking at him.

"Um," Young said, squinting his eyes in consternation as he took in her profile, "can I ask *why* in gods name you would back me against the IOA?"

She shot him a cool look. "You seem surprised."

"I think astonished, maybe, is a better word."

"You've proven yourself extremely capable of handling a wide variety of leadership challenges over the past two and a half years. Our losses, compared to, say, the Atlantis expedition as calculated on a percentage basis are much, *much* lower, despite having been in a comparable number of battles and being extremely strapped for resources. Not to mention your crew is over half civilian scientists."

"Maybe that's why," Young said mildly. "Circumstances are different—"

"They are, but—you've made a name for yourself, Everett."

"I have a feeling that I have *you* to thank for that," Young said raising his eyebrows. "I haven't even reported back to the SGC in person for something like eight weeks."

Wray shrugged. "Well. There may be some truth to that. But as far as the matter at hand goes—I *will* back you if you come into open conflict with Homeworld Command, but I would prefer that it didn't come to that, if it can be avoided."

"Yeah," Young sighed. "I see your point. So, what am I going to have to give Telford?"

"Access to the communications stones at a minimum. You're also going to have to formally charge him in a military court—I can arrange that for you by proxy, by the way—and then allow him access to counsel. You're also going to have to let him out of his quarters periodically."

Young rubbed his jaw. "See, I don't—"

The sudden drop out of FTL caused him to break off.

Wray steadied herself against the unpleasant sensation with one hand on the command chair.

"Here we go," Volker said, squinting out the forward view at the yellow star that took up a large portion of the visible spacescape. Beside it, a planet was evident—one side lit up a bright, searing white, the other side shrouded in darkness.

Young stood and pulled out his radio. "Scott," he said. "Assemble your team and launch as soon as you're ready."

"Understood."

Young watched Chloe pull in a deep breath, her dark hair highlighted by the light from the star, before she deliberately got to her feet. Her face was set and impassive.

On her way past him Young squeezed her shoulder and she gave him a wan smile.

"You got this, Chloe," Volker said, sparing a glance at her as she walked out.

Chloe didn't respond.

"Um," Brody said, looking out the forward view as he came to stand at Volker's shoulder. "That's no moon."

"It's a space station," Volker whispered dramatically.

"Guys," Young snapped. "Star Wars quotations are only allowed when they're *not* misleading. Unless—"

"Nope," Volker said. "Sorry. It's—definitely just a planet."

//?// Young shot a wordless wave of inquiry at Rush.

"Lisa," Wray said over her radio. "We need you to take Chloe's bridge shift."

//Eli's on his way,// Rush shot back. The scientist was on his way to the shuttle bay.

//Be *careful*,// Young projected forcefully.

//Yes yes. Don't—rearrange anything in your mind.//

//Pull all the shit you left in there forward, you mean?//

//Yes. That. Don't do it.//

//I don't *intend* to do so. Usually.//

//Make an effort this time, will you?//

//You're a lot of work.//

//But I'm worth it.//

Young shook his head.

"Guys. What have we got?" he asked, turning to Volker and Brody. "What's the story with this planet?"

"It's orbiting fairly close to its parent star," Volker said, his eyes fixed on his monitors rather than on the forward view. "I think—yup. Yup, it's tidally locked, which probably explains why it stuck with its star when it was ejected from its parent galaxy."

"Any life down there?" Young asked, feeling edgy.

"No way," Volker said. "Tidally locked planets—" he broke off looking intently at the monitors. "And, forget what I was about to say, actually. I'm picking up signs of civilization in the twilight band." He looked up at Young.

//Interesting,// Rush commented in the back of his mind. //Tell Volker to specify.//

"Specify," Young snapped.

Volker and Brody exchanged a significant look.

Young shot a wave of irritation at Rush, and then added, "please," in a more sedate tone.

"So, in the habitable band we've got vegetation, we've got a lot of—oh boy. Yup, we've got naquadah-based structures. It's not exactly naquadah, but some alloy—I can't tell you much more than that, not sure if it's Ancient or just something similar. I'm getting no power readings though—by all indications these are probably ruins."

Young breathed a sigh of relief.

"I'm assuming you would have told me already if anything had come up on short range, right?"

"Yeah," Volker said. "We've got nothing."

"Well, keep scanning the planet, we might as well learn what we can about it."

"It doesn't seem like the nicest place," Volker continued. "Tidal forces have made it seismically unstable, and the upper atmosphere is a seething mass of ionizing radiation."

"Hey people," Eli said, bursting onto the bridge, his laptop and notebook tucked under one arm. Park was right behind him. "I heard that we have a *tidally locked planet*? Has anyone named it, because if not, I vote for either Ryloth or Twi'lek, that is capital Twi, apostrophe, lek, which, as you may or may not know is the—"

"It's tidally *locked*?" Park repeated, speaking over Eli. "I *hate* tidally locked planets."

"Number one, that's a lie because you hate nothing," Eli replied. "And number two, even if you did hate something, tidally locked planets? That's like the *weirdest* thing to choose."

"They have *earthquakes*," Park said. "As I think I've told you guys—"

"Yeah yeah, broken glass, bleeding feet, trauma. We know," Eli said. "Is the shuttle away yet?"

"Not yet," Young said. "Everything is in place, I assume?"

"Yeah, we've been ready for *days*. Or, at least, hours."

"Colonel, this is Scott," Young's radio crackled. "We are good to go. Permission to launch?"

"What's our current trajectory?" Young asked the room at large.

"We're at low impulse, heading toward the star," Park said. "The fact that we have a planet in orbit changes our approach vector slightly. We want to give that thing plenty of clearance."

"At our current course and speed we should have a good six or seven hours before any solar radiation starts to make things uncomfortable for people on the hull," Volker added.

"You're clear to launch," Young said.

"Yes sir," Scott replied. "Rush and Greer are suiting up now."

Young sighed.

"I'd feel better if we had *four* suits," Wray said quietly. "I don't like the idea of depressurizing the back of the shuttle with people in the cockpit who don't have any kind of—"

"Yup," Young said. "There are a *lot* of things I don't like about this plan."

He depressed the button on his radio. "James, are you in position?"

"Yes sir," James said. "Barnes and I are standing by. If anyone needs an evac through the hull, Barnes is already suited up and good to go."

"Good," Young replied. "Hopefully you won't hear from us."

Young drummed his fingers on the armrest of his chair, keeping his link with Rush wide open while he watched the planet in the forward view.

He was tempted to ask Rush about his thoughts on the remnants of civilization found in the twilight band, but he didn't want to distract the other man.

After a few moments, Brody cut through the chatter on the bridge with, "they're in position."

"Destiny, we're depressurizing the aft compartment," Scott's voice came over the communications system rather than via radio.

"Okay," Eli said.

Young watched Park's shoulders tense.

Beside him, Wray took a half step closer to his chair.

Volker chewed his lip.

The bridge was silent.

"Guys," Eli said into the quiet. "It's going to be fine. We just checked the seal again in the shuttle bay half an hour ago."

A few more seconds passed.

In the back of Young's mind, he felt Rush grip the metal frame of the shuttle as atmosphere vented to space.

After a few seconds, the scientist stepped forward onto the hull of the ship, Greer beside him.

"Hey Destiny," Scott's voice came through the speaker system, relief evident in his tone. "No problems with depressurization—we're good here. Greer and Rush are on the hull. Kinos are deployed."

In the back of his mind, the stark, bright light of the star gleamed painfully off the hull as Rush looked out over the expanse of silver in front of him.

"We're getting visuals," Eli called. "I'm patching them down to the feed in the mess now. Yay for crowdsourcing."

"How many people did you end up assembling to scan the footage for anomalies?" Young asked him.

"Um how many? Try the entire crew organized into hierarchical teams based on experience with Ancient systems. Most likely though? Rush beats all of them."

"The *entire* crew?" Young echoed faintly.

"Unless they had another job, yeah. People want to help, you know. Plus, there's no TV here, so— 'save the ship' is a very popular leisure activity."

"I guess," Young said, staring into space as he watched Rush begin to grid off the area to be searched using a permanent marker attached to a thin piece of metal piping.

"He gridding?" Eli asked, looking back at Young.

"Yeah. He's gridding," Young said.

"Oh yup," Eli said, cycling through the kino feeds on his monitor. "I see him. God, I can't believe he's *this accurate* using nothing but the scans I showed him this morning."

"Yeah, well, he has a lot of processing power."

"Yeah. Apparently he can also draw *really* straight lines." Eli's radio crackled. "Eli, this is Varro, some of the teams down here are already coming up with stuff they want you to look at."

"No," Eli said grabbing his radio. "Tell them to simmer down—we haven't even finished marking the area that the kinos are going to search—whatever they're seeing now—is normal stuff." Eli paused to look back over his shoulder at Brody and Volker. "One of you guys might have to go down there for fifteen minutes and give them a refresher in 'normal' versus 'weird'."

Young continued to watch Rush mark out a six-by-nine meter grid on Destiny's hull in the back of his mind.

Abruptly, Daniel Jackson appeared in Rush's peripheral vision, walking along next to him without an EVA suit.

But then, of course, he wouldn't be.

Rush jerked in response to Young's sudden surge of alarm, and Greer reached out to steady him.

//Calm down,// Rush snapped. //You're extremely distracting.//

"Doc, you good?" Greer asked through the in-helmet communications system.

"Yes, yes," Rush said, regaining his equilibrium.

//Sorry,// Young replied, backing off slightly.

//Stop talking to me. I can't do this and carry on three conversations at once. Or rather, I would *prefer* not to.//

Young sent him a wave of acknowledgement.

"Hey," Eli was saying, "hello—Earth to Colonel Young—"

"*What*," Young snapped, his focus abruptly pulled back to the bridge.

Eli exchanged a meaningful look with Park. "Long range sensors are picking up some indications that there might be instabilities in the solar corona."

"Meaning what?" Young asked.

"Meaning that it's within the realm of possibility that we might experience a solar flare sometime within the next day."

"And that would be bad, I assume," Young said, raising his eyebrows.

"It depends," Park said, "but it could create an electromagnetic disturbance that interferes with our equipment."

"So, do we need to change our course?" Young asked.

"Um, maybe," Park replied.

"Park. That's really not helpful."

"I know—it's just, there are pros and cons. Pros would be that if we change course right now, pull a 180 and head back out into empty space, at the slow sublight speeds we're maintaining, it might be enough to take us out of range of the flare—but it might not. It depends on the strength of the flare. The major con is that if we do that, we lose the option of going for the star when—er, *if* the Nakai show up."

"Eli," Young said.

"We should stay on course," Eli replied. "There's no guarantee that if we turn around we'll even make it outside the radius of the flare. But we will guarantee that the star won't be an option for us anymore, and that was the whole point of picking this location in the first place."

Young nodded, massaging his jaw.

Beside him, Wray crossed her arms.

"Okay. Stay on course. We'll just hope they finish in time."

"Yeah," Eli said, drawing out the word as he turned away from the monitor he had been hovering over. On his way to his usual station, kino feed in hand, he stopped a few feet away from Young.

"There can be no pressuring of Chloe when she is working on that device. Pressure Rush all you want. But Chloe—" Eli shook his head. "She knows already," he added quietly. "She *knows*."

Young raised his eyebrows.

"I'm serious," Eli said quietly.

"Yeah," Young replied. "I got it."

Eli nodded and passed toward the back of the room.

//You get any of that, genius?//

//No. Get what?// Rush asked as he finished the grid and the kinos began their algorithmic sweeping.



//We may have a solar flare in our near future.//

//Well. *That* would be a catastrophe,// Rush commented.

//So, maybe you should speed things up as much as you can?//

He got a wave of irritation in reply as Rush looked out across the shadowless silvered surface of Destiny's hull. Young felt his attention split as the scientist engaged with the AI, asking it a question that seemed to be half in Ancient, half in code.

A headache flowered behind Young's eyes as Destiny answered.

"Um, is he just *standing* there?" Eli asked.

"That's what it looks like," Brody said.

"Um, hi? Eli to Nick, I thought we were going to be doing a methodical sweep of the grid, what are you *doing*?"

"Don't worry about it, Eli," Rush replied.

"You *always*—wait. That response is so inappropriate that it makes me suspect that it's kind of like an inside joke we have now? Anyway, how am I supposed to coordinate this efficiently if I don't know what you're doing?"

"I'm making an educated guess about where to look."

"I thought you were going to walk the grid. But if you don't want to, we already have a few candidates that are coming up from the teams in the mess. I think they're a little trigger happy down there though, just FYI." He paused.

Rush said nothing.

"Um, *hello*?" Eli snapped.

Rush said nothing, shutting out nearly everything except the data he was getting from Destiny.

"Seriously?" Eli said to the room at large, "he's going to stop talking to me *now*?"

"Eli," Young said. "Settle down and give him a minute."

Slowly, Rush started forward, pacing over the gridlines he had made, his steps slightly out of their usual rhythm due to the catch and pull of his magnetized boots. Greer kept pace with him, and in his peripheral vision, Young could see the unhindered gait of the AI.

The kinos seemed to be able to sense their trajectory and altered their search pattern.

"God, he's disrupting everything—" Eli murmured, from somewhere behind him.

"What else is new?" Young murmured.

Wray shot him an arch look.

Rush stopped in near the intersection of two gridlines and knelt with difficulty.

"Yeah, he's where thirty-nine and forty meet forty-five and forty-six," Eli said over his radio. "You guys have anything in that region?"

Young watched as the AI knelt next to Rush, its face angled out toward the star in the oblique, slanting light that reflected from the surface of Destiny's hull.

"It's very close," Jackson said.

"Scio," Rush murmured, "But I don't see a physical correlate."

"You got something, Doc?" Greer said, standing next to him.

"Maybe," Rush replied, his hand spread on the deck plating. He began running his glove over the hull.

"Careful," Greer said. "Don't tear your glove."

"It's perfectly—" Rush broke off abruptly as his hand vanished from view and he fell forward, unbalanced.

Young felt Greer's hand close around Rush's shoulder and yank him back.

"Mmm," Rush said, unperturbed. "Clever."

"What the *hell*?" Eli snapped.

Young took a deep breath, trying to calm his racing heart.

"God damn, Doc. Take a year off my life why don't you?" Greer said, his hand still closed over Rush's shoulder.

Rush narrowed his eyes, studying the featureless metal. "The transmitter is concealed by a small holographic projection of normal hull—likely the power for the projection comes from the device itself. We never would have found this via kino. Chloe, are you watching this?"

"Yes," Chloe said, her voice tight. "I've been watching."

"I'm going to determine the boundaries of the holographic projection and then attempt to disable it so you'll have an unobstructed view of the transmitter."

"Negative," Chloe said. "Just determine the boundaries. I'll disable the projection."

"You're not going to be able to see what you're doing."

"Better I trigger something than you do," Chloe said shortly.

Young felt Rush grimace. "Greer," he said. "Do you have that marker?"

Very delicately, using the tip of the marker itself as a probe, Rush mapped out the area of the hull covered by the holographic projection.

It was no larger than a sheet of notebook paper.

Rush narrowed his eyes, looking at the outline he had drawn.

"Quid credis?" Rush murmured at Jackson, who was kneeling across from him.

"I think that you've already ruled out any kind of triggering device that operates via interruption of the holographic field when you rather imprudently put your hand through it," the AI said quietly, looking up at him. "Furthermore, your hand appeared to vanish into the metal, which implies to me that the projection originates from the perimeter of the depression, rather than from the center."

"Chloe, did you get all that?" Rush asked.

//Genius, she can't hear the AI.//

"Sorry," Chloe said. "I don't know what you mean."

"Nevermind. I think the holographic projection may be originating from the edges of the depression in the hull. I'm going to test that theory by trying inserting my hand immediately along the edge to see if I can disrupt it."

"Um, I really think I should be the one to do it—"

//No,// Young projected forcefully.

"Don't you dare," Greer said mildly, dropping into a crouch next to him. "I'll do it."

Before anyone could stop him, Greer had gingerly slid his fingers down along one edge of the depression.

The appearance of solid silver metal vanished to be replaced with a dark, shallow space. Immediately, Greer slid a second hand adjacent to the first, blocking the projected light along an entire side of the cavity.

Rush added his hands and, between them, they had blocked half the perimeter of the small hole.

In the center of the depression they could see a small device.

"Zoom in, zoom in, zoom *in*," Eli muttered, manipulating the kino feed.

"It looks like we can block the projected electromagnetic waves that conceal this thing without triggering any unwanted surprises," Rush said over the radio. "The trick is finding something we can line the depression with so that Chloe will have sufficient room to work."

"Um, I put electrical tape into Chloe's kit," Eli said. "Feel free to give me a raise at any time."

Young rolled his eyes.

"How much *do* I get paid, actually?" Eli asked. "I get paid, right?"

//Get your ass back in that shuttle,// Young shot at Rush.

//Yes yes,// Rush replied.

Six hours later found Young standing behind Eli's station, watching the kino feed as Chloe meticulously worked to disconnect the transmitter from its countless power inputs. Eli sat hunched in his chair, furiously flipping back and forth between pages in his notebook.

"Okay and so that thing? The black thing? I think it's kind of like their version of a diode?"

"I said no *jargon*, Eli," Chloe said sharply.

"Diode isn't jargon, it's like—a thing. Even *I've* heard of it."

"A two terminal electronic component with non-linear conductance and resistance," Rush said over the radio.

"See?" Chloe said. "Just say that. Thank you. And yes, yes it is a diode."

"Don't touch it; it looks like it's a check valve, and it may help us out if we accidentally trigger an overload in step forty-six."

"Well, I have to get underneath it," Chloe said, "if I'm going to go after the last power input directly."

"Maybe you can just go for it indirectly—it runs along the side that's across from where you're working before it sort of twists around to end up underneath the transmitter proper."

Young carefully linked up with Rush, who was sitting in the cockpit of the shuttle next to Greer, his left ankle resting on his right knee, as he followed Chloe's progress with a handheld monitor.

//How are we doing?// Young projected at him.

//She's getting tired,// Rush said absently. //But we're nearly done.//

//How close is nearly?//

//Half an hour if she goes for the power supply indirectly, maybe ten minutes if she goes for it directly.//

The sudden flashing of an indicator light caught Rush's attention, and he looked up at the control panel of the shuttle.

"Oh," Park said abruptly. "Hi everyone. Okay, we, um, we're seeing an abrupt increase in the activity of the coronasphere."

"Chloe," Rush said, his voice calm, but his thoughts suddenly swirling and flaring in abrupt anxiety. "I think you should go for the power supply directly. Disconnect the diode and—be careful not to trigger an overload."

"What's going on?" Chloe asked, the words sharp and frightened.

"Nothing," Rush said.

"What kind of activity?" Eli snapped.

"Magnetic flux," Park said. "Lots of flux."

"Oh god, okay," Eli said. "Oh god. No one tell Chloe."

"Do we definitely have a flare?" Young asked the room at large.

"No, but it's looking very likely," Park said.

"You're good," Scott said, his voice quiet, clearly meant for Chloe alone. "You're *awesome*. You got this."

"Chloe," Rush said. "Stop working for a moment. I'm about to rotate the ship. It's going to get extremely dark. You'll need your light."

"He's *what*?" Eli snapped. "He can do that?"

"Understood," Chloe said. "Matt, can you—thanks."

//Rush, what are you doing?//

"Port thrusters are firing," Volker said. "He's ah—putting the bulk of the ship in between them and the star. It will be some help but if we have a flare—they'll have to get off that hull."

"How long will they have?" Young asked.

"After we have a confirmed flare? Ten minutes, tops, before the radiation reaches lethal levels. Their suits will protect them, but—not for long."

"All right, Chloe," Rush said, as the ship rotation stabilized. "You're clear to keep working. You have ten minutes."

"Ten minutes until *what*?" Chloe asked, her voice edged with anxiety.

"That's when you need to be finished," Rush said calmly. "It would be better if you could do it in half that."

"What?" Eli snapped, "What is he *doing*? Does he know something we don't? Does he think we're having a flare?" He grabbed his radio. "Just, stay cool, Chloe," Eli said, "no big deal. If you don't finish this time, you just go back out. No problem."

"Everyone stop talking please," Chloe said.

//Ten minutes?// Young shot at Rush.

//Based on *that* magnetic flux? There's already been a flare. You'll detect it shortly.//

Young drummed his fingers on the armrest. On the shuttle, Rush did the same thing.

"Long range sensors are—we have a confirmed coronal mass ejection," Park snapped, cutting across the chatter on the bridge.

"We're going to start experiencing electromagnetic disruption in less than two minutes," Volker said.

//Genius, how bad is this going to be?//

//Unknown.//

"Call the shuttle back."

Young jumped, startled, as the AI appeared next to him.

"Call the shuttle *back*," Jackson repeated. "The other two can evacuate over the hull."

//Are you getting this?// Young shot at Rush.

//Yes. The AI is extremely concerned, but the egress point on the hull is over seventy-five meters from their current position, whereas we are three meters away.//

//Worst-case scenario, what happens to the shuttle?//

//Worst-case scenario, we lose navigation, communications, and computational control generally and when we try to make it back to the docking port we become ballistic and crash into the sun. Well, actually,// Rush amended, looking out the forward view of the shuttle, //we'd probably crash into the planet.//

"Nice," Eli said his voice tense. "Nice one, Chloe."

"If they don't make it back before the leading edge of that flare hits, *they may not make it back at all*," the AI hissed, its projection flickering. "Do you realize what happens to this ship *without* him?"

"Almost done," Chloe said, over the radio.

"Eli," Young said. "How long does she have before she gets it?"

"Three minutes, maybe?"

"And the leading edge hits in?"

"Ninety seconds."

"Sergeant Greer," Young said over the radio. "I want you to power up the shuttle."

"What are you *doing*?" Eli said, rounding on him. "They might not make it across the hull. Part of it is *exposed* to the *sun*—if there is so much as a tiny flaw in either of their suits and they get hit with those levels of radiation—"

"And what happens to the *shuttle* when the flare hits? Are they going to be able to make it back?" Young growled.

"We don't *know*, but they're going to have a better chance than anyone stuck on the hull, *that's* for sure," Eli said.

"This is Greer—we're having some problems with the start up sequence, stand by."

"Nick," the AI hissed furiously, and vanished.

//And by problems he means *you*, I take it?// Young asked, trying to keep a lid on his rising anxiety.

//Even if Chloe doesn't evac via the shuttle,// Rush said, //from a psychological standpoint it would be extremely damaging for us to leave at this precise moment.//

"Just take your time, Chloe," Rush said over the radio. "We'll wait for you."

On the kino feed, Young could see Chloe's hands begin to shake.

Young rubbed his jaw and paced up and down the available space a few times before moving to stand in front of the forward view.

Wray came to stand next to him, looking out at the star.

"The leading edge of the flare is going to hit in five," Park said. "Three. Two. One."

The lights on the bridge flickered.

A sudden hiss of static replaced the kino feed.

"Shit," Young said, turning back to look at Eli. "Tell me we still have communications."

An abrupt surge of panic from Rush exploded to the forefront of his mind, shattering his thoughts apart in a single, horrifying image—

A flashlight hurtled through the darkness of space, away from the hull of the ship.

A woman's scream sounded from beneath the static that nearly obscured the shuttle's communications system, short, terrified, and unmistakable.

It was Chloe.

"Chloe," Eli said, holding his radio with both hands, his fingers white, his eyes staring at nothing. "Chloe, what happened. *Chloe*. Do you read?" Eli turned the dial on his radio, listening to the homogenous static. "Chloe. *Matt*. *Chloe*. Come on."

// "What is *happening*?" // Young shouted and projected simultaneously.

At the back of his mind, Rush's thoughts were nearly uninterpretable for a moment before he finally got himself under enough control to project back at Young.

// We just lost our magnetic seal holding us to the exterior of the hull. So did Scott and Chloe. //

"Shit," Young breathed, turning back to Eli. "They lost their magnetic seals to the exterior hull."

Eli paled. "Oh *god*. Can he see them?"

Young linked up with Rush fully.

The other man was leaning over the control panel near the front of the shuttle, his hands pressed against the locked controls, Greer at his side, as they watched the dark huddle that was Matt and Chloe, holding themselves against the hull.

// She was working, // Rush projected, barely understandable above the roar of his thoughts, // and the pressure of her hands against the transmitter was enough to push her free of the hull, // Rush said, making a concerted effort to slow down his breathing. // Scott managed to get a grip on the hull *and* grab her ankle before she was out of reach. He pulled her back down. Thank *fuck*. //

"Yeah," he said to Eli. "Yeah, he can see them. Matt's got a grip on the hull and he's holding Chloe in place. She's still working."

"How are we going to get them *back*?" Eli whispered.



"How long do we have before the radiation rises to lethal levels?" Young asked the room at large.

"Maybe five minutes?" Volker said. "Six at the outside."

Young pulled out his radio. "James and Barnes, are you standing by?"

No answer. Only static.

"I need a runner," Young snapped.

"I'll go," Wray said, kicking off her black pumps.

"How fast are you?" Young asked.

"I'm very fast," Wray replied, already on her way towards the door. "What do you want me to say?"

"Tell Barnes that her magnetic boots won't work. Tell her that she's going to need to secure herself at intervals to the hull using hooks and line, and she's going to need to do it in such a way that Matt and Chloe can follow her back."

"Does she *have* hooks and line?" Wray asked.

"She does," Young said.

"Someone give me a timer," Wray said.

"Here." Eli tossed her his iPhone, and she was gone.

"*Shit*," Volker hissed.

"What?" Young turned to see Volker looking up at him. "*What?*"

"The *shuttle* just came up on *short range*. They're *ballistic*."

//*Rush*,// Young projected forcefully.

//I was waiting for a better moment to break this piece of information to you, but Volker is correct. We are indeed currently ballistic, we have no navigational controls, and the gravity of the planet is already pulling us away from you into a decaying orbit. I'm—working the problem.//

Young shut his eyes.

## Chapter Fifty Two

Destiny's lights flickered and reengaged.

Monitors dimmed down and the air recirculators shut off briefly before kicking back into gear.

Young instinctively looked up at the ceiling, as if there were answers to be found there.

His hands were cold. He found it nearly impossible to hold onto a coherent thought.

"I need a visual," he snapped at Eli. "Or audio. Something. *Anything*."

"Yeah, well, unfortunately, direct radio emissions from the star are currently making that *impossible*," Eli's voice was strained. His eyes were locked on his console.

Again, the power flickered.

"What's with the lights?" Brody's voice was uneasy. "The hull plating should prevent magnetic flux from interfering with internal systems."

"Guys," Young snapped over the soft trill of a single alarm. "I need to know *what is going on*. What systems do we have, what *don't* we have, and *why*?"

Volker answered, looking up at Young. "The EM radiation produced by the flare interferes with any over-the-air or over-the-vacuum EM-based communications, which includes our radios, our kinos, and our sensors. The magnetic flux can induce electrical current in unshielded systems, which would completely fry *all* of our circuitry if Destiny wasn't built to withstand this sort of thing."

"What about the shuttle?" Young growled.

"Not sure." It was Eli who answered, one hand running through his hair as he finally looked up at Young. "It's probably got enough shielding to prevent anyone inside from getting, like, you know, lethally exposed to gamma rays, but in terms of stuff they need? Navigation? Propulsion? Induced current is going to fuse its circuits like you wouldn't believe. Rush can redirect power, so if he's got somewhere to ground it he might be able to save key systems, but like—let's be real. I have *no idea* how hard that's going to be for him to do in a piece of machinery that's—well, not Destiny." Eli looked edgily back at his console. "Ask Rush how fried his circuitry is."

//Did you get that?// Young projected into the rapid swirl of Rush's thoughts. //How fried is your circuitry?//

//We're getting continuous induction in multiple circuits and have already burned out navigation. Currently, I'm trying to preserve shielding and at least some elements of —// Rush's projection shattered as his attention abruptly redirected away from Young and towards one of the shuttle's displays.

"Pretty fried," Young said, letting the bridge fade back in around him as he looked at Eli. "He says navigation is burned out but I think so far he's preserved the shielding and maybe something else."

"Hopefully propulsion," Eli said tightly. "He can probably manually compensate for navigation to at least some degree but if they lose thruster control—" Eli broke off.

"What," Young snapped.

Eli said nothing. His hair was lit up gold and orange from the light of the star that came through the forward view.

"If they lose thruster control, *what*," Young repeated.

"They burn up in the atmosphere," Eli said. His voice was tight and low and he did not look at Young.

"This is *your* fault," Emily hissed, appearing next to him as the overhead lights and monitor displays inexplicably dimmed down and then dialed back up. "I told you to call them back. I *told* you."

Young flinched.

He felt Rush wordlessly snap at the AI in a short burst of furious data.

It flickered and vanished from his peripheral vision.

"Can we do *anything*?" Young said, rounding on the science team. "There must be *something* we can do. For the shuttle. For Scott and Chloe. Come on, guys. Give it to me."

No one spoke.

He turned away from them and walked toward the forward view, where he could see a bright arc of plasma shooting from the surface of the star. He tried to breathe through the tightness in his chest while at the back of his mind, Rush's thoughts slowed, crystallized, and shattered apart with some new insight that Young couldn't follow.

Already, he felt alone.

"Maybe," Park whispered into the silence, "maybe it will be a short flare."

"With the levels of flux that we're seeing—" Volker trailed off. "I don't think that's likely."

"What are you saying?" Young growled, turning back to fix the science team with a furious glare. "What are you *saying*? That there's nothing we can do? That we're in one of *the* most advanced ships in the entire *universe* and we have to just *watch* as they burn up in the atmosphere?" He paused, sweeping the room with his eyes.

"Because if that's the case, then I want to *hear you say it*."

Rush shot him a wave of panicky exasperation.

"They're going to crash into the planet," Eli said, his face locked.

"*Unacceptable*."

"It's going to happen," Eli continued. "If they have shielding, and they have some ability to fire the thrusters, and Rush can do all of that and perform the necessary navigational calculations, then they might not burn up. In which case, we should assemble a team to man the second shuttle so that we can—so that we can go down and get them."

"If they hit outside the band—" Brody trailed off quietly.

"They won't," Eli said, giving Young a quick, terrified smile that didn't touch his eyes. "If he's able to avoid burn up, he'll be able to hit the band."

At the back of his mind, the nearly incomprehensible vortex of Rush's thoughts was beginning to fade. Young snapped their thoughts together.

//*Rush*. What the *fuck* is going on? Talk to me.//

He could hear the trill of alarms, feel Rush's fingers moving over panels, feel the panicked, mathematical swirl of his thoughts as he calculated the shuttle's current trajectory.

//Calm down,// Rush replied, managing to project a faint wave of reassurance, but not much else.

//I'll calm down when you give me a *reason* to calm down.//

In response, he got back a wave of anxiety-laced irritation and beneath it was the sense that Rush was about to—

The scientist curled his fingers into the paneling of the shuttle, his thoughts almost completely in Ancient and totally uninterpretable as *he ripped* the paneling away in a strange combination of mental asking and taking directed generally at the shuttle's CPU. Before Young could stop him, he flung the panel at Greer and plunged both hands down into the open circuitry.

"*Shit*," Young hissed, as he felt the scientist pour his mind into the shuttle processor, interfacing with it in a way that Young had assumed he could only perform with Destiny and then—and *then*, Jesus Christ, he was *pulling* some of the shuttle's algorithms into his own mind.

With a reflexive horror, Young flooded forward, annexing broad swaths of Rush's consciousness, trying to keep the shuttle out in very much the same way that he had previously kept out the AI.

Rush's thoughts ground to a halt.

"What are you *doing*?" Emily hissed, her mouth inches from his ear. "He has to change his trajectory or he's going to die. Unless he fires the thrusters, he's going to *die*." Her voice had that familiar, tight quality—almost angry but not quite—the sound of suppressed tears.

Rush was projecting at him, a sort of distracted reassurance that seemed to consist of the same words, repeated over and over again in Ancient.

Young loosened his hold in a slow unclenching, but he did not let go. He *couldn't* let go. It was like trying to prevent the inevitable dislocation of a joint—instinctive resistance against a sickening separation that *should not happen*.

That could not.

"Please." Emily was next to him. Her voice was breathless and her eyes were closed. "Please. Don't let this happen."

"What can I *do*?" Young asked her, the words barely audible.

"I cannot help him," she whispered. "I told him that I would *always* help him."

For a moment, they were silent.

"Tell me about Scott and Chloe," Young murmured, his eyes fixed on the sun.

"The external seal of the airlock is open." Emily whispered. "I do not have any additional data."

They stood in silence for a moment.

"I can't be sure," Park said, her hands pressed against the forward view as she leaned out over her console, watching the shuttle, "but I think they altered their angle of descent." She looked back at him, her face pale and frightened.

"They did," Young snapped distractedly.

At the back of Young's mind, Rush's consciousness swirled frantically.

"He's still connected to the shuttle," Emily whispered, her arms wrapped around her ribcage. "Why isn't he pulling out? Why wouldn't he *pull out*?"

"Why is he *fading*?" Young asked, the words barely audible through gritted teeth. "I went to one of those obelisk planets with no ill-effects; I should still be able to sense him."

"*He* powers the link," Emily hissed. "Not you. He is not supposed to leave. He *cannot* leave," her voice cracked on the last word and her projection flickered. "He must pull out of the shuttle. *Make* him pull out of the shuttle. He's not listening to me."

//Pull out,// Young projected at Rush, trying to hold on to everything of the other man that he could, trying to have any effect on Rush's mind at *all*—but within the disorganized and disorganizing swirl he couldn't tell if Rush had even heard him.

//Nick,// he repeated. //Pull out. Pull away from the shuttle. It's going to crash and I don't want your mind in there when it does.//

A few seconds passed.

"He's not pulling out," Emily whispered, her voice horrified. Her eyes shut. Overhead, the lights flickered. "*Why*?"

"He must think he has to stay with it in order to survive the crash," Young replied, his hands curling into fists.

"Maybe," Emily's projection flickered. "*Maybe* that's what he thinks. I don't know. He's getting too far. He's *too far*. He needs to come back."

"Kiddo," Young whispered, his eyes closing, "it's not going to happen."

"He needs to come *back*," Emily repeated, her voice cracking subtly on the last word. She shifted closer to him, her projection flickering. "He can't leave," she whispered.

"Let him go," Young said, looking over at her, meeting her eyes. "Everything you've got of him on the CPU. Give it back to him. As much as you can."

"No," Emily whispered. "No."

"Yes," Young said, the word barely making it out of his closing throat. "If we're going to get him back, then you have to. If you can give any of it back to him, then do it *now*."

"It will be only information," she whispered. "He doesn't have the capacity to process all of it."

"Do your best," Young said, the words inaudible. He pressed three fingers to his aching temple. "Give him back what he *needs*."

With a strangled cry, Emily vanished.

His headache increased in intensity.

He couldn't see.

He couldn't hear.

He couldn't let go.

He pressed a closed fist to his mouth and as he did so—

His mind snapped in half.

Young opened his eyes to TJ leaning over him. The overhead lights were out. The oblique rays from the star lit up her hair in streaks of yellow and orange.

"He was talking to someone," Eli said quietly, from somewhere behind his head. "I think maybe it was the AI. It could have been Rush, but it seemed more like the AI and then he just—hit the deck." Eli's voice wavered briefly. "Do you think that means—"

"I don't know," TJ said quietly.

Young shifted marginally.

"Hi," TJ whispered.

At the back of his mind was an unbearable void.

"Hi," he replied.

She gave him a wavering smile, unable to keep her fear from her face or from her eyes.

Static came from Destiny's sound system.

"What happened?" TJ whispered.

Young's eyes flicked away from her, out to his left, where Emily sat, her arms wrapped around her knees, her expression one of abject misery.

She looked at him and just as quickly looked away, her projection flickering.

"Can you tell," Eli whispered, his eyes dark, his face bronzed by the light of a treacherous star, "are they alive?"

"I don't know," Young said, his hand coming across his eyes. "I don't know," he whispered again.

He pushed himself into a sitting position and dropped his head into his hands, as if they could keep his skull from throbbing its way open. "TJ," he said, looking up at her with

some difficulty. "Assemble a team. As soon as this flare is over, we're going down there."

"I need to check you out," TJ whispered. "Make sure you're okay."

"There's nothing wrong with me that you can fix," Young said.

She looked away and then got to her feet and vanished in the direction of the door.

"Any word on Chloe and Matt?" Young asked Eli.

"Not yet," Eli replied, his eyes flicking out uneasily toward the star. "Hopefully, they're off the hull."

"The airlock is closed," Emily whispered, looking at Eli.

"In the meantime," Eli whispered, "is there any chance you could talk to the AI? We've lost access to various systems across the board. Internal power expenditure has dropped by sixty-five percent and the CPU is operating at max capacity—it's slowing everything down."

Young squinted over at him. "What the hell am I supposed to do about that?" he asked dully.

"I think—I think the AI is stressed."

"You're goddamn *right* it's stressed," Young growled.

Eli opened his hands. "I don't know," he whispered. "I just thought—" he broke off at the sound of the door hissing open, his expression tense, hopeful, waiting, and then—

"Chloe," Volker whispered.

"Chloe," Eli called, rocketing to his feet. "*Chloe*. Oh my god."

Young's sense of relief felt—very far away.

It was hard to get to his feet. It was hard to turn, and when he did, he could barely see her. Her face was pressed against Eli's shoulder, her arms around his neck, her pale hands clenched into his sweatshirt. Scott, Barnes, James, and Wray flanked her, their faces strained.

Wray met his eyes.

Young turned away, pressing a hand to his head.

Next to him, Park sat quietly at her console. She was not watching Eli, not watching Chloe, not watching the monitors.

Her eyes were fixed on the tidally locked world below them.



"How long has it been?" Young asked.

"Fourteen minutes since we confirmed the flare," Park said, her voice flat. "Based on—well. They probably hit the surface somewhere around three minutes ago."

Young put a hand on her shoulder. Maybe to steady her, maybe to steady himself.

"Can you tell if—" she broke off.

"No," he said quietly. "I can't."

"Okay," she whispered.

"How long do stellar flares last?" Young shut his eyes against a wave of vertigo.

"Already," Park said, "this is a long one. It should be over soon. And then—and then we can go down there."

Young's fingers tightened on her shoulder and then he pulled away, unclipping his radio. "TJ," Young said. "Come in please."

He got nothing but static.

"Damn it," he hissed.

He clipped the radio to his belt and looked up to see that Scott had slipped past Chloe and Eli to approach him.

"Colonel," Scott said, his face set, his skin pale. "We saw—"

Young held up a hand. "Yeah. I'm sure you did. As soon as this flare ends, I'm taking a team down to the planet and I'm leaving you in command. Do me a favor and find TJ tell her to get her team on the shuttle and be ready for departure. I'll join them when the flare ends. Then report back here."

"Got it," Scott said, turning to go.

"Lieutenant," Young snapped, "how long were you out there?"

"We're okay, sir." Scott said over his shoulder, as he headed toward the door. "At least, we *think* we are."

"*Everett*," Emily breathed, her voice tight and close and horrified right next to his ear.

He was thrown off his feet, crashing into the side of the command chair before hitting the deck. A deafening, nearly subsonic boom echoed in his ears.

Behind him, Chloe screamed, short and sharp and startled.

From his position on the floor, he could see that the star and its planet had begun to creep across the forward view.

The ship was in motion.

"What the *hell* just happened?" Young said, forcing himself to his feet as he fought the disorienting way that his mind kept reaching back into the darkness, into the place where Rush used to be.

"Oh this is so not good," Eli said, his eyes glued to the nearest display.

"*What?*" Young snapped.

"Something massive just hit us. Something seriously *massive*. I think we might have been *rammed*."

"By *what?*"

"Our sensors are still sucking," Eli said, "but the *Nakai* would be a good bet."

"The *Nakai*," Young hissed, his head whipping around to fix Eli with a glare. "When did they drop out?" Young rounded on the science team, his voice rising. "What the *hell* are you people *doing?*"

"No sensors? No *data*," Eli shouted back at him. "No data? No *warning*."

"Our axis is deviating," Park called out. "We've begun a slow rotation to port. Negative roll, negative pitch."

"Power levels just dropped another fifteen percent," Brody said from the back of the room.

"From *where?*" Eli asked.

"Not sure," Brody called back. "I'm looking for it—"

"The *shields*," Emily whispered, her eyes shut.

"From the shields," Young growled.

Eli briefly stopped what he was doing and locked eyes with him.

"Camile," Young snapped, turning to see Wray standing near the door, her shoes still off. "Barnes. Set up a relay between here and the observation deck. We need more eyes."

They nodded and vanished from the room with the hiss of the doors.

"Are you still going to send the shuttle?" the AI whispered, looking at him, standing inches away from him. "If it's them. If it's *them*, will you send it?"

"I don't know," Young murmured.

"I won't leave without him," Emily whispered.

Young said nothing. He pressed his fingertips against his aching head.

"I won't leave," Emily repeated, her voice high and tight.

"What about all these people?" Young whispered. "What about the *crew*?"

"I don't care about that," she whispered.

He thought about threatening her.

He thought about turning and telling Eli to take the CPU offline.

But instead, he said, "Yes, you do."

She turned her back to him. Her image flickered, but she did not step away.

//Nick,// he projected into the emptiness at the back of his mind.

"Nick," the AI echoed.

He felt a hand on his arm and looked over to see Chloe, her eyes red-rimmed in her too-pale face.

Wordlessly she held out a piece of metal.

It was a small thing, only a little larger than a pack of cigarettes. It lay heavy and intricate in his palm.

"Thanks kiddo," he said, the words barely audible. "Nice job."

Chloe ducked around him to touch Park's shoulder, sliding into her station as Park moved laterally to cover the weapons array.

"I'm showing a constant power drain from the forward areas of the shields," Brody said, "consistent with what we'd expect from weapons fire. I'm projecting the three dimensional map of the shielding now."

Young looked up to see a luminous projection of Destiny's outline and shielding, projected in swaths of blue, green, and an angry looking red, centered under the starboard bow of the ship.

"If we fire a broad sweep with the forward array, we're likely to hit at least some of them. Do you think they can maintain their shields during a flare?" Park called out.

"It stands to reason," Volker said, "if we can."

"So not worth the power then," Young said, pocketing the device that Chloe had given him.

"No, not really," Park said quietly.

Young paced forward, one hand still pressed to his temple. He narrowed his eyes, studying the midair display, trying to hang on to his focus.

As he watched, the area of most intense power drain shifted fractionally.

"They're not *targeting* us," Young snapped at the room. "Their firing pattern isn't shifting with our rotation. They likely don't have sensors either. Can we get past them?"

"If we had *any* location data that would be—" Eli began.

Barnes burst back onto the bridge.

"Nice," Eli said, "that was fast."

"Report," Young said.

"Relay is in place," Barnes replied, only slightly out of breath. "One Nakai ship is visible, starboard side, two thirds of the way up the bow."

"Any fighters?" Young asked.

"None," Barnes said.

"I doubt their short-range fighters have the shielding to operate under these conditions," Chloe called out, turning in her seat.

"How the *hell* long is this flare going to last?" Young growled, driving the heel of his hand into his left eye.

"Unknown," Volker replied.

"Guys, looking at our axis deviation, there's no way that the ship that hit us is the one that they can see on the observation deck, I think there must be another one *underneath* us and—"

Eli broke off as the bridge shook a second time, sending Young, who was already fighting a sense of instability, back to the deck plating.

"It's freaking to starboard, and below us it *must* be—"

"I can't compensate for our lateral rotation—"

"Power levels are down thirty percent—"

"Angular momentum is increasing—"

"Are we *venting atmosphere*?"

"The CPU is overloading, fetch, decode, write-back. Oh *hell*, Eli, I think it's executing on *data*—"

"Emily," Young whispered, turning onto his back, fighting the terrible pain in his head.  
"Emily, talk to me."

She flickered into existence for a moment, lying on the floor next to him, her face contorted with pain. "To create a machine that feels is a cruelty."

"Em," he said. "Come on."

"I'm blind," she whispered. "And they are destroying me on all fronts." Her voice cracked.

She was crying.

"Em," he said.

"Reanalysis of output parameters reveals executable files have produced suboptimal results." She flickered.

"I don't understand you," he whispered, reaching out toward her.

"This is regret." She squeezed her eyes shut. "This is *regret*." Her voice faded to nothing.

"Yeah," Young whispered. "I know, sweetheart, but—it's not helping."

She shut her eyes, curling in on herself.

"It's gonna get dark in here—"

"Guys, the colonel is down and he's not moving—"

"Seriously, why are we locked out of *thruster* controls?"

"Why would they *ram* us, it's got to be as hard on them as it is on us—harder, probably —"

"He orders my priority queue," Emily whispered, "on a minute to minute basis."

"Well, he's not here right now," Young said, barely able to get the words out. "We can't see them. Their visibility is better than ours. If we stay here, they'll continue to ram us until they tear us apart."

"I am incapable of leaving here without him," she fixed him with her familiar brown eyes.

"What if we fly into the star?" he murmured. "Can we do that? Can we do that during a flare?"

"I cannot see the star," she whispered. "Outside the ship, everything is darkness. I don't know where to go."

"Stabilize our rotation," he said.

"That solves nothing."

"Do it anyway, sweetheart."

Again she flickered, but the star, which had almost vanished from the viewscreen as they spun, stopped its slow progression.

Young pushed himself up, fighting a wave of vertigo.

Emily followed him.

"Port thrusters just fired," Brody called out. "We're stabilizing."

"Colonel," Chloe said. "Are you all right?"

"Give us thruster control," Young said quietly.

Chloe looked back at him, but said nothing.

"Give it to us," he whispered again.

Young watched Emily's outline shimmer and then—

"Oh, *hello thrusters*. Where have you been all my life?" Eli asked triumphantly.

"Center the star in our forward view," Young ground out, his eyes sweeping the room as he stepped unsteadily over to stand near Chloe's station, into the spot Rush generally favored.

No one responded.

"Like, um, *manually*?" Volker asked.

"No," Young snarled, one hand braced against the transparent material of the forward view, "by fucking *magic*."

Everyone stared at him.

He took a deep breath.

"Sorry," he said. "Yes. Manually. We have no sensors, so it has to be manually."

No one spoke.

"This is a big ship," Brody said finally. "And the thruster controls are—sensitive."

Silence fell.

Eli stood. "Yeah," he said quietly. "Yeah. Okay. We'll try it."

Young nodded at him.

"Eli," Chloe said, "if you overcorrect and lose the star as a reference point—"

"Hey," Eli said, breaking in. "I got this. I beat Diablo II in fifty-five hours, okay? In Tie Fighter? I went from post-Hoth to destroying Admiral Harkov's forces in *two days*. I was twelve, okay? *Twelve*. And, um, don't even talk to me about Starcraft."

"I have no idea what you just said," Chloe whispered, giving him a wan smile, "other than 'I got this'."

"My name's Chloe and I am too cool for video games," Eli murmured, his voice wavering.

Chloe edged close to Young, her eyes fixed on Eli.

"Okay," Eli whispered, flexing his fingers as he sat. "We need to go a bit starboard, so, a little positive roll, a little negative yaw—" Eli pressed down gently on the screen, shifting his fingers minutely across the display.

Slowly, the star began to re-center in the forward view.

"Positive pitch, while at the same time, no one is ramming us, this is *key*—" Eli pushed his eyebrows together as the bow of the ship came up. "Please tell me that someone is getting this on kino because I want it in my best-of montage."

After a few more seconds, the star locked dead center in the forward view.

"Give us sublight," Young said, pressing the heel of his hand to his temple.

The AI looked away, a chunk of Emily's hair falling to cover its face.

"I'd *love* to give it to you," Eli said, "but *unfortunately* we have been locked out of—oh. Oh wait. Hang on. Yup. Engaging sublight, right freaking now."

Young felt the hum of the engines engage under his feet.

"We have the shielding for this, right?" Volker asked the room.

"Barely," Brody replied.

"Eli, watch your pitch," Park called. "Correct down by five degrees, maybe? Ten?"

"Hey," Eli snapped, his gaze intent. "Who is the semi-professional gamer, here? I'm trying to clear the thing that has been *shooting* at our keel."

"I don't think starships *have* keels," Volker said. "Also, this isn't Tie Fighter, Eli, we're at maximum sublight and so we've cleared them by miles. Lisa is right. Correct down. The closer we get, the more you're going to have to adjust."

"Stop backseat driving, you guys. Someone plot an angle of entry into the coronasphere that will limit the shear on the hull."

"I'm on it," Park said, looking down at her console, the light from the star gleaming off her dark hair. "Optimum reentry angle relative to angle of airflow attack, or I guess in our case, plasma-flow attack is going to be—" she paused. "About forty five degrees. Err on the steep side," she said, glancing at Eli, "not the shallow side."

"Oh joy," Eli said. "How the heck am I supposed to *estimate* the plasmaflow attack vector?"

No one answered.

"It will light up the shields," Emily whispered.

"Look at the shields," Young said, quietly to Eli. "They'll tell you."

"Seriously?" Eli said quietly.

"Destiny can't see the star," Young said, "but she can feel the EM radiation when it begins to drain the shields."

"Magnetic flux peaked thirty seconds ago," Volker called. "It's starting to fall off."

"Does that mean what I think it means?" Young growled.

"Yeah—the flare is ending."

"Please tell me we're getting sensors back before we hit the corona," Eli said tightly.

The star loomed ever larger in the forward view.

"I don't think so," Volker replied. "The flux is decreasing, but field strength goes up as our displacement from the source goes down."

"Everett," Emily whispered.

He looked at her.

She looked at the console.

From the place in his mind that was empty, he could feel what she wanted.

"Eli," Young said, stepping forward.

"Yeah," the young man replied, his eyes never leaving the forward view.

"Up."

"What?" Eli said, distractedly.

"*Up*," Young repeated.



"Now?"

"Yes. Now."

Eli's eyes flickered back and forth between the forward view and Young. After a few seconds he stood and moved laterally, his hands still on the controls while Young edged into place.

"You know all the—"

"Yes," Young said, sliding his fingers beneath Eli's.

The transition was nearly seamless.

The bridge was quiet.

At the back of his mind, he could hear the music of the shields.

The star grew larger.

The shields grew louder.

They hit the coronasphere with a shower of red-gold against blue, the plasma streaking in lateral trails as it hit the shields. There was a multitonal reverberation in his mind—thirds and fifths and minors and octaves blending together to make something complex and layered that seemed to teeter on the cusp of being so much more than it was.

"This is what it's like for him," Young murmured.

"No," Emily whispered. "This is a *fraction* of what he experiences."

"It's beautiful," Chloe whispered.

"You can see the vector made by the plasma hitting the shields," Emily whispered. "Set that as zero and make your angle of declination forty-five degrees."

The chords in his mind changed, their intervals morphing, their quality shifting as he pitched the ship down. His eyes and his ears and his hands all moved in concert and the color of light hitting the shields became yellow and blue and green where energy met energy barrier in streaks like roman candles.

"Almost," Emily said. "Almost."

They came together like lost things—the tones and the color and the play of his fingers on the console—all of it bright and full and balancing out the dark pressure of the AI against his mind. With an abrupt mental snap he felt the angle and the course lock in.

"Course is locked," Chloe said quietly, looking over Young's shoulder.

Slowly, he got to his feet.

"Collectors have lowered," Brody said.

Young felt barely able to stand. The pain in his head was nearly unendurable. But he stood anyway.

Emily was close to him.

Too close and too familiar and too lost and too *upset*—

"If we have to battle the Nakai, how will we get a shuttle down to the planet?" Emily whispered, inches from his ear.

"I don't know," Young said, hooking a hand over his shoulder to rub the back of his neck.

"How will we evade their short range fighters?" Emily continued.

"I don't know." Young said, dropping into the command chair.

"If the shuttle makes it to the planet, how will it avoid destruction on the return trip?"

"I don't *know*," Young snapped.

"What if *they* send their short-range craft to the planet while we are inside the star?"

"*I don't know*," Young shouted, pressing the heel of one hand against his temple.

"What if his mind shattered with the shuttle?"

"*I don't KNOW*," he shouted again.

Emily flickered and vanished.

Around him, the bridge was utterly silent.

# At All Angles: Part 1

Lightning in the ionosphere. Electric fields vary with time.

Voltage differentials and velocity differentials over space and over time meaning  $\Delta V$  and  $\Delta v$  with a convergence on  $t$  meaning colloquially and it's correct to continue to conceptualize in such a manner because there's safety in redundancy which is now integrated into how he works, but meaning colloquially that everything is happening *right now* and that isn't a problem per se it's simply *difficult*, not a logistical catastrophe but more of an heuristic hell this temporal sequencing; every time he has to answer for himself *who* is he and *where* is he and *when* is he and *what* is happening and he's always had something of a flair for combinatorics which makes it possible to *do* this but it is unarguably *difficult* to sequence temporally, and it follows that it's difficult to prioritize in settings where the limits of time are deterministic in that they define possible outcomes in a very imminent way and in this case the imminent outcome he's concerned about is imminent death. He's not a pilot or a fulminologist or any binnable thing anymore and to get entrapped in a set-of-sets classification at this point would be *abad idea*, as in Colonel-Young-on-a-bad-day level of bad idea but it is difficult because it's apparent that even at this upper layer of cognitive processing that, yes well, he's not entirely in control of his own mind not all the time not any more so he'll classify because he can't not and he allows it to run and he starts a new process or, perhaps, train of thought, which is really a better safer way to put it but perhaps he shouldn't have to worry about that right now what with the voltage differentials and the velocity differentials and considerations of pitch and yaw and roll and movement through space and that at least can be one definition of time that can work in this context, so what he will do is this, he—

"Shit, Rush, what the *hell* did you just do?"

//Rush. What the *fuck* is going on? Talk to me.//

"Compensate for the navigational failure by interfacing with the shuttle directly."

Alarms sound.

—he will define a three dimensional coordinate plane with all the typical axes and not some fucking fancy 3-manifold (topological, piecewise-linear, or smooth, take your pick but pick optimally) no, the conventional Cartesian-style system will be perfectly adequate in this scenario but why exactly do the shuttle control keys have beveled

edges, what is it, exactly, about the edge of a depressible movable part that should so lend itself to beveling that it becomes a cross-civilization phenomenon but he was defining his coordinate system and if he can't pull it together for even this then he has a problem. A problem that will supersede all of the other problems that he also, currently, has. They are manifold.

"Nothing," he snaps at Greer

//Calm down,// he projects at Young.

He remembers not to look at the AI, but instead he thinks at it. //Yes yes. I will. I am.//

Planet (0,0,0). Destiny—put it on the axis (0,0, 45,000). Kilometers remind him of who he was. The shuttle is following the arc of a line that is represented by an equation that describes a decaying orbit and by *decaying orbit* he means a trajectory that's incompatible with the maintenance of structural integrity of the shuttle by which he means burn-up in the low atmosphere is a virtual certainty the shields on this thing aren't sufficient to protect them from the fast heat and the rushing of ionized particles that flare in the darkness and the snapping sound of weakening glass and the wavering of the heated air and the feeling of suffocation that precedes the crack of sudden dissolution and what did those bastards do to his mind that he can have not only flashbacks but these moments of—what is this, he doesn't know the only thing he knows is that it's not panic, he is not panicking, he panics all the time and he knows what it's like and this is not panic it's not panic it's not panic it's not panic it's not. It's not. He's functional. He *is*.

"Well how come the displays are back but *I'm locked out*?"

//I'll calm down when you give me a *reason* to calm down.//

"Nick. *Nick*. You're too far."

Fuck them, fuck them fuck them. Fuck. Them. This is fucking *hard*—anyone would think it was, and none of it is helping—not the questions, the suspicion, the fear, the hostile concern, the pressure to go and not go, the pressure to stay and not stay, to interface, to not interface, to argue, to reassure, to lie, and at the back of his mind the shields, the *shields* are beginning to *shriek*—and he needs to let go of his still running set-of-sets classification and his mathematical calculations and his view of the monitors and the three conversations that people and things and other people are trying to have with him and his anxiety and his not-panic and in order to do that, well he rarely lets go, usually he splits but this time he has to let go and he doesn't know

how so he tries to think of of Kurt Gödel's incompleteness theorems, true but unprovable, but not the theorems just the man himself and how he must have looked out into the darkness and found the uncertainty there that was just a reflection of his own uncompleted and uncompletable processes—those that do not complete, those that *cannot*, and he tries to find a way to codify that insight; to accept that at present there aren't any optimal solutions and there is nothing that can turn this situation around and this is just one more permutation of choosing between two shite choices, not certain, seeking always to mitigate, to *mitigate* in the absence of solution sets and his hands are playing over the console like the opening of a Chopin prelude and Chopin was insane or sick or ill, there had been something in there about coughing up blood in what Gloria had said through the door, the locked gray door of a bathroom and he had sat on the other side, his forearms on his knees wanting to be let in but also grading linear algebra finals with matrix after careful matrix. So it follows then that no one is happy, per se, least of all him when his fingers stop moving on the consoles. The hierarchy of events is important here because Young's fear continuously slams into his mind in dark slow inertial waves and that is an indicator that he has limited time to act and so he reaches down and he curves his fingers into the paneling on the shuttle and he thinks *come loose come loose let me in, you want to let me in* and the hidden catch depresses and he pulls the paneling away with its beveled keys and its interface for humans and he shoves it in Greer's direction.

"Shit. Doc, that seems like a bad idea—"

He presses his hands into the circuitry and pours into the little self-limited half-fried processor of the shuttle, converting his own energy and therefore mass and, in usable biochemical units, calories into energy that it can use to *do what he wants* and he will *make* it do what he wants—if one picks one's battles and repercussions are not considered it's usually possible to get what is wanted though that is not always the case and it is literally less than one second before he predictably feels Young pull him back with a reflexive terror and a strength of feeling that he finds difficult to explain or deal with and he's forced to fight and he's just—

Held.

There.

Trying.

To.

Break.

Fine, he gives in because he can't break free and so he projects back toward Young. *Reassure reassure reassure reassure reassure reassure fine fine fine fine fine, let me go.* He moves closer and he gives Young control of everything he thinks he wants and everything Young knows to ask for which is just a fraction of the whole and Young is aerodynamic drag on his mind and Young is his anchor and he cedes it all to him, his thoughts and his breathing and his heart and his hands. *Let me go*, he thinks, *let go, let go, let go, let me go.* Young is afraid and it's as if he knows what Rush trying to do because he's annexing territory like an avalanche and this is always his impulse to acquire and to control and to make still for consideration and it is very much, *very much*, like being held in restraints where forces are equal and opposite and if he just wouldn't pull away, then no one would pull him back but he always pulls away it's who he is. In this Young is stronger than he himself is, stronger than Destiny and utterly implacable and in these static contests he always loses so he relaxes and looks for a workaround, which is, if he can be called a genius, the area in which his genius lies. So he continues to project back reassurance and by increments Young loosens his hold fraction by fraction by fraction but it's enough for his thoughts to again build into their outward flare-and-spiral that's an intolerable mess to Young, just like the other man's opaque solidity is to him, but his thoughts are much more fluid and distracting and it is easy to hide intent within them and all he needs is to just—

interface—

with the aft thrusters and they—

fire—

and their trajectory is altered and so he uses his link to the thrusters as a beachhead against Young and certainly he will grant that it's not the most collegial behavior and he has to sacrifice entirely his ability to *actually* move, has to give that to Young to hang onto, so yes Young has utterly, as is his impulse, stilled his hands and stilled his eyes and slowed his heart and he could do anything, anything he wants with Rush's hands and eyes but Rush *gives* him all of that as they fight for control of his mind.

"Rush. *Rush*. Come on, man, don't do this now. We're *crashing*. Into a *planet*."

Greer sounds concerned.

"Nick," the AI says and he can tell it's upset because it has changed to Gloria and it is flickering and in the back of his mind he feels the CPU grinding slowly away its algorithms looping ad infinitum; god, *god* it's not its fault it just pulls her from his mind when it is afraid because it has to work at Jackson but Gloria comes naturally easily

and always from his mind but there is only so much he can take, really only so much anyone can take before they simply—

"Nick, I'm afraid."

Yes of course it is, without him it will rewrite its code into nothingness and Colonel Young may actually go insane unless he lives on in the CPU somehow, some fraction of him is there, always, depending on system requirements. But even if he persists as some odd, twisted shadow of himself that won't help Greer with the problem of imminent death as part of fiery conflagration of molten metal.

"Nick, I can't do this without you."

"Rush, I can't *do* this without you, man."

From Young he gets not words, just a ceaseless, unenlightened, unremitting, unflinching hold on his mind that masks a terror that's deep and wide and oddly existential in feel for a man as solid and rooted in reality as the colonel is. Would Tamara have been like this or would he have pulled her mind loose from its moorings into madness because she has always been more sympathetic to him than Young; perhaps he reminds her of someone a brother maybe or a friend but someone gone, someone associated with sadness or maybe that expression she makes when she looks at him is simply because he's destroying Young and he can't help it and she knows he can't help it but she hates to watch, just like everyone hates to watch as they spiral down, forced to watch, forced to spiral, forced to fall, choosing to fall, pulled down metaphorically except actually right now it's really more literal and it's also not so much a spiral as a ballistic trajectory, an arc made by gravity and it would not be ideal to arc down into the middle of light zone or the dark zone on this tidally locked world and hitting the sea would also not be ideal because they might survive the impact but not long afterwards how long could humans last in the water and how cold would it be; he's drowned too many times to drown again now and he would prefer burning up in the atmosphere to the cold stillness of the water that's more his nature but what would Greer prefer but he's not able to ask.

He will solve this. He will, and by 'solve' he means he will find a solution set that maximizes positive outcomes and although everyone seems to expect life to be without pain, he will give them the best set that he can and he will minimize *collective* pain and isn't that what he always does and he would appreciate it if someone could just explain to him what is so goddamned heartless about that using any metric they deem appropriate—what is so manipulative and scheming and calculating and controlling and devious and unscrupulous. He would genuinely like to know. Is it

because he lies to carry the thing off? Betrayed and betrayer, certainly, but regardless of it all he—

"Nick. *Nick*, don't *leave*. Don't *leave*!" Its scream mixes with the scream of the shields and Young is digging into his mind but already his influence is starting to wane.

//Pull out,// Young says.

He holds on.

//Nick.//

He holds on.

"*Nick*."

He holds on.

"*Rush*."

He holds on.

//Pull out. Pull away from the shuttle,// Young clarifies as if his meaning wasn't glaringly obvious. //It's going to crash and I don't want your mind in there when it does.//

Oh he doesn't *want*, does he?

"Doc, shit, you have to strap in," Greer says.

True, true, and unrelated. He can't move.

"Nick. *Nick!*" Gloria is screaming. "Pull out. *Listen* to him. *Pull out* of the shuttle."

He holds on, his mind interfaced with the shuttle, adjusting the energy that he is pouring into it, optimizing, reinforcing the little shielding that remains in the face of tropospheric drag.

"*Damn* it, Doc, you are a pain in the ass."

He is aware of Greer unbuckling himself and if he could comment he would say something involving a permutation of the word fuck but he can't say anything he can't even look, can't even direct his gaze, all he has is his peripheral vision which indicates the other man manages to stand against the turbulence that rocks the shuttle, against the abrupt changes in velocity, accelerations positive and negative, as they descend through condensed water vapor toward the planet's surface. Greer's hand comes into view as it is braced on a console and then Rush is shoved back and buckles are buckled honestly he's not crazy, he's not, about this rigid contracture of muscles that seems to accompany battles for control of his mind and body as if he were not already



confined enough he is strapped into the seat he's fucking doing this *for Greer* so that they don't burn up in the atmosphere and if the man gets himself killed because he's unstrapped when they hit Rush will be not only unsurprised and fair fucking pissed, but also frankly fair fucking fucked because already he can feel the presence of Young and the presence of the ship receding from his mind by increments and he is beginning to feel—

Not right.

"Rush. *Rush!*"

Greer is yelling his name barely audible over the roar of the atmospheric drag the air compresses and rarefies; without a medium there is no sound it's just a pressure wave but there's a medium now and he hopes that medium is breathable and there is so much pressure on his mind he's coming apart and nothing is holding him together. Except Greer is shouting his name and, yes well, it's probably more frightening to watch the groundrush when your copilot who is considered by most to be much too unstable to walk over a flat surface or open a jar by himself let alone fly a shuttle when he's never done it before simply takes over the controls and stops responding to everything you say and he's not insensitive to that, he's not, he's not insensitive to anything unfortunately, he just can't do this and talk, But Greer is shouting his name again and again and again and he doesn't mean to but he's giving him something to focus on to remember what he is or who he is or what he is and that he's not this disintegrating shuttle that he's locked straight into they're locked together and if it hold on him is so intense when they hit the ground it will shatter apart inside his mind and maybe his mind will shatter apart with it and he's not *overly* concerned about that because his mind is an already shattered thing that the AI keeps and Colonel Young keeps and he keeps intact as best that they can and most of the time it holds water but only in the way a shattered glued together piece of ornamental glassware holds water and an unshattered version would be better but but you keep the shattered one because where will all the water go without it.

The floor?

The earth?

Or maybe, there would be no water.

"Rush, snap *out* of it." Greer screams to be heard over the roar of the drag. "*Rush.*"

He can't die here, not yet. He won't let go. He will hang on until the end and try to keep control until they crash straight into the earth. The apposed destruction of the

shuttle will damage his mind a little further and maybe he will lose some other skill set that he hangs onto like the ability to subtract or something equally vital but from the disorganization he'll gain a compensatory insanity like a sense of loss that becomes mathematically quantifiable and he'll continue to *know* all the answers they'll come out of this pained and painful swirl and he'll be a little further gone but he'll compensate, right up until the point where he can't compensate anymore and then he'll be decompensated. Is it so wrong to want this it was what Gloria wanted too at the end and she had always been his metric but she also wanted him to be there and he wasn't, he wasn't there and he is not there for Mandy now, locked in the timeless dark and he won't be there for Young but they all wait for him until the end, they are all, all of them, waiting for him but he never comes or he comes *too late*, he's still not sure which it will be but for Gloria at least he knows the answer. He should have just stayed under the river water and that's why now invariably, anytime anyone tries to drown him he just *breathes in*—

Ionizing particles rush over the hull and Gloria is screaming, *screaming* and the last thing he feels from Young is the sensation of his hand coming to his mouth in a closed fist and then *nothing*. Nothing. *Nothing* is holding him back, *nothing* is holding him down it is *just him* and the broken, tortured, twisted insides of a defective malfunctioning shuttle and they belong together, yes they *must* because he needs something he needs something something *something* because he needs something because—

"Rush."

—because they are alike, suboptimal things that burn hot and red orange but nevertheless accomplish their purpose in the face of untenable unstoppable sometimes insidious and rarely obvious *drag* that slows and burns and weakens and burns and burns and burns and the ground is rising up to meet them in an optical illusion but that does not concern him because he's very good at responding to only what should be responded to and it seems like he's not but he maintains that even now he *is*, because the notes of the circuitry and the music of the shields and the sensation of circuits burning like they are parts of his body are just as real and pressing to him as people are and he can't cut them out and can't ignore them but he can work around it all, splitting and splitting and splitting and working around always but there has been a sudden spike in the energy required to fight his way free of the ephemera and run his algorithms, so many that he's beginning to—he can't keep track he needs *Destiny* for that, Destiny is too far and Colonel Young is too far and he is alone, alone, *alone* and his mind doesn't know what to do with the space they have taken up for so long and it

feels like a vacuum cold and dark and pulling on all that he is but still, *still* he holds to the shuttle, because that was his decision and he stands by it and he *will*, until the *end*, unless he doesn't, he's mercurial and that is what is called a 'character flaw,' He holds to it, putting more and more of himself into it and what does it say about him—

*"I'm fucked up aren't I? Am I fucked up?"*

*"Yes but oh just a little bit darling and it makes you interesting."*

—that he doesn't mind letting machines and letting aliens and letting technology and letting chairs and letting people just reach in and take what they need to take and remake what they need to remake but usually he gets something in return, something he *wants*. This is a case in point is it not, because his hands are in its circuitry and this is a direct interface and his brain has more computational capacity than this little shuttle could use if it wanted but it doesn't have wants per se, other than *his* wants and his wants right now consist of diverting all power, *oh god all power*, to forward shields and it's not alive, not really, all the available energy it has is coming from him, from *him* and god this will cost him and it will cost the shuttle because maybe it *is* alive in the way a small animal is alive just circuitry and voltage differentials and no real thoughts but then why do the circuits shriek and why does this hurt it and why does it pull energy from his mind like it is *frightened* and why does he know and it know and he know that it is going to die it's going to die inside his mind and he's going to die with the shuttle he's going to die he's going to die he's going to he's going to

## At All Angles: Part 2

Greer opened his eyes.

The light was purple.

The way it glinted to violet over edges and seemed to sink into black pools in corners reminded him of the small room on the small street where the evening sun had passed through the blue curtains over his bedroom window, but—

It was clear that whatever he was looking at was not his bedroom.

The air tasted strange. Acrid.

He narrowed his eyes, pressed his eyebrows together, and shook his head once to clear it.

He took a deep breath.

Gleaming edges and violet surfaces and lines and planes and angled planes that were transparent made up his entire visual field until, with an almost physical snap, he forced them to resolve into something that made sense.

"Aw *shit*."

His muscles contracted as the memory of the crash burst back into his mind. He jerked, his heart pounding against his ribs as he instinctively fought against the cords that still fastened him to his chair. He forced himself to take a deep breath.

"Shit."

He was oriented sideways relative to the press of gravity, one arm trailing away from his body into empty air.

He felt too heavy—as if something more than gravity was pulling him down.

He looked up, and his forehead smacked the warped metal of the shuttle wall. He looked down, and—

"*Shit*."

Rush's hands were still buried in the circuitry of the opened control panel.

In the dim light, Greer couldn't see much else.

"Oh this is—this is *fucked* up," Greer murmured. "You with me, Doc?" he called, raising his voice slightly.

No answer.

"Rush?"

No answer.

"Come on. *Rush*."

No answer.

"Yeah," Greer said, his voice cracking subtly. "You're right. That's—probably a lot to ask."

He closed his eyes and brought a hand up to his face.

"Okay," he said. "Okay."

He pulled in another deep breath.

Priority number one was to get clear of the wreckage and assess their surroundings.

Priority number two was—currently unresponsive.

He ran his hands over his upper arms, his shoulders, and his torso. He twisted slightly, passing his hands over his thighs, visually inspecting his—

"Yup," he said. "That's about right."

As soon as he saw the thing, he could feel it.

A three-inch piece of metal, sheared away from the base of his chair, had embedded itself in his left calf and was pinning his leg in place.

In the dimness it was difficult to tell how much blood he'd lost.

Best not to think about it, probably.

In one quick, sharp motion he jerked his leg free. He bit the inside of his lip, swallowing the scream that tried and failed to make it past his vocal chords and shut his eyes against the sudden wave of vertigo.

"So yeah, that hurt, Doc, but I'm good," he said. "I'm good."

He waited a few seconds for the lightheadedness to pass, and then, satisfied that he wasn't pinned anywhere else, he hooked his uninjured leg around the base of the chair, wrapped one arm around the back, and unbuckled his restraints.

Despite his efforts, he half-fell before he could reach back around, fisting his free hand around the dangling cords.

Either gravity was stronger than usual on this world, or he had lost more blood than he realized.

He lowered himself down deliberately before he let go of the restraints and dropped the last few feet to the opposite wall. He hissed as his knees buckled, stressing his injury and sending a bolt of pain up his left leg.

"Yeah," he hissed as he shut his eyes, breathing through the worst edge of pain. "Don't worry about me, Doc. I am *fine*."

He stretched his injured leg out in behind him while he twisted to get a good view of the scientist.

The other man was still strapped in, his hands tangled in the circuitry of the open panel, his eyes shut.

Immediately Greer's fingers went to his throat, where he felt the steady pulse of the carotid artery.

He let out a breath that he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

It was very quiet.

Rush's eyes snapped open.

Greer jumped, one hand coming up reflexively.

After a few seconds, his heart rate slowed and he took pulled in a slow breath.

"Doc?" he said quietly. "How ya doin'?"

No answer.

"Doc," he murmured again. "Can you talk to me?"

No answer.

"Rush," he snapped, louder this time. "*Rush*."

That got him a long intent stare.

"Hey," he said quietly.

Rush looked away, toward the open shuttle circuitry.

"Rush, no, come on man, look at me. *Me*."

He reached out to touch the scientist's shoulder.

Rush jerked back, yanking his hands out of the circuitry, curling into himself in a rapid contracture of muscles, eyes shutting, hands clenching, one of them curling into his hair, both of them pressing into his temples as if he could hold himself together with two closed fists.

Greer jerked back and opened both hands.

"Whoa," he said forcefully, before dialing the volume of his voice back down. "Easy," he said. "You're fine. You're doing—ah, you're doing good. We're *both* doing good actually. Just, you know, chillin' in the shuttle. Well, the shuttle wreckage. In a little while we're gonna go check out this new planet."

Rush looked like he was making an effort to slowly, incrementally, relax.

From what Greer could see, the scientist was uninjured.

"So far, all I can tell you is that it's purple. And the gravity seems to be dialed up."

Greer's eyes darted around the interior of the shuttle for a few moments before he continued.

"Fortunately for us, nothing seems to be on fire, but uh—generally it's a good idea *not* to stay inside *wreckage*."

Greer reached forward again, this time slowly, with his hand open, intent on releasing Rush from the restraints that still secured him to his chair.

Again, Rush violently jerked back away from him.

"Okay," Greer said, keeping his tone light. "I get it. Settle down. You need a minute? I can give you a minute." He looked around the interior of the shuttle, trying to mentally catalogue what he would need to come back for.

The rope and the flashlights were a must.

A *gun* would have been nice.

Unfortunately, *someone* had insisted that *guns* would not be *necessary* on this mission and would simply pose a *hazard*.

Eli was going to pay for this.

Greer looked back at Rush. The scientist's eyes were dark and wide, his gaze fixed on the damaged panel in front of him.

"I get the feeling," Greer said quietly, "that if I try dragging you out of here right now, it's going to be a pretty shitty experience. For both of us. Any thoughts on that?"

Rush's gaze flicked toward him and then back to the panel.

"Yeah. Maybe we'll just wait another minute."

Greer looked edgily into the ruined aft compartment of the shuttle. The rear doors had been damaged in the crash, and the strange purple light was visible through a wide gap in the metal.

"So, I've been learning Ancient for you, Doc," Greer said. "Here goes nothing." He cleared his throat. "Salutem. Quod nomen est tibi?"

Rush looked at him with considerably more interest than he's so far displayed.

"Hey," Greer said, looking intently at Rush, trying to hold the other man's attention by force of will. "I hope you still understand English because that's all the Ancient I know."

Rush continued to look at him.

"Do you understand me?" Greer asked, his voice quiet, intent.

Rush's eyebrows furrowed and he blinked rapidly.

"I get that you're not at your best right now, but this is going to go a lot better if you can just get it together even a little bit, Doc. A lot better."

Rush looked back at the exposed circuitry of the shuttle.

"Nope. I'm much more interesting than a broken ship. Come on." Greer moved a few inches forward, trying to recapture his attention. "Come *on*, Rush. Talk to me. You've got stuff going on in that head of yours," Greer said quietly. "I can see you thinking."

Rush looked back at Greer.

"Come *on*, man. Focus. Talk to me. Say something. Say *anything*."

Rush said nothing.

"There's probably a reason the colonel talks to you pretty much nonstop when you start doing weird shit. My guess? You need to readjust some to being a person. I'm also guessing that the fact that you were as good as plugged in to the shuttle when it hit the ground isn't helping you out. Plus—well, there are about a million reasons that you are just having a *shit day*, Doc."

"Greer," Rush whispered.

"Yeah," Greer said, sitting forward, forcing himself to keep a lid on the intensity that he wanted to respond with. "Yup. You got it. Can you understand me? Do you know what I'm saying?"

Rush shut his eyes.

"Come on Doc. I need you. We've got to get out of here. We've got to figure this out. There is *no way* I can fix this shuttle without you telling me what to do."



He had to wait for almost two minutes.

"Warped toric joints," Rush finally said, his voice barely audible.

"Um," Greer replied. "One more time?"

"The shuttle has—warped toric joints."

Greer fought to stay focused and not give in to the overwhelming wave of relief that swept through his chest.

"Oh yeah?" he said, with a faint smile.

"Yes," Rush said. "And—" he stopped, looking back at the circuitry. He was quiet for so long that Greer was certain that he wasn't going to continue when he finally finished with "—I destroyed its central processor."

Rush reached out and ran his fingers over the metal edge of the panel in a slow, delicate sweep.

Greer frowned, resisting the urge to reach out and yank his hand away from the circuitry.

"So we're gonna to need to be rescued, is what you're telling me?"

"No."

"So you think you can get us out of here?"

"No."

"Well," Greer said, wincing slightly as he readjusted his position, not really sure what to make of Rush's two contradictory statements. "I'm pretty damn sure the colonel is going to try and attempt a rescue."

"Of that," Rush whispered slowly, still stroking the metal. "I have no doubt."

"So," Greer said. "What do you say we make it as easy for them as we can?" He waited for a moment and when Rush didn't respond, he continued. "Transmit a signal, maybe? So they'll find us?"

"So they'll find us." Rush's hand stilled for a moment on the metal.

His eyes—

His eyes were hard to look at.

"Yeah," Greer said, the word barely making it past his lips.

The wind whistled softly through the sheared and twisted wreckage.

"Do you know what it feels like to be vivisected?" Rush whispered.

The hair on the back of Greer's neck stood up.

"No," he said.

For a moment, Rush said nothing. His fingers curled around the edge of the open panel.

The wind outside died away.

"Let's keep it that way." Rush's voice was inaudible except for the hard stops of the consonants.

"God *damn*, Doc—" Greer whispered, not entirely certain how to complete his sentence, trying to put together the connection between his question and Rush's counter-question. "You're freaking me out."

Rush said nothing.

"You think that if we transmit a signal," Greer said slowly, "that it won't be our people who will find us. It'll be the Nakai."

Rush nodded.

"Ah. Yeah. Okay. You're doing the two steps ahead and one step—sideways thing."

Rush stroked the shuttle.

"That's okay," Greer said. "You do your thing. I get you. Sometimes."

Rush ran his thumb over something that looked like it might be part of a circuit board.

"What's with the, uh—petting the shuttle?"

"It doesn't understand what has happened to it," Rush said.

"The *shuttle*." Greer said. He had meant it as a question, but it didn't come out that way. It came out more like a reminder.

"Yes." Barely audible. "The shuttle."

"Okay," Greer said, suddenly resolved. He shifted his position again, coming into a crouch directly behind the chair that Rush was still strapped into. "I think you've spent enough time with this thing. Time to go."

"No," Rush said, his hand tightening around the edge of the paneling.

"Sorry Doc, this is going to suck, but you don't get a choice on this one."

In one quick motion, Greer unbuckled Rush's restraints, wrenched a fist into the front of his jacket, and pulled him up, out, and over the chair he had been strapped to, breaking his hold on the ruined console. He managed to haul Rush halfway through the aft compartment before the scientist was able to get it together enough to even start struggling, and by that time, Greer had momentum going for him.

They burst through the gap in the ruined rear doors into the light of a violet sky.

Small wet stones slid past each other as Greer stepped down into a few inches of running water that flickered in the evening light as it flowed quietly in a broad, shallow swath.

There was no way he was about to drag Rush through *alien water*. Or whatever.

Rush seemed unconcerned with their surroundings and took advantage of Greer's momentary distraction to get his feet beneath him and attempt to wrench himself free.

He succeeded only in unbalancing the pair of them.

Greer staggered but kept one hand fisted in the front of Rush's jacket, hissing at the pain that shot up his injured leg. He managed to stabilize himself on the warped edge of the aft cargo doors, managed to keep Rush on his feet, managed to brace himself against the side of the shuttle so that when Rush tried to break away again, he was ready.

As the scientist attempted to twist out of his jacket, Greer dropped into a crouch and yanked the other man into a fireman's carry.

"You are just shit at the hand-to-hand, Doc," Greer said. "We need to work on this."

The disorientation of the sudden change in his position seemed to take most of the fight out of Rush, allowing Greer to make it across the shallow water and onto the bank with relatively little trouble.

He lowered the other man down onto loose stones next to the water.

Greer scanned the tree line carefully as he knelt beside Rush, trying not to strain his injury. When he was satisfied that nothing was immediately about to make them its lunch, he ran a critical eye over the scientist.

"You hurt, Doc?"

Rush looked at him.

"Does anything *hurt*?" Greer asked him.

Rush looked like he was trying to figure out what had just happened.

Greer looked him over carefully, but didn't see any obvious injuries.

"Sorry," Greer said slowly, his gaze flicking back and forth between Rush and the tree-lined bank of the wide stream. "Sorry about that, Doc. I told you it was gonna suck. But being in that shuttle was not doing you any favors."

"Quid—" Rush said, looking up at Greer. "Too much data," he said finally, "and insufficient speed."

"Yeah," Greer said. "I know, but you'll get the hang of it. You're good at figuring—" Greer waved a hand in the air, "figuring stuff out."

Rush looked at him.

"You just explained something to me," Greer said. "That's an improvement already. We're gonna be fine."

Rush looked up, away from Greer, out into the twilit sky.

"Yup," Greer said. "We're fine."

## At All Angles: Part 3

There are—

Water.

The nature of his problem—

is a dictionary problem but he does not have the processing power to make a hash table the standard solution an associative array would be best but maybe he can live with a dynamic array can he even

Random access should be must be retained.

Shuttle?

Too much data, not enough metadata.

"You're all right," Young says.

This is what he will do he will

This is what he will do he will

This is what he will do he will create a hash table that does not bin all of his data but only a portion it can't be all because the cost per lookup must be low if he is going to respond with anything approaching normal speed and it must be well dimensioned because certain keys will have many corresponding values but he probably has the capacity for this and it should get easier as he goes he's just not clear on how he will interface with the data outside the hash table and whether he will interface with it or it will interface with *him*.

"A limited hash table as your base," Young says. "I like it. That'll work. Most likely."

He suspects that Young is not actually here.

People pull their context with them and Young pulls nothing that is situationally appropriate.

Rush says nothing.

He builds his hash function. Too many collisions will slow him down significantly if he creates all his keys now then he could have a perfect hash function but that will not leave him room to adapt and his mind isn't meant to work like this anyway things always tear through his consciousness putting too much rigidity in will ensure nothing but shatter.

"Don't waste time making it perfect," Young says, watching Greer go back into the shuttle. "And watch your clustering, genius. It's gonna jack the lookup cost."

Rush says nothing.

*It is dark and he is slammed down on a table he is still wet he is so cold but not cold enough*

He jerks and he stops

"—so we've got, oh I don't know, a million bucks worth of fancy tools and kinos back there, but not much in the way of—"

"—and you know how I feel about that. Anyway, if I have to use my *knife* in self defense I am personally going to force Eli—"

"Rush."

He has a hash table. Should the Nakai

"Rush."

be included in the table or should they remain outside there are pros and cons to both the pros being mainly that the probability that he is going to encounter the Nakai again in the near future and by near future he means before he leaves this twilight band is high and that it would be useful to be able to rapidly access information about them but the cons are that said information serves as a focus for

*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, and he was not built for this, he knows he wasn't, but being conscious for the cut and spread is not sustainable and yet it is nothing but sustain. Their knowledge of his anatomy cannot be any better than his own and maybe that's why they don't place it in his heart just adjacent to*

yes as a focus.

Maybe they do not go in the table.

Maybe the table will just be keyed to people but which people and he's not sure what Young is doing here and what Greer is doing here and are they hallucinations or delusions or are they here and where is he and when is he and he has a lot of memories that seem to involve Nicholas Rush he was the one that Colonel Young knows and the one that Greer knows.

He is ninety-five percent certain that he is Nicholas Rush.



"Doc. Come on. Give me a hand here, will you?"

He's sitting

and he feels unstable and he puts his hands down in front of him and his hands are touching rocks that are dry and they look purple and the sky is purple and this is the twilight band and he directed them here using the shuttle the dead shuttle that was so afraid and now he is alive and it is not alive it has no processor it cannot do what he wants or it wants it cannot do anything and it is possible that he might have been damaged as well what happened when the shuttle hit the ground he doesn't remember maybe it will come to him maybe that's already what this is and he will be forever hitting the ground.

"Hold these, will you?" Greer hands two objects to Rush and if he can touch an object that's handed to him by a person does that mean that that person is real.

He looks at what is in his hands and he decides that it is a radio and radios are now keyed to Eli.

"A modified hash table," Eli says. "Based on people. That is *hot*. But like, in a computational sense." Eli smiles. "Obviously. But here's my question for you—is that really the best idea? Because now, you know, you did indeed correctly identify that little number in your hand there," Eli raises his eyebrows at the radio, "but because you keyed it to me, now you've kinda got me as baggage. I guess that's a con, unless you find having me here helpful, in which case it's a pro. But who all are you binning on? I'm willing to bet that not all of them are going to be *as nice* to you as me."

"I think they'll be helpful," Rush says.

Greer looks at him intently. "The radios?" Greer says. "How come?"

"Um, yeah," Eli says. "You don't have to talk to *me*, cause I'm kinda *you* anyway. You should talk to Greer. I think he might actually be—you know. Here."

"In case—"

He needs a teleological argument to clarify a statement he didn't intend to make why would he want a radio on a planet what is the purpose of a radio perhaps he can simply state its function is that an appropriate response to the question of why is a radio helpful Greer is looking at him.

"In case we want to transmit a signal through space by modulating electromagnetic waves."

Greer looks at him.

"Yup. We might want to do that." Greer looks down at his leg. "I'm liking the English, Doc. Not gonna lie."

Greer's eyes shift again to look at the tree line. "You going to be okay here by yourself for a minute? I need to get the first aid kit."

Greer looks at him.

"Yes," Rush says.

"Can I have a radio?" Greer asks.

Rush looks at Eli, who is still sitting next to him on top of the small rocks.

"Yeah," Eli says, motioning with his head.

Rush hands Greer one radio.

"Thanks, Doc," Greer says and then he is gone and he is alone there is no one next to him and no one in his mind and no one he can see he can tell where Destiny is he can feel it like a fish hook in his thoughts pulling him back across a distance that he can't cross and it is so quiet here and he does not like the water.

"You'd better get your shit together, Nick," Telford says, smoking a cigarette. "You're fucking pathetic. You think you have the processing power to build and operate a hash table? Good luck."

"Please don't talk to me," he says.

"Don't *talk* to you? I *am* you, you fucking idiot. How the hell am I *actually* going to be here? Think about it for ten seconds. I'm fucking locked in my quarters thanks to you and all because I tried to *help* you. That entire crew up there is alive because of me. *You* are alive because of *me*. And you know it. Clearly." Telford takes a draw of his cigarette. "So don't give me that shit, Nick."

"I would prefer someone else."

"Yeah. Well. If that's the case, maybe you shouldn't have keyed anything to me."

"Please go away."

Telford sighs and tosses his cigarette out into the shallow water. "Nick—"

"Go."

"You're not interfacing with the data," Telford says. "The data is interfacing with *you*."

"Not preferred," Rush says.

Is he dealing with the totality of things as they exist or is he dealing with things that do not he is not certain that he can delineate all the permutations of options but he thinks it may be important and he wishes he knew why he was not on Destiny and he thinks that maybe he is on Destiny but if he is then where is Colonel Young and where is the AI. He could be dreaming he does not remember his dreams often but when he does he wishes he didn't so maybe that is what this is. Maybe this is what happens to him when he is in the chair maybe he is the AI now and this what is made when they combine a thing that cannot *do* this but the thing that worries him most the

*"I don't know exactly—" he breaks off, trying to hold onto his panic even as his eyes slide shut and then open again, "How we ended up in this situation but—"*

thing he can't really guard against is something happening to Young because that would imbalance him it would have to but why would he hallucinate a world with a purple sky and a broad shallow stream and he does not like the water.

"Hey Doc," Chloe says, her arms wrapped around her knees. "Do you think I'm dead?"

He looks away from her abruptly, one hand pressed to his mouth.

"Do you think I made it back inside Destiny before I was killed by the stellar flare, or do you think Matt and I died out there?"

It is all right because

"—and damn I hope I got a tetanus booster at some point in the—"

"Hold this, will you?"

He is holding something.

"What do you think, Doc, is it better to wash this thing in alien water, or just slap some of that antibacterial gel on it and call it a day?"

It is all right because they were on the hull he can remember Lieutenant Scott catching her ankle and catching the hull and holding her there and Colonel Young knew and they had six minutes or maybe seven and they were not so far only seventy-five meters and someone was in the third suit standing by.

He is holding something.

"It's gauze," Tamara says.

Rush says nothing. He has no idea if she is there or not but probably not and Greer probably is and he tries not to talk to people who aren't there it is a policy that he has.

"He's injured," Tamara says.

"You're injured?" Rush says to Greer.

Greer looks at him intently.

Rush wonders why he is getting that look.

"Yeah," Greer says finally. "Yeah. I cut my leg. That's why I've been cleaning it and wrapping it for the past fifteen minutes."

This is something he should have noticed this is something that he should have

"Hey," Tamara says, coming around so she is back in his line of sight. "It's okay. You're doing your best. And now you can help him. It's an alien world—who knows what kind of bacteria he's going to be tracking through. Do the *real* me a favor and save me some work, hmm?"

He says nothing to Greer because what could he say he can barely explain anything on a good day and people who aren't here are talking to him and maybe Greer himself is not real this could be an elaborate construction by the Nakai because actually wait this makes sense who can talk to a starship with their *mind* no one can do that maybe he never left and everyone thinks he's dead maybe how could he be reconciled with Colonel Young he framed him he *framed* him and then he was left to *die* Young left him he *left* him he left him to the Nakai and could they take all this from his mind do they want to ascend does he want to ascend what do they want from him what do they why would they take him off Destiny if they haven't already gained control of the ship if they did that they would kill the crew the crew probably doesn't even think of him or remember him anymore but still he's fucked them over from a distance in space and time.

"Doc," Greer snaps. "Look at me."

"I don't think you're here," Rush looks at him. "They've probably already killed you."

Greer stares at him.

"Nah," Greer says finally. "This is one of those things you should trust me on, Doc. I'm not dead, and you're not dead."

"I think they're torturing me."

"The Nakai?"

"Yes."

Greer looks at him as Tamara studies him from the side.

"I think he's real," she says turning her blue eyes on him but he tries not to look at her but he fails, "I think he's real," she whispers again. "I bet he has no idea what a hash table is."

"Define hash table," Rush snaps at Greer.

"Um," Greer says, "one more time?"

"Define *hash table*."

"Hash table? Sorry Doc, I think you may have some wires crossed on that one. Hash is a food and a table is something you eat it on, but I'm pretty sure there's no such thing as a hash table."

"See," Tamara says, "See? If he were one of us, he would know."

Is he lying does he know he narrows his eyes and tries to tell but Greer mostly looks sad which is odd he doesn't understand that.

"It's a computing term," Rush says because he doesn't like the way that Greer is looking at him.

"Oh yeah?" Greer ties off the bandage around his leg and he looks down and away.

"Yes," Rush says and then he reaches out and closes his hand around the bandage on Greer's leg very hard and the only thing that this requires is the understanding and manipulation of energy-mass equivalence which is something that he's been doing in a mechanical context for quite some time now and the energy is so great in even a small piece of mass that it requires practically nothing from him to simply provide the requisite energy to rebuild according to previous patterns arteries and veins and cells continuing from behind and coming back from ahead to grow together and this is nothing compared to what he will eventually attempt for Tamara and it is over before Greer has time to pull away but he does pull away because

"You're all right," Young says. "You just scared the shit out of him. That's all."

"I wish you were here," Rush whispers. He's lying down again.

"I know genius. Me too."





## At All Angles: Part 4

Greer stood on the bank of the broad, flat steam and looked out over twilit water.

Things were not going well.

It probably had not been a good idea to freak out on Rush.

To be fair, he hadn't really 'freaked out' so much as he had just been *startled* when the man had grabbed his leg and dug his fingers into the injury that Greer had just spent fifteen minutes cleaning.

*Anyone* would have pulled away.

Anyone.

Anyone probably also would have yelled 'what the hell are you *doing*', though that reaction really hadn't done him or Rush any favors. Greer maintained however, that it was a completely reasonable response, especially in light of the fact that Rush had definitely been doing something.

His leg had felt like it was being boiled from the inside out and there had been no way, *no way* to know that Rush was—well.

Healing him.

Which was weird enough in and of itself to justify the freaking out, which, again, had not even really happened.

It turned out that yelling at Rush had been a bad idea because the man was currently lying about three feet behind Greer, mostly unresponsive.

Greer was giving him a minute.

It had been over an hour since they had crashed. The communications array on the shuttle was utterly dead, as far as Greer could tell. Maybe Rush could do something with it, but Greer had a feeling that asking him to do so might not be a good idea. They'd heard nothing via radio—not surprising, as they were most definitely out of range of Destiny, but still, Greer kept hoping to hear Young or Scott over the open channel. He wondered how long it would take for the stellar flare to pass and how long before Colonel Young felt it was safe enough to launch their second shuttle.

He glanced back at Rush.

Hopefully not long.

He tried not to think about Matt and Chloe, holding themselves to the hull of the ship.

He tried not to think about the Nakai.

He tried not to think about how difficult it might be for Destiny's crew to *actually* pull off a rescue.

He took a deep breath and scanned the tree line with his eyes. One thing was certain. It was stupid to stay out here in the open for a prolonged period of time. He wanted to be in sight of the shuttle, but not easily visible. They'd already stayed on the shore of this stream for too long.

"Hey Doc," Greer said, turning back toward Rush. He kneeled down on the loose gravel that lined the bank of the shallow stream. "How you doing?"

"Fine," Rush whispered.

"Sorry that I, uh, flipped out on ya there," Greer said, resting his forearms on his knees. "You just—surprised me. That's all. Nice new skill you've got yourself."

Five seconds passed and Greer wasn't sure if Rush was going to respond.

"Don't patronize me," Rush snapped abruptly.

Greer smiled at him. "I would never patronize such an *unbelievable jackass*."

"Go to college, why don't you," Rush whispered.

"Oh you would love that," Greer said. "You gonna teach me some quantum mechanics? Give me your old trigonometry text book?"

"Shut up."

Greer continued to scan the tree line.

"Yeah yeah. You're very scary. Cold hearted bastard blah blah blah. What do you say we get out of the open?"

Rush didn't reply, but Greer watched him slowly lever himself up onto one elbow and then back into a sitting position, his hands placed in front of him as if he needed the stability. His movements were deliberate and lacked a sense of coordination or balance or—Greer wasn't *sure what* it was that looked off, but something wasn't right.

"Doc," Greer said, watching Rush look at the ground like it was a revelation. "If you can fix *me*, can you fix *yourself*?"

"Somewhat," Rush said. "What do you think you're fucking looking at?"

"But not all the way," Greer said.

Clearly.

Again, his eyes swept the tree line.

"It's like bricking yourself into a wall," Rush said. "You can—" he paused briefly, his gaze losing focus before his eyes snapped back to Greer. "Only get so far."

Greer hauled his pack onto his shoulders. "You're a lot of fun at parties, aren't you?"

Rush said nothing. He flinched at something Greer couldn't see.

"What do you say that we get up and walk fifteen feet in that direction?"

"I—" Rush broke off, his hands fisting into the gravel, his expression frozen, his eyes—it was difficult to look at his eyes.

"Rush," Greer said urgently. "*Rush*."

No response.

Greer waved a hand five inches from the other man's face.

No response.

"Come on Rush," Greer said quietly. "You got this."

"What?" Rush snapped, as if he hadn't just spent thirty seconds completely unresponsive.

"What just happened?" Greer asked slowly, holding up his hands.

"Nimium notitia, parum processing power."

"Doc, that pretty much tells me nothing."

"Crash and restart," Rush whispered, "Gradual hard disk failure."

"Doc, you're getting *better*. Come on."

"Yes," Rush said, giving him a quick, pained smile. "Better. What did you want to do? Go into the forest?"

"Yeah. Get out of the open. Not far. Can you stand up?"

Rush surged to his feet in one abrupt motion. He staggered slightly, but stayed upright, planting his feet apart.

Greer stood slowly and watched Rush take in the tree line, scanning their surroundings like he was looking for something.

"How long has it been?" Rush murmured.

"Since we crashed? About an hour." Greer picked up the gear that he had salvaged from the shuttle. "How long do stellar flares last?"

"Minutes," Rush said, looking up at the sky. "Minutes to tens of minutes. Not an hour."

"So they should be coming to get us at any time now," Greer said quietly. "Are they going to be able to follow our trajectory down to find us?"

"No," Rush said quietly. "They lost their sensors, and I—altered our trajectory. We weren't purely ballistic."

"So they're going to have to sweep this whole twilight band for us?"

"Not the entire band," Rush replied.

"Um, okay. Look, my *point* is that are you *sure* that we shouldn't be transmitting a *signal*?"

Rush looked intently at the shuttle, lying in the middle of the broad, shallow stream.

"The only way to do it," Rush whispered, "Would be to substitute my mind for the shuttle's processor. And then—then the Nakai would know who was down here. The information would be deducible by the nature of the signal."

Rush flinched at nothing that Greer could see. His gaze was directed out and away.

Before the other man could stop him, Greer stepped in and closed a hand over the scientist's arm, just above the elbow. Rush tried to jerk free, but Greer held steady and after a few seconds Rush relaxed enough to let Greer pull him toward the tree line.

"We're not doing that, Doc," Greer said quietly. "That's not the plan. You've spent enough time with that shuttle. They can probably scan for us, or something, right?"

"I wish it was not in the water," Rush whispered, looking over his shoulder at the stream.

Greer pulled him into the black, tangled shadows of the wood. The interior of the forest was dark—the bare, black trunks of trees grew close and straight, like the bars of a formless cage.

Greer found a place against a downed tree where they could sit with limited cover while they kept the shuttle in sight.

Greer dropped his pack and pulled Rush down into a seated position next to him.

Around them the forest was quiet.

There were no sounds of birds or insects, just a heavy, oppressive silence.

"Dark in here," Greer said, trying to shake off the unease he was feeling.

Rush said nothing.

Greer reached into one of pockets of his BDUs and pulled out a power bar and two white pills before opening the pack to retrieve their only water.

He had to say the scientist's name twice to finally get him to look over.

"Here," Greer offering him the water and the Tylenol. "Take this stuff. You look like you feel like hell."

Rush stared at the pills and power bar without taking them from Greer.

"What?" Greer said, his tone light. "Are you being a skeptical son of a bitch? Its not *poisoned*." He winced, hoping that he hadn't just planted a suggestion in the other man's head.

"You brought me a power bar."

"Yes."

"And—"

"Tylenol. Acetaminophen. Fever and headache stuff. You take this something like every six hours?"

"Why."

"Probably because you have a fever and headache? I didn't know how long we'd be in that shuttle and—"

"I don't need a *caretaker*," Rush snapped at him acidly.

"Fine," Greer said, holding up his hands. "Then where's *your* fucking Tylenol? That *you* brought. Because you're *so prepared*."

Rush looked away.

"That's what I thought. Luckily, I will allow you to have some of *my* Tylenol. That I brought for *myself*. And you can just stop being a pain in the ass."

"But I'm so good at it," Rush whispered.

"Yes. Yes you are."

Rush swallowed two pills and handed the water back to Greer. Greer shoved it back at him. "Keep drinking. And eat your damn power bar."

Rush glared at him and then scrutinized the power bar, running his fingers along the packaging, examining it with narrowed eyes. His gaze flicked up into the empty space directly in front of him several times as he carefully turned the power bar until the seam in the packaging was oriented upwards. Slowly, his eyes repeatedly flicking up

into the forest, he tore the wrapper away, as if he were mirroring someone Greer couldn't see.

Jesus H. Christ.

"Nice," Greer said quietly.

Rush's head snapped around. "You don't *praise* someone for fucking opening a power bar."

"Yeah," Greer said. "I guess not."

Rush broke the power bar in half, and handed half of it to him with an aggrieved, distracted air.

"Thanks," Greer said quietly, re-wrapping the thing in the open packaging and re-pocketing it.

He watched Rush slowly eat his half a power bar and drink about six ounces of water, his eyes constantly flicking out and away into the forest.

He waited until Rush was done before speaking again.

"Doc," he said casually, "What are you looking at out there?"

"My hash table," Rush replied.

"You can't see the AI?"

Rush's eyes snapped to Greer.

"Why would you ask me that?"

"It just seems like—someone might be talking to you."

"No," Rush said. "No one is talking to me. Except you."

"Okay," Greer replied. "Okay."

Rush flinched at something that Greer couldn't see to the point that he overbalanced and had to stabilize himself with one outflung hand.

"Why don't you take a nap, Doc. I'll wake you when we're rescued."

"I'm not going to fucking *take a nap*, Greer."

"Okay, well then why don't you just lie down for a while?"

He had been sure that Rush would fight him on this one, but instead the other man curled into himself slightly and half-fell sideways before Greer reached out and dragged him in.

Rush tensed up and then abruptly relaxed.

Greer frowned.

"You with me, Doc?" he asked, shaking Rush slightly.

No answer.

"Crash and reset," Greer murmured. "I hope we don't run into any trouble here, you know? Because, don't take this the wrong way, but I have the feeling that you're not going to do very well. But hey, not a problem. We're going to get rescued any time." Greer looked up at the perpetually purple sky. "Any time now."

He was quiet for a moment, his eyes sweeping over the dark maze of trees and out again over the calm, shallow river.

"It's lucky that we ended up in a place where the weather is so nice. I don't know. Lisa talks about tidally locked planets a lot, and how much they suck, but this one doesn't seem so bad. It must be something like seventy-two degrees. Pretty great, if you ask me."

"Luck," Rush whispered disdainfully. "If I plot a course for the twilight band, then the twilight band is where we fucking hit, Greer."

Greer smiled faintly and looked out into the dimness.

Greer spent the next hour and a half splitting his attention between Rush and their surroundings. Even asleep, the scientist was having a rough time of it, invariably jerking awake every twenty minutes and scaring the hell out of Greer each time he did it.

"Fuck this *anyway*," Rush said after the fifth time he had jerked awake. "How long have we been here?"

"Two and a half hours," Greer said neutrally.

Rush looked out at the glittering purple water, his expression locked. "They're not coming for us," he whispered.

"Doc, I will personally guarantee you that they *are* coming for us."

Rush struggled into a sitting position and ran a hand through his hair, dark in the purple light.

He looked up at into the perpetual evening.

"The Nakai have dropped out," he said quietly.

Around them, the forest was utterly still.

"There is no way for you to know that," Greer said, uncertain.

"Oh no?" Rush whispered, giving him a twisted smile. "Then why haven't we already been rescued?"

"I don't know. A million reasons, Doc."

Rush said nothing. A few seconds passed, and the scientist flinched in the darkness.

"There are ruins on this planet," Rush said quietly. "Ruins that contain a naquadah-based alloy."

"Nope," Greer said quietly. "Forget it, Doc. We're waiting right here."

Rush clenched and unclenched his fists several times. He looked out into the dimness. He looked at the sky and flinched again. "Correction," he snapped. "*You're* waiting right here." Before Greer could stop him, he surged to his feet.

Greer was right behind him and had grabbed him before he had taken three steps.

"Don't even *think* about it, Doc," Greer hissed. "I will fucking tie you up if I have to. This is where they're going to *come*. This is where they're going to *look*. We have to be *here*."

Rush shuddered in his grip.

"Right now," Rush whispered, his eyes shut, "Destiny is passing through this planet's star."

"You don't *know* that," Greer said, shaking him gently.

"And the Nakai are trying to calculate where it will emerge,"

"Doc."

"But they are also scanning the planet."

"Rush."

"They will detect the energy signature of our shuttle."

"Come on, man, you're just freaking yourself out."

"They will launch their own short range vessels to investigate."

"Rush. *You don't know any of this.*" Greer felt his breathing speed up. He looked out into the dark interior of the forest.

"They will follow us," Rush whispered, horrified. "They will track us across this planet."



"Rush. *Stop it.*" Greer shook him. Once. Hard.

"They will *find us*," Rush hissed. "And they will never, *never* let us go. They will tear you apart," he said, his voice rising.

"Rush," Greer snarled from between clenched teeth, his fingers digging into the other man's biceps. "Get a *grip*."

"They will take what remains of your mind and they will *remake you*. Into something horrible. Something that you *wouldn't even recognize*."

"*Rush!*" Greer shouted directly in his face. "Stop."

For a moment, Rush said nothing, simply stared at Greer with wide, horrified eyes.

"You're okay," Greer said, trying to calm down. "You're fine. I'm fine. Everyone is *fine*."

Rush flinched and his eyes flicked up, toward the twilight sky.

For a moment, there was no sound other than their labored breathing.

Greer jumped at the distant, but unmistakable sound of a sonic boom.

A craft had entered the upper atmosphere.

He kept a hold on Rush, dragging the scientist back toward the edge of the trees to look up into the cloudless purple sky.

Very far away he could see the dark shape of a descending ship.

He looked at Rush.

Rush looked back at him.

A second sonic boom caused them both to jump.

Then a third.

Then a fourth.

"Go, Doc," Greer said, shoving Rush in the direction of the trees. "Go. I'm right behind you."

## At All Angles: Part 5

Plants have taken back this city. That is the way of things.

"Doc, get up."

It is not entirely transparent to him what he is doing on the ground and no one is conjecturing at the moment which leaves him uncertain as to what precisely has happened to his hash table specifically whether he is using it or it is using him who is in control of his mind and if he can ask that question does it mean that he is or is ability to ask simply indicative of consciousness which is presumably necessary for self determination but perhaps not sufficient. He is decompensating as inevitably as the plants grow between the broken material of the road, destroying it with their black, twilight-band leaves optimized to absorb everything they can from the sun which is close and hot but oblique its electromagnetic waves travel through the atmosphere slantwise, slowing and refracting and refracting and refracting to a point where red meets up with the darkness to make a color that's more

"You're better than this," Telford has time to hiss before Greer pulls him up. "You're *better than this*."

He wishes his hash table was not so set on giving him a hard time. He should not have included Telford but then that was perhaps true in a context that extended beyond this computational construct in his mind but the man has a point and he *is* better than this he does not just mindlessly run from something that will always inevitably *catch up*

within the confines of a closed system and right now with no shuttle and no gate this is the closed-est of closed systems. So this is what he will do he will

"Come on," Greer says.

"No," Rush snaps.

He will continue to operate his hash table with multiple personality disorder and he will continue to indirectly—well best not to think about what is outside his hash table but he is making stepwise adjustments to this way that he is now without Young and without Destiny and so he will attempt to think of something that does not involve purely running away because they cannot run far enough they will not stop chasing him until they have him and until they have broken open his mind and taken it apart and there are things they could do things that

"You're never safe from them," Chloe whispers her eyes wide and her hair wet. "Not until you're dead. I don't think anyone else really understands that the way that we do."

There is a voltage differential building in his mind and one day one of these things that other people call flashbacks is going to release like a shockwave across his mind that never lets him go and he cannot afford this right now he cannot he cannot

"Don't you fucking *dare*," Greer says, his face inches from Rush's own his arms hurt where Greer is gripping them. "You *stay with me*, Rush."

"Yes," Rush says and he is breathing very fast. "Yes yes. I need to think. We can't outrun them."

He acknowledges Greer's statement and he explains his actions and he explains a reason for those actions and this is definite progress for him he has more space to run his algorithms and whether that is adaptation or adrenaline he will merely continue heuristically. If you have difficulty understanding a problem try drawing a picture but insight into insight is a tricky business and does he understand this it is difficult to say but the problem can be outlined in the following manner they descended nearly ballistic at a time point that occurred before the Nakai dropped out of orbit and now the Nakai are here and a rescue party is not and their shuttle is dead and no one can

find them even if they come they are no longer with the shuttle and they must break out of their closed system. Planet, ship, space and Nakai between to traverse the distance in question they will need a ship or a gate or a ship.

A ship or a gate or a ship.

"You know," Young says, shoving his hands into the pockets of his BDUs, "your current data set may not represent future system states." Young looks up at the buildings. "Awful lot of resources you have here. Possibly."

"Can you run and think at the same time?" Greer says, shaking him once, "'cause it's kind of required."

Rush narrows his eyes. Young is not part of his hash table because—

Black skyline against a purple sky three hundred and sixty degrees a shell of a hemisphere narrow space quadrilaterals blocking light at various distances this is a city but he needs a lab who lived in this city who were they there is glass or a functional equivalent shining amongst the plants what is this place what is this place he needs a direction this is the outskirts and they need the center but where is the center or where is a lab or is it

or is it

Who would live in a twilight band and *is there naquadah here or was it brought here* brought here—not de novo here on this scorched and freezing locked fucking rock oh no no no *no* it was brought here it was *brought here* their precious fucking naquadah alloy but *is* it an alloy that is an assumption who are they or what are they these people who lived in a twilight band who came here to do something and died and died and died they must have because *where are they*

Greer is dragging him forward.

"I need a terminal," Rush says and look how well he is doing he will fucking end them all no one leaves him on fucking planets Destiny will wait for him he will always find his way back to her.

"What kind of terminal?" Greer says.

"The only—" he reaches out as if he could touch it his terminal that remains theoretical.

"The only kind that I *ever* need," he finishes, clenching his fist.

"Something you can stick your hand into, basically," Greer says quietly, looking behind them.

"Yes," Rush hisses and he can feel the branch and spread of parallel processing begin in an anticipatory whirl in his mind but he doesn't have the capacity for it. Not yet. "It worked with the shuttle, it will work with anything."

That is a generalization and that is progress specific case to general case and he is a fucking heuristical genius thank god for that.

"This is the point where usually I would say, 'Doc, you can't just go sticking your hand in random pieces of equipment.' Not without fucking antivirus software for your brain. But, we're pretty fucked."

"Yes," Rush says. "Yes that's accurate."

The metal is cool against his back and he can conceptualize what it is that he wants to do which is to keep going but he fails to do it and he's not entirely sure why that is but Greer is not dragging him forward anymore Greer is not even here and what happened exactly he is inside a structure and he cannot breathe very well which indicates recent physical activity or recent panic not mutually exclusive or maybe his heart is just failing difficult to know when one has these spontaneous resets he was running and the reason for that was what exactly maybe his hash table knows.

"Hey," Daniel says, leaning forward and looking out from under his eyebrows and he did not key to the AI he keyed to Daniel the real Daniel. "Hey Nick."

Greer is not here.

Rush nods at him but says nothing but he hopes that Daniel will tell him where he is and he tries to project in Daniel's direction but it is so hard.

"Yeah, sure," Daniel says, miraculously managing to pick up on his intent. "Unfortunately, I can't really tell you anything more than what you've got in your searchable database. I'm sure the *actual* Daniel would be much more helpful, but hey. You work with what you've got. So. You're inside a building in the center of an abandoned city. You passed the city limits—at some point, I'm not actually sure when, because you don't track that very well. Anyway, you're looking for a computer terminal where you can interface and try and determine if there's anything here that can get you back to Destiny. Namely, a ship or a gate." Daniel raises his eyebrows and he watches Rush like he's not sure if he should keep going or not so uncertain

*"Nick," Daniel calls, his voice echoing through the cement hallways of the SGC. When he doesn't turn he feels the other man reach out, his hand closing around Rush's upper arm.*

*"Daniel," he says, looking pointedly at the grip the other man has on his arm.*

*"Sorry," Daniel says. "But I think maybe I didn't make myself clear in the briefing. I think this is a bad idea. A really really bad idea."*

*Rush smiles faintly at him. "No, you were quite clear on that point, actually."*

*"A device that's supposed to help you let go?" Daniel steps in, lowering his voice. "A device that's supposed to change the electrophysiological properties of your mind with no description of how this is going to happen? A device used by Anubis? Nick. You can't really be thinking of doing this."*

*Rush says nothing.*

*"I said this to Telford, and I'll say it to you. A device like this—it could ruin your mind. It could kill you. Whatever it does—you may not ever be the same."*

*"I know that."*

*"Then why—"*

*"I have to go." Rush pulls away.*

*"Don't," Daniel calls after him. "Please don't."*

*"I have to go," Rush says.*

He opens his eyes and it's dark and it's dark and it's *dark* only a dim light comes in through the windows and everywhere there is broken glass or its functional equivalent and why is it all broken all of it as if all of the shatterable things on this planet shattered in one moment *one terrible* moment but the structures still stand they are laced with a naquadah alloy he can't see it here but he could see out outside the naquadah shot through like a web like a thing that had grown into the metal like something alive.

"This place is theirs," Chloe whispers. "You know it is."

"Yes," he says to her and he shuts his eyes but that doesn't keep the knowledge away their terrible aesthetic is all over it boxy structures with curiously curving interiors technology that's partially organic that *grows* its way to completion that is not meticulously constructed but spreads like disease but the naquadah, naquadah, *naquadah*—that is not theirs.

"But why?" he asks Chloe and he does not have to explain what he means, not to her.

"Maybe they stole it," she says. "They take their tech. It's how they advance."

"But why bring it here—to a tidally locked world in an intergalactic void?" He whispers his question.

"Because," Chloe says. "They were doing something dangerous here. Something very, *very* dangerous. Something that failed. Something that killed them all."

He brings his hand to his mouth and he is not panicking he is not panicking he just would like to know where Greer is and where the Nakai are relative to his current position delta-s for both that is what he would like to know and he would like Greer to come back for several reasons, not the least of which is that he doesn't know how long he's been here not breathing well against this wall in the darkness and what if something happened to Greer what if he's dead or trapped or maybe he was never here at all maybe he was a part of the hash table but he is positive that he could touch him but does that mean anything it's not clear to him but it *is* clear that he cannot stay here forever against this wall was he supposed to wait or go he doesn't know and where are the Nakai he doesn't know that either it is now apparent to him that he gains contextual knowledge and his placement in linear time and his ability to serially

organize from Colonel Young and from the AI and without them without them *without them* at least he needs *one of them* because without them

"Please," Rush says. "Please find me."

"I think you're going to have to find *us*, genius," Young says.

"I can't."

"Yes you can. Of course you can. Just—don't leave without Greer."

"Okay," Rush says, his hands clenching and unclenching his vision is graying out and he is about to pass out he is not sure why this is happening what is wrong with him what is wrong with him something is wrong with him this does not usually happen even when he panics and there is a non-zero probability that he is actually panicking right now and he can't hear anything over the rushing sound and

"—on Doc. Fuck. *Fuck*. Wake up. Wake up."

"You know what I find interesting?" Telford says lighting up a cigarette



He blinks and focuses on Greer who is very close to him.

"*Rush*," Greer hisses quietly. "You're doing a fucking *terrible* job. Now *talk* to me, damn it." His whisper cracks on the last word.

"Greer," Rush whispers.

"Fucking yes, it's fucking *Greer*. There you go." He claps Rush gently on his shoulder.

His nerves feel raw like stripped wires and he jerks but Greer steadies him.

"I found a terminal."

"A terminal," Rush repeats.

"Good for interfacing," Eli says. "Ship-whispering, you know? You need to find an Ancient ship. Or a gate. Or a Nakai ship. Anything you can fly. I think really anything would work because I think that you can probably fly anything that's got a propulsion system and can hold onto its atmosphere."

"Yes," Greer says. "A terminal. You wanted one, and I found one. It's two levels up."

"You don't even care to know *what it is* that I find so interesting?" Telford asks, still smoking.

"No," Rush says to Telford but it's Greer who answers him.

"Doc. Come on. I know you're tired but—"

"Yes yes," Rush interrupts him. "Let's go." He tries to stand but he can't without Greer's help and again he is not entirely clear on why that might be but

"You're sick," Tamara says. "It's normal to feel this way."

"You're all messed up cognitively," Eli says. "Makes sense you'd be extra tired."

"Even from a distance, they're pressing on your mind," Chloe says, "and it's painful. I can feel it, even if you can't."

"You're trying to figure things out," Daniel says. "That takes energy."

"You're insane," Volker says. "There are probably physical repercussions of psychotic breaks."

"Don't ask me," Brody says. "I just work here."

"Your RAM disk or rather, its functional equivalent, loses its stored data whenever you abruptly change position," Rodney says urgently. "Have you not *realized* this?"

"I can't believe you're not even curious," Telford says.

He is

He is walking up stairs or maybe Greer is dragging him up but what is he doing here and why is he here there are no stairs on Destiny and who is he exactly and when is this and he flinches and pulls away from Greer and they almost go down they struggle for a moment and Greer hisses nearly silently and gets one hand over Rush's mouth before he can say anything and there is glass everywhere.

Maybe it is a functional equivalent of glass.

"Seriously, Nick, what did I *just say*," Rodney says impatiently but unusually quiet right next to him. "Don't freak out, he pulled you up too fast and you lost about—well, I don't know if *you* don't know, but probably something like ninety seconds and you're in the middle of some kind of ridiculous post-apocalyptic wasteland that's really *really* creepy so let's just stay focused on the task at hand. Can you do me a favor *and tell* this guy that when he drags you around you can't *deal* with that very well? Speaking on behalf of your entire hash table, we're tired of orienting you every twenty minutes or so."

"Settle down," Greer whispers, his mouth right next to Rush's ear.

Rush nods and Greer slowly lets him go how does he explain to Greer that his RAM disk loses its data with sudden movements.

"My RAM disk loses its data with sudden movements."

Greer stares at him.

Rush gestures at the wall with an open hand and then makes a sweeping motion up to their current position. "Nothing," he says, hoping Greer will get the idea.

"Got it," Greer says. He steps in carefully, slowly pulling Rush's arm over his shoulders in one smooth movement. "You good?" Greer whispers.

"Yes," Rush replies and they start up the stairs.

"You still good?" Greer whispers, increasing his pace slightly.

"Yes," Rush says.

"Where's *Gloria*?" Telford says from beside him. "Why isn't *she* in your hash table? Where is your *brother*? Why isn't *he* in your hash table? Where is *Mandy*, hmm? Where is *Young*?"

Rush flinches.

"Doc," Greer says. "Hold it together."

"You know exactly why we aren't in there," Young says quietly. "We jack the lookup cost."

"Oh they *jack the lookup cost*, do they?" Telford repeats, savagely breaking off the words. "You're not seeing the big picture here, Nick."

Rush flinches.

"Doc," Greer says. "Talk to me."

"My hash table is questioning its premises," Rush says he tries not to look at Telford but it is hard.

"Well tell it to fuck off right now." Greer says, increasing his pace slightly. "You're busy."

Rush says nothing.

"Hey," Eli says. "Hey, how are you going to search an alien database? Have you thought about that at all? Think about *that* maybe."

"They're getting closer," Chloe says. "They're faster than you are."

"Scary, I know. But, on the plus side, you can convert matter and energy and even if you can't ascend quite yet—well, you see where I'm going with this," Rodney says.

He does but it upsets him

because it means that nothing will work out and not only has he *already* deeply materially failed his brother and failed Gloria but he *will* fail Mandy and he *will* fail Everett and he *will* fail the AI and he *will* fail the entire crew and that has always been and remains a possibility that interferes with his ability to

*His mind is breaking underneath the strain. It comes apart along familiar lines. He cannot see them clearly through distorting indices of glass and air but he can feel their thoughts against his thoughts. There are things they do not seem to understand but the human psyche opens to them, disintegrating, overripe, like fruit. It suggests to Rush that something in him wants to let them in. Is there a kinship there? Because he's certain given time and cause that he could come to match their ruthless edge. Or is it something else? Some darker betrayal. Does some part of him enjoy destruction and the rending that they cause as they attempt to reach the places he has locked away from them? And when they find the memories of Gloria, they show her to him, dying—*

He is standing and his hand is braced against a wall and what is he doing but it doesn't matter because the interface already calls to him, he is going to touch it and that is what he is doing he will see what happens when he touches it and he doesn't have a plan he doesn't have a search tree in mind nothing needs to be preserved he is simply looking for a ship or a gate or a ship—

"To me," Telford says, "you've always seemed like a guy who had the shit beat out of you as a kid. Thoughts?"

A ship or a gate or a ship.

A ship or a gate or a ship.

"Hi Nick," sergeant Riley says.

"You're not part of my table," Rush replies.

"Nope," Riley says, his arms crossed, leaning against the wall next to the terminal. "But that's okay. Just ignore me."

"Yeah, Doc, I'm really here." Greer is standing right next to him. "I'm not in your hash table. I'm right here."

"I know that," Rush says because Greer looks so uncertain. "I wasn't talking to you."

"Okay," Greer says, "Great. You gonna do this thing, or what?"

A ship or a gate or a ship.

A ship or a gate or a ship.

"Of course I am," Rush says. "Don't touch me."

A ship or a gate or a ship or a gate or a

## At All Angles: Part 6

Greer stood next to a shaft of purple light that entered the ruined lab obliquely through the remains of a second floor window. He looked out, facing what he was going to call west, squinting into the ever-setting sun. Ruins spread out from their current location as far as he could see. Empty shells of buildings, their windows blown out, lined narrow, abandoned roads. Everything was constructed of a gray metal with darker swirls threading through it like metallic webs. Glass littered the ground. Inside, outside—shiny transparent fragments seemed to be everywhere, spilling out over the cracked and damaged roads and glittering beneath the black, alien plants that had begun to push their way up through places where they shouldn't be.

The city was dead.

It had not escaped his notice, however, that the buildings and roads had not been *entirely* reclaimed by vegetation.

Whatever it was that had happened here—hadn't happened *that* long ago.

He stood silently, his hand on his knife.

Watching.

And listening.

*They will tear you apart.*

Every so often, his eyes flicked to Rush, who was braced with one hand on the wall, one hand on the naked circuitry of the terminal that he had worked open.

The man was plugged into a foreign computer system. Not *just* plugged in, but apparently also *powering* it.

With his mind.

Or whatever.

*Damn* but the man had been keeping some things under wraps.

Healing injuries. Reanimating dead circuitry.

Greer wondered how long he'd had the capacity to do that.

He also wondered whether the colonel was aware of these new abilities that Rush had picked up somewhere along the way. Knowing Rush, the answer was probably no.

Greer was pretty sure that they had to be a recent development, however, because Young had been injured not too long ago, and if Rush could have done something about that, he would have.

Probably.

Nah.

Definitely.

Now that he was thinking about it, he realized that it had been a few days since he'd seen Rush limping.

Maybe he had healed his own feet.

Greer hoped so.

They could use something in their corner at this point; god knew they had little else. Twelve ounces of water, half a power bar, two MREs, some rope, a first aid kit, a kino and remote, a flashlight, and a knife were pretty much all they had to their name at this point.

Somewhere in the distance, to the east of their position, Greer heard the faint roar of thunder.

*And they will take what remains—*

His eyes flicked back toward Rush in time to see the other man slowly pull his hand back from the terminal he had interfaced with. His eyes were hollow and he looked like he was—not all there.

Greer stepped in immediately but clamped down on his instinct to reach out and steady the other man.

"Rush?" he said in an undertone. "You okay?"

"Yes," Rush said, not looking at him, not looking at *anything*. "A valid point."

Greer took a deep breath.

"*Rush*," he said quietly, edging as close to the man as he could get without touching him. "What did you find out?"

Rush glanced at him, quick and oblique.

"They were conducting research here," Rush whispered, now looking down and to his left, as if he could see through the floor. "Research," he repeated.

"In this *building*?" Greer whispered back, his eyes raking the dark, wide hallway. "Can I pick them or what? I told you this looked like a lab."

"Did you?" Rush asked absently, still utterly absorbed in staring at the floor. "They're *all* labs."

"What do you mean they're all labs?"

"I mean," he whispered, glancing directly at Greer "they're all labs." Slowly, very slowly, as if he were afraid of losing his balance, Rush knelt down and spread his hands out along the floor, palms down.

"Do you know where we should *go*?" Greer whispered, crouching beside him, trying to keep the unease he was feeling out of his voice. "Isn't that why you wanted the terminal?"

"They brought a gate here," Rush murmured. His voice was without inflection.

"There's a *gate* here?" Greer said through clenched teeth, nearly vibrating with the need to shake the information out of the other man but desperately afraid of derailing Rush's tenuous focus.

"Yes. There is a gate. It isn't active. Also, there are ships."

"Can we *use* the gate?" Greer hissed. "Can you make it work?"

"Quid," Rush whispered so quietly that Greer wasn't entirely sure that the word had been directed at him.

The man was staring at his hands, spread out against the swirls of metal. His breathing was fast and shallow and he looked—

He looked fucking *disturbed*.

"Doc, listen to me," Greer said. "Forget whatever you're doing with the *floor*. Can you make the *gate* work or do we need to find a *ship*?"

Rush looked up at him. "How should I know? The gate is preferred."

"Yeah, no kidding. Where is this gate?"

"Five kilometers left and half a kilometer down."

"*Left*?" Greer repeated.

Rush pointed to his left, opposite the eternally setting sun.

"Half a klick *down*?"

"Yes their origins are subterranean though their aspirations remain interstellar."



Something about the way Rush said it caused the fine hairs on the back of Greer's neck to prickle.

"Whose planet is this?" Greer whispered.

"It's *their* planet," Rush whispered back. "Didn't you know?"

"The Nakai."

"Yes." His voice was so quiet that Greer couldn't hear the word. "Are we on the ground floor?" Rush asked, his hands still pressed flat against the surface he was kneeling on.

"No," Greer replied. "But we should be. Let's go."

Rush looked up at him abruptly, his eyes locking on Greer, his expression unsure.

"What?" Greer whispered.

Rush said nothing, every muscle tensed, his nails digging into the floor.

The roll of distant thunder almost, but not entirely, obscured another sound.

A quiet sound.

The subtle snap of a piece of glass under pressure.

It echoed faintly from somewhere beneath them.

Greer held Rush's gaze and gave him a slow, deliberate nod.

Rush nodded back.

Greer held up two fingers and then motioned toward the limited cover of the opposite wall. "Go," he mouthed.

Rush shook his head.

Before Greer could stop him, the other man had shifted his weight away and backed out of Greer's reach heading for the open *window*.

God *damn* the man anyway.

The scientist could barely keep himself together *walking up stairs*, let alone clinging to the side of a *building*—but there was no time to argue.

There was no time to reason with Rush, if that was even possible.

There was no time and no place to secure the rope that Greer had in his pack.

Silently, his feet shifting aside the broken glass that glittered on the floor of the dimly lit hallway, Greer slid forward to join Rush next to the window.

They crouched below the frame.

Wind whistled softly around the broken fragments of glass that jutted into the open space.

There was a narrow ledge at the base of the window, not more than four inches wide.

"Are you *sure*," Greer mouthed at Rush.

Rush nodded.

There was nothing about this plan that Greer liked, but he had no way of knowing how many of them were, even now, entering this building.

Greer motioned with his head toward the window.

Rush narrowed his eyes, looking up at the frame for a good three seconds, as if contemplating a particularly difficult problem.

Fuck.

Around the corner, Greer heard another muffled snap.

Rush surged to his feet, one foot braced on the ledge as he launched himself through the frame.

Just when Greer was certain he was going to overbalance and fall, he abruptly pivoted, stopping his angular momentum by curling his fingers around the top of the empty window frame and then stepped laterally out of sight with an economy of movement that Greer would not have thought him capable of.

Greer didn't waste time looking back over his shoulder.

He shot to his feet and stepped onto the ledge, copying Rush's movement as he spun and moved out of the open frame of the window.

His fingers clutched at a seam in the smooth, dark metal.

At his back, a cold wind began to blow, whipping at the loose ends of the straps that secured his mostly empty pack.

He focused on breathing as quietly as possible.

In and out.

In and out.

The wind continued to whistle, cold and high pitched.

A thin veil of clouds on the leading edge of the approaching storm muted the light of the sun.

He looked at Rush.

The other man's fingers were digging into the side of the building, every muscle in his body tensed.

Greer looked back at the lower ledge of the window, only about ten inches from his left boot.

Five seconds passed.

Ten.

Twenty.

In his peripheral vision he saw four long, blue fingers emerge from the dark interior of the building and come to rest on the windowsill.

The thing was less than a foot from where he was standing.

It would only need to lean out—just a few inches beyond the frame of the window and it would see him.

Greer pulled in a long, silent breath.

He shifted his weight subtly to free up his left foot.

He watched the fingers wrap idly around a shard of glass that remained in the window frame.

The glass broke under its grip with a dull crack.

Next to him, Rush flinched.

*And they will remake your mind—*

Greer bit his lip.

The fingers vanished.

The wind whistled subtly around the edges of the building.

Greer let out a long, slow breath and began to count off the seconds in his head.

One minute stretched into three, which stretched into five.

His muscles began to burn.

In his peripheral vision he caught a flash of blue and looked down at one of the cross streets below them. Several Nakai had gathered in the street. Whether that meant that they were done searching *this* building, he wasn't sure.

He looked at Rush, but Rush was not looking back at him.

The scientist's eyes were shut, his hands blanched, every muscle in his body tensed with the effort of maintaining his balance on the narrow ledge. The other man was not going to be able to maintain his hold for much longer.

Cautiously, Greer edged back toward the window and reached out to hook two fingers inside the frame. He used that as an anchor point to angle his upper body out away from the building and look into the hallway.

It appeared deserted.

He snaked his entire hand inside the frame to stabilize himself while he unclipped his pack and carefully slid it through the window and down to the floor.

He looked back at Rush.

The other man had not moved. His eyes were still shut.

This was going to be difficult.

Greer reached out, his left hand and foot anchored inside the window, and closed his hand around Rush's wrist. In one smooth, fast motion he yanked sideways as hard as he could, pulling the other man off balance even as he levered himself back through the window frame. Rush half-fell but Greer was able to use his own momentum to drag the scientist through the open window. Rush was minimally helpful but he had a glazed expression that seemed to indicate that he wasn't processing much of anything.

Their reentry to the building was quieter than he had anticipated, but not entirely silent. Greer reached around and pulled Rush in, clamping a hand over his mouth, listening for any indication that the Nakai were still in the building.

Thirty seconds passed, and he heard nothing.

Rush jerked abruptly, straining against Greer's hold, the racing of his heart easily detectable in his thin frame.

"Cool it," Greer whispered almost soundlessly in the other man's ear. "I'm gonna let you go, but *no talking*."

Rush nodded and Greer slowly released his hold. The scientist turned back, giving him a look that was half alarmed, half confused.

"You can sense the Nakai?" Greer whispered, thinking of the way Rush had spread his hands out along the floor, as if he could feel something through the metal.

Rush gave him an equivocal hand gesture.

Greer compressed his lips. "Are there any *here*," he mouthed, forming two fingers into a blade and pressing them down into the floor, pointing at the lower levels of the building.

"Now?" Rush mouthed back, still looking confused. His gaze flicked out into empty air.

"Yes," Greer whispered, trying to keep a lid on his anxiety and impatience. "*Now*."

Rush shrugged.

"Do you know how to get to the *gate*?" Greer asked.

Rush looked at him, his expression closed and unreadable. Again his gaze flicked out and up and held there, focused on empty space. Finally, after about twenty seconds, he looked back at Greer and nodded.

Greer nodded back and motioned for Rush to follow. They crept along the dim hallway, moving silently, crouching against the walls, below the shafts of light that entered slantwise through the evenly spaced window frames, before ducking into a shallow alcove near the top of the stairs that they had climbed twenty-five minutes previous.

Greer held up a hand.

Rush looked at him with a closed expression that was eerily reminiscent of Colonel Young.

Greer looked back at him.

Typically Colonel Young was much easier for Greer to read than Rush, in that the colonel was generally a pretty stubborn, stoic guy at baseline and, while a lot of people found him to be closed book, the man had little tells that would usually give away what he was thinking if one knew what to look for.

Rush was nearly the opposite—extremely expressive, often deceptively so, and this neutrality of facial expression he had going was throwing Greer for a loop. It really wasn't the kind of thing that he remembered seeing much from Rush, and in the situation in which they found themselves he wondered—

He wondered if it meant that Rush had absolutely no idea what was going on.

"Stay here," Greer mouthed, carefully pushing Rush back against the wall.

Rush nodded.

Moving aside broken glass with a soft scraping sound, Greer inched forward. He lowered himself flat on the floor before peering over the edge of the landing down the first set of wide, flat stairs.

He saw nothing.

No hints of movement in the shadows.

No sheen of blue catching the purple light.

Outside, he heard the distant growl of thunder.

He crept down a few steps, balancing on the balls of his feet, trying to see as far as possible without exposing himself unnecessarily. He watched silently for a few more seconds, then shifted his weight and moved back up, approaching Rush's position.

The scientist had his eyes shut, his head in both hands.

"Rush," Greer breathed, trying not to startle him.

"Why are we alive?" Rush whispered. "We must not be their primary objective. Not yet."

"*Rush*," Greer whispered intently. "Stay with me."

Rush nodded.

Greer tipped his head in the direction of the stairs. "Quietly," he mouthed. "Very. Quietly."

Rush nodded again.

They crept silently down the stairs, staying low, balancing on fingertips and the balls of their feet, noiselessly shifting the carpet of broken glass aside as they progressed. It took them almost ten minutes to traverse the winding stair and reach the wide-open atrium that made up the ground floor.

There was no available cover.

Greer motioned with his head toward the opposite wall next to the shattered doors they had entered through.

"We're going for it, Doc," Greer mouthed. "One long, straight shot to the far wall. Stay low. Stay *quiet*."

Rush shot him an incredulous look.

Greer gave him a pointed look in return, inviting Rush to propose a better idea if he had one.

The scientist shrugged.

Greer looked out across the long, open expanse and then started forward, increasing his speed to something like a ten-minute mile.

He kept Rush in his peripheral vision.

They were only ten feet from the opposite wall when Greer caught a flash of blue from the open doorway that they were making toward.

He heard the ascending buzz of a charging plasma weapon.

Rush slammed into him from the side, knocking him off his feet and out of the way of the energy blast the thing had leveled at him. He managed to take his forward momentum and turn it into a roll that brought him up into a crouch. Acting on instinct, he continued forward, pulling his knife in a reverse grip, edge out.

It advanced and he advanced and they crashed together before it could get off a second shot. It hissed, a low, wet sound and went for his throat as he drove his right fist obliquely across its eye in a glancing blow as he twisted his hand to get in a swipe with the blade.

It shrieked at him, backing away, hissing as it curled against the wall.

He moved forward, intending to press his advantage.

Rush yanked him back.

Greer pulled away, intending to finish the thing off.

Rush pulled him back and shoved him toward the shattered doorframe.

"Rush," Greer hissed, "I—"

"No," Rush said his voice cracking, his expression braking into a pained grimace. "Go. Go."

He pulled Greer through the shattered doorframe and into the darkening purple light.

They took off into the road, Rush running flat out, one of his hands closed around Greer's forearm in a vise-like grip.

Thunder sounded again, closer this time, and a few drops of rain began to splash over the cracked and overgrown road.

"Rush, stay *low*," Greer hissed furiously. "*Slow down*. We're going to run straight into—"

For no reason that Greer could see, Rush abruptly changed direction, veering left and nearly overbalancing them both as he got out of the center of the road, ducking into the narrow space between two buildings.

He pressed himself back against the shadowed wall.

Greer immediately followed suit.

Not five seconds later he heard the horrible arrhythmic beating sound of the approaching Nakai.

Six of them passed their position, advancing quickly in the direction they had just come from.

Greer looked at Rush.

The scientist was standing with his eyes fixed on the road that they had just vacated, his breathing fast and shallow. After a few seconds, his gaze flicked over to Greer.

"So you *can* sense them," Greer mouthed at him.

"*Chloe* can sense them," Rush replied.

Greer looked at him uncertainly. "Okay," he said. He looked up, trying to orient himself, turning in the direction of the wind and rain. "Based on what you said before, the gate should be this way?"

Rush shook his head. "First we go down. *Then* we go over."

The scientist edged further into the narrow space between the buildings until he came to a dark grating in the street.

He pointed at it, meaningfully.

"No," Greer whispered, stone-faced.

Rush stared at him.

"You want to trek through five clicks of some freaky-ass sewer system? With *one flashlight*? In the middle of a *storm*? No. We are *not* doing that," Greer whispered. "No."

"Yes," Rush hissed. "*We are.*"

"No," Greer shot back. "*We are not.*"

"They will find us," Rush whispered in his ear, his fingers digging mercilessly into Greer's biceps. "They will find us and they will tear your mind apart. They will remake you in every way it is possible to be remade."



It was the second time Rush had said it.

The second time he'd switched pronouns in the middle of his description.

"They're going to remake *me*?" Greer said quietly. "They're going to tear *my* mind apart? I know they scare the hell out of you, Doc but—"

"Yes," Rush hissed through clenched teeth, stepping in, his eyes nearly black in the dimness. "Yes they do. But not because of what they're capable of. I assure you that by now I am familiar with exactly how far they are able and willing to go to achieve—their objectives. This is our only chance to evade them. To get *ahead* of them. To get away. We *must* get away." Rush broke off, finishing the longest speech that Greer had heard him make since they left Destiny.

"We don't have to *evade* them, Doc. We stay on the surface. We head for the gate and we pick them off one by one as we go. I can take them. You just saw—"

"You're lucky that thing was too surprised to go after your mind—" Rush let Greer go, turning away, one hand pressed to his temple.

"We *cannot* go down there, Doc. There might be worse shit, flooding underground—"

"They will close in on us," Rush whispered, his voice cracking, his free hand coming up, as if to ward something or someone off. "It's already begun. And I will be forced to—" Rush flinched, nearly overbalancing.

"Forced to *what*, Doc?"

"Do something that I do *not* want to do."

"*What*?" Greer hissed.

"Matter and energy are intraconvertible. This is necessary, but not sufficient for ascension." Rush stared at him, his expression horrified, his breathing fast. Too fast.

"Doc," Greer whispered. "I'm not getting it."

"Matter. Energy." Rush was practically hyperventilating. "Please understand that I don't want to. I don't *want to*."

"You don't want to *what*?"

Rush turned away abruptly, his hand coming to his mouth, his eyes closing. "Yes," he whispered, flinching, turning away from something that Greer couldn't see. "Yes I know. I *know*."

"Come on, Doc," Greer whispered. "Keep it together."

"You have no idea," Rush hissed, turning on him abruptly, eyes glittering with an intensity that was painful to look at, "How fantastically 'together' I actually am. You have failed to supply any rational arguments, as to why we cannot proceed in the manner I outlined and therefore," Rush paused and looked away, his hands clenching and unclenching several times, "we go."

Rush turned and knelt abruptly, his fingers wrapping around the grating. Before he could lift it, Greer twisted a hand into the back of Rush's jacket and yanked him back to his feet.

"We are *not*—" Greer began furiously, but broke off as Rush's knees buckled.

They folded to the ground together as Greer controlled the other man's fall.

"*Shit*," Greer mouthed silently.

Rush looked at him, blinking rapidly, clearly confused about what had just happened.

Greer grimaced.

"My RAM disk loses its data with sudden movements," Rush said, breathing quickly.

"Nope," Greer said quietly. "Not quite."

"No?" Rush whispered.

"No Doc, You lose your data when you move suddenly and it's not your own idea."

"I'm not compensating well to environmental changes represented as functions of variable sensory input," Rush said, almost silently.

"Yeah," Greer whispered. "I know."

Carefully, Greer loosened his grip on Rush, who braced himself with both hands, but stayed sitting, his eyes flitting restlessly onto things that Greer couldn't see.

Greer stood and took a deep breath, looking down at the grating that Rush had tried to remove.

Looking at the blackness beyond.

The rain began to fall faster, drumming off the abandoned shells of buildings that surrounded them.

He did *not* want to go down there.

Anything could be down there.

*Anything.*

Kneeling in front of the metal grid, he copied Rush's earlier motion and curled his fingers around the metal. He pulled until the piece came loose in his hands. It was heavy. He shifted it only as much as was required. He could see metal rungs, spaced too wide to be comfortable for a human.

He glanced at Rush, who was now watching him.

Greer opened his pack and pulled out their only flashlight, directing it down into the darkness.

Fifteen feet down he could see the glitter of dark, running water.

"Shit, Doc," he breathed. "I hope you're right about this."

"Right about what?" Rush whispered.

Greer shut his eyes.

"Don't worry about it," he whispered. "It'll come back to you."

## At All Angles: Part 7

He does not like the water.

It flows Cimmerian over his boots soaking his BDUs and he does not like it he does not and Greer does not like it either or if it is not the water that Greer doesn't like then it is something else in this labyrinthine network not a sewer no this is where they lived and how they lived half in the water half out but all in the dark building up and building down from the surface. Maybe it is the dark that Greer doesn't like or the way it closes in around them and around the beam of the flashlight and presses in presses down. It is difficult for him to breathe and there are multiple reasons for that.

"Something is wrong with Greer," Volker whispers to him in the darkness.

He flinches and pulls away in a digital discrete response his ability to respond in an analog manner is fading and only marginally retained at this time point.

Greer steadies him and rights him by increments slentando before letting him go but he is silent.

"You need to calm down," Volker says, "and you need to talk to Greer. Try to act like a *normal person* for once. You know, not completely devoid of every human sentiment?"

This is perhaps a good idea even if it does come autoschediastically by way of Volker.

"Greer," Rush whispers. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, Doc. I'm fine."

The sound of water moving over rock and metal.

"He's clearly *not* fine," Volker says. "But then, why would he tell *you* if he wasn't? You're about the *least* approachable person in my entire sphere of human *and* alien interactions."

"Your hash table is awfully hard on you," Riley says mildly.

"With good reason," Volker says.

"Greer," Rush says again but then he stops with that because he is not sure how to continue how to get Greer to tell him what is wrong and does it matter he is not entirely sure of anything in the internal disorder that he faces he cannot tell what is real and the dark and the water is not helping but he is finding a gate that is what he is doing and when he finds it he is going home. "Something is bothering you. This much is obvious, even to me."

"Not a big deal, Doc. I just—don't like enclosed spaces."

The dark presses in and a *prima vista* he can understand that he can at least in a literal way he just isn't sure what he should do about it and he's terrible at relating to people he wasn't always this way he can't have been but now he does not know what to do or what to say what would Gloria

"Yes," Telford hisses barely visible coming in and out of the darkness. "Gloria. Or have you forgotten about her? Is she locked away somewhere down in that fucking fatidic subconscious swirl that makes up the fucking core of your fucked up mind? Is she buried there? Do you *know* where she was buried? Have you *seen the place*? You haven't even been there, have you? She died, and you left the entire planet behind as if that is what defines progress for you, auto-erasure on an ever-increasing scale. If it weren't for *me*, and it weren't for *Mandy*, who on Destiny would know so much as her *name*?"

Rush flinches and processing requirements suddenly increase and he is *upset* or maybe *because* he is upset causation is

"It's not true," TJ says. "You define yourself by your purpose which has become your essential nature. There is nothing wrong with this. You are the only one who needs to remember her." TJ looks at him in the darkness. "She would understand."

"Oh yes," Telford says casually. "I'm sure she understood you very well. Very well. At the end."

He flinches and his hand comes up and he is about to he is about to he is about to he is about to create a list of consecutive integers beginning with two and ending with  $n$ . 'p' will be defined as the first prime number which is the first listed item which is two and starting from p he will count up in increments of p and mark each of these numbers in the list then find the first number greater than p that is not marked and p will now equal this number shift the twos and shift the threes the sieve of Eratosthenes when the multiples

"God, you're unbelievably solipsistic," Volker snaps. "We were talking about *Greer*."

"You cope algorithmically," Daniel says. "Nothing wrong with that. Just keep going. Talk to Greer."

"Yes," Rush says to Greer and his voice sounds breathless. "This is a common problem."

"Yup," Greer says shortly, "pretty common."

He does not need his hash table to point out paralipsis to him he employs the technique often enough to recognize it when he encounters it even if he cannot recognize much else abstractions are not the problem for him nor have they ever been and while his lexical capacity remains unhindered branching needlessly untethering further from the context that he lacks, his explicatory power diminishes and it is hard to hold onto here in the dark and he is *wet* and he does not like the water and Atlantis was not like this and if he is not there then where is he *and when* is he but context is dragged by what it is linked to and this is Greer that he was thinking about and who is with him and he does not know what to say but he proceeds ever-heuristically and what he will do is this he

"You're going to *ignore* me? You think I'm not insightful?" Telford hisses in the dark. "I'm the most insightful thing in your hash table, *Nick*, because everything that you've buried is keyed to me. I'm the only one who can keep it down there for you."

He will explore this logically there is certain information that he wishes to obtain from Greer and that he wishes Greer to have and how to orchestrate such an exchange is not immediately apparent to him but commonality of experience is a good place to start and Greer does not like this place it is difficult for him like the way that he does not like the water and that is not a preferred avenue of thought because

"Before it hits your consciousness," Telford hisses, "as it comes up—you bin it. And you *bin it to me*. Everything outside your table is keyed to me."

"Not everything," Young says.

"I can see why this is confusing for you," Riley says.

because it has been defined as not preferred and it is best not to interrogate one's premises when one is trying to proceed noctivagant and cold and wet, this is what is called 'practical' and it may be what makes him a suboptimal in his humanity there is no meaning in such a thought but he thinks it anyway and he wonders what kind of person is he that he locks down and works around always, looking for problems that he is capable of solving and was he always like this he thinks it was always like this. Why did Gloria stay why did Gloria come with him always Gloria could Gloria could Gloria could always she could always and she had wanted to she had wanted to go home she had wanted to be with her family because they had loved her and she had loved them and *he was not there* and she had wanted to she had wanted to she had wanted only that one thing—

"Greer," Volker snaps. "Not Gloria. *Greer*."

"Circuitry is dark," Rush says and this is a shared experience and therefore appropriate. "And there is no space there."

Greer says nothing for a time period that Rush can only guess at and this was the wrong thing to say. Gloria would have known, Gloria would have, Gloria knew what to say Gloria or Young would have known he is not like Gloria, Gloria talked more and Gloria cried easily like Chloe but she always turned away and it was always quiet and Young does not cry and he does not cry but the Ancients they cried but their crying somehow it was easier to breathe through and did not close the throat like human crying does and if it had been difficult for them to breathe through crying then maybe they also would have stigmatized it and if Chloe if Chloe could

"Yeah," Greer says quietly. "Yeah, I guess it would be."

"I can't—" Rush breaks off. "I understand that your dislike of enclosed spaces exists even though I am unclear as to its etiology."

"Just give it up," Volker says. "You're hopeless."

"You're doing okay," Daniel says. "Keep going."

"You're awfully chatty, Doc," Greer says quietly. "What's going on?"

"You did not want to come down here," Rush says.

"Honestly," Greer says, "I didn't want to come to this planet at *all*."

He continues to walk through water.

"When I was a kid," Greer says, "my dad used lock me in a closet sometimes. You want an etiology, Doc? There it is."

He is not expecting this and it's so much like something that might come from his own head that he doesn't trust that it is real but if it is real and Greer is really here

"I don't know why I'm telling you this, Doc, except sometimes I get the feeling like maybe you might know what I'm talking about."

"Yes," Rush says and this is not really helping his state of mind but he suspects again paralipsis and so he says, "only a closet?" Why is he doing this he does not want to think about this here now in the dark and the cold and *in the water* he does not like the water he has *never never* liked the water.

"What did I tell you," Telford hisses. "It's written all over you."

"Nope," Greer says and his breathing is fast. "Not only." Then he says, "You?"

"Greer," he says closing his eyes trying to control his hash table, "I am trying to remain mentally solvent."

"Right," Greer says. "Sorry."

He falls.

"Hi," Riley says, kneeling next to him in the dark, flowing water. "You're really quite interesting, aren't you? Not easily classified."

"Doc." Greer is shaking him. "*Doc*. Come on. Talk to me."

"What." Rush pulls away from Greer and he is cold and he is wet.

"*Rush*." Greer says and they are both sitting and the water is half a meter deep.

"*What*," Rush snaps.

"You have to tell me when you get *tired*."

"I don't get tired."



"Rush—" Greer breaks off with open hands. "Do you even know what just happened? Do you know what the *hell* we're doing?"

"Fuck off," Rush hisses. "I'm not staying here."

"It kinda bothers me," Eli says. "I mean, I'd just like to know what happened here. It creeps me out. Doesn't it creep *you* out? Especially in light of what they were working on?"

He does not feel right he has not felt right for quite some time he doesn't know how to interpret the problems that he is having which seem to be not just mental but physical as well and if he had to make a guess he would guess that it all stems from what he is now which he would describe at a first approximation as heterotelic and he

"I mean, doesn't it worry you? I mean, I guess, obviously it must because I'm you, kinda, and *I'm* worried about it. In a lot of ways they were trying to do something similar to what *you're* trying to do. Doesn't it *concern* you that something went like, terribly terribly wrong?"

"It's not the same," he says.

"What's not the same, Doc?" Greer says.

"Plus, you don't know that they didn't succeed," Rush murmurs.

He nearly goes down again.

"Doc," Greer says, "you need to stop?"

"Um, if they succeeded, then why isn't this whole planet gone?" Eli says. "You think they ripped through the multiverse but, weirdly, all *their stuff* was left behind? Sorry, but that just doesn't seem likely to me."

"Nobody rips through the multiverse," Riley says mildly.

"I'm beginning to question your origins," Rush snaps.

"My *origins*?" Greer says.

"It's going to work out better for you if you don't," Riley says.

"Are you *threatening* me?"

"No," Riley says. "I'm giving you a tip."

"Fuck you. You destroyed this place. Because the *Nakai* tried to tear through the D-brane."

"Doc."

"Of course they did," Eli whispers. "Of *course*."

"We don't need to threaten," Riley adds, "but I think you know that."

"I'm not going to tear through."

"But you want to," Telford hisses. "God, how you want to. Think of what you could fix. You have so much to fucking fix."

"Shut the fuck up, *David*."

"Doc."

"What you want," Riley says, "is immaterial to us. The only thing that matters is *what you do*."

"Are you here or not?"

"Like I said, best not to question," Riley says. "But I think if I were you, I would go left at the next junction."

"Doc," Greer says. "I'm here. Keep it together, huh?"

They press on his mind and it is like being held down and he despises that—  
entrapment without creating a sense of entrapment within and always when they are  
near it is like this and Chloe feels it too Chloe can Chloe feels it more Chloe had no  
defenses against them Chloe was almost remade how many of them were remade  
however many it is none of them know who he is not yet if Greer had touched them as  
soon as they as soon as he if he had

They are coming.

How can he stop them from coming he cannot there is nowhere to go their motion is constrained and essentially two dimensional forward or back and they cannot go back because they are back there.

"The collective pressure is going to shatter our table," Chloe says and she is crying.

Yes that is likely it is buckling under the strain and the pressure of their thoughts on his is raw and agonizing even now but they cannot sense him not yet only in the vaguest of ways because if they knew, if they knew who he was and what they had they could shred his consciousness from a distance at least partially it will be much easier for them when they touch him but this would be how many times now he doesn't know he just knows that it has happened before and not just one time.

"Tell Greer," Young says urgently. "Tell him what you know."

"It's not going to fucking shatter your table," Telford snaps. "Not if you make a fucking *effort*, Nick."

He wishes Young were here they should not be separated his capacity to exist alone is

"Do you understand what is happening to you?" Riley asks.

"It hurts so much," Chloe whispers.

"I don't think you do," Riley says.

They are coming.

"Remember," McKay whispers in the dark. "Remember what I told you."

"Don't do it," Eli says, his voice pained. "Don't do it until the last."

"Nick," Young says. "Nick, you've got to tell Greer. They're almost on top of you."

"Greer," Rush says but he can't get anything else out the pressure on his mind is too great and he can feel their approach from behind and quickly so quickly but he cannot explain and simultaneously preserve his ability to respond processing the pain and the pressure and the rhythm of their thoughts and the water is deeper here and they are swimming so quickly through the dark he can tell that they are under the water but he cannot tell Greer and they will not see them until it is too late and they are pulled down how many are there and where they will be pulled down and Greer pulls his knife and holds the flashlight and he looks back but he is not looking in the water and that is where they are.

"Three," Chloe gasps. "Three of them."

"Matter to energy," McKay says, "matter to energy, matter to energy, it will be more than enough."

"Don't do it," Eli says. "Please don't. Just wait. You can do it any time. It's like the ace up your sleeve, you know? But don't use it."

"You *can't* do it anytime," McKay says. "It requires concentration. Start now."

"If you do this, you kill three people," TJ says.

"If you don't," Telford hisses, "they'll take the ship. And everyone dies anyway. A prolonged, terrifying, painful death."

"Just wait," Eli says. "Wait."

"Switch the transmitters," Brody whispers from directly beside him. "Broadcast. With *intent*."

"There's a certain poetic justice to it," Daniel says, "and it won't kill Greer."

"I like it," Volker says.

"Fuck them up," Telford hisses. "Fuck them *all* up. Shred their minds like they've shredded yours."

"Get ready," Eli says. "Plan what you're going to do. They'll pull you under, so don't crash when they do it. Be ready. Make a plan."

"Your table will shatter," Chloe says. "It's already begun."

"But we can do this one last thing," Eli says. "We can do this. We just need a plan."

"At the moment you broadcast," Chloe says, "let it in. Let it in and let us go. You'll transmit nothing but pain. Like an infinite loop."

"They pull you under, and you take the transmitter," Young says standing very close to him, watching the water. "That's the plan, genius. They pull you under, you take the transmitter, you put it on, and you obliterate your table."

He can't see them but he can feel them with his mind and he is shaking and he can barely stand but he can hold it together for this he can he can and he will he they are close to the gate and if everything proceeds correctly he can he will he will do this he will do this there is a limit to the things that will be asked of him at least requirements will be temporally bounded if there is no other bound and he cannot see the temporal end of requirements but this is required and it is nearly always possible to do and to achieve what is required if the consequences are disregarded as irrelevant sequelae and this is what he will do

"They pull you under, and you take the transmitter," Young repeats. "Think only of what is required of you."

They pull him under and he takes the transmitter he takes the transmitter he takes it he takes it when they pull him under any moment now they will pull him under and he will take the transmitter, he will take it he will take it they will pull him under and he will take it they pull him under when are they going to he can feel them they are almost

"I do like you quite a bit," Riley says, watching with his arms crossed. "You're very determined. Though you're not quite as charming as your other version."

"They pull you under and you take it," Young repeats.

They pull him under and he takes it he is going to take it and so he is not surprised it will be dark and it will be cold and this will not surprise him and it will not reset him he will not have a hard-disk failure they will pull him under and he will take it they will pull him under and he will take it they will pull him under and he will

"Doc," Greer's whisper cracks open and his breathing is shallow and water falls onto water making a hollow sound. "Are they coming?"

"Yes," Rush says.

The tunnel is dark and the beam of the flashlight is bright and they cannot see but they will not see because they are in the water and they will pull him under and he will take it they will pull him under and he will take it they will pull him under and

Cold fingers close around his ankle and yank him down beneath the black surface of the water but he was expecting this the blackness does not surprise him but they have pulled him under and now he takes it that is step two. He reaches up and Chloe is screaming somewhere in his mind as he touches it and he is screaming as well it tears into his mind there is no sound under the water but he is only doing one thing just one thing that he is doing and he finds its head and then the side of its head and it pins one hand one of his hands but he has another and the other reaches up and pulls off and reattaches and he is wearing it and he shatters his own protection and as it tears in he projects his own agony out at them and for this to work he has to feel it too and he does looping and burning out circuits he floods through their link through the local link and through the link on the ship and he projects the utter desolation that is in his mind and if they can get anything out of this they never can they never and it lets him go and it tries to pull away but there is nowhere for it to pull to because he is in its mind this time and he *is* fucking it up and he *will* fuck it up and he only stops when it stops because it is dead and he has killed it and when he is finished screaming he breathes in he always breathes in and he is drowning

He takes off the transmitter and he is done and now he has no plan and he has no hash table.

Was anyone here with him he does not know who he is or where he is or when he is only that something is happening to him and that the thing that is happening has a name and that name is drowning but no one is holding him down not this time. His eyes are open but he can see nothing it is black and he is going to die here because that is the outcome of drowning and sometimes dying does not hurt but sometimes it seems that it hurts very badly.

## At All Angles: Part 8

Rush vanished beneath the dark surface of the water.

Greer drew in a startled breath.

His fingers tightened on his flashlight and on his knife.

His feet were swept from beneath him so rapidly that he didn't register the sensation of long fingers wrapped around his ankle until he was already under the water. Contracting his abdominal muscles with a panicked burst of energy, he forced him through the dark drag of the water, toward the writhing, serpentine motion of the thing that was holding him down.

He came forward with the knife and forward with the light. Its submerged beam diffusely illuminated the silhouette of the Nakai with enough contrast that Greer was able to plunge his knife into its narrow, sinuous torso.

It did not let him go.

He was grabbed from behind.

There were two of them.

At *least* two.

Rush would have *no chance* against them.

He struggled, his hands closed tight around the knife and around the flashlight.

He yanked a foot free from the grip of the thing that had pulled him under and kicked out, managing to connect with what he hoped was its head.

He needed to breathe.

With another solid kick, he freed both feet and got them underneath him, turning himself in the water, trying to break the stance of the thing that was holding him under.

He *needed* to breathe.

His movements were already starting to slow, but he persisted, moving his center of gravity around and below the thing that was holding him.

Thin, strong fingers reached up, curving around his neck, past his ear, finding the side of his head.

He jerked away, but their reach was long and—

It pulled away from him.

The water erupted in a turbulent swirl around him and they were *all* screaming—under the water, above the water, the sound clarifying as he surged to his feet.

He gasped. The air felt warm against his skin and in his throat.

Water streamed down out of his eyes.

He could see two of them screaming—high pitched, snarling, writhing in what looked like *agony*.

He pulled in a breath and lunged forward, leading with the knife, tackling the nearest one, driving the knife into the place where a heart would be, then pulling it out, flipping his grip, and drawing it across the throat. It fell away from him as its companion dived back into the water and disappeared, swimming back the way they had come.

There was no more screaming.

His breathing was loud over the slow, quiet flow of the water.

He scanned the tunnel, sweeping his flashlight in broad arcs ahead of him and behind him but there was no movement other than the ceaseless flow of the water.

No sign of any additional Nakai.

No sign of Rush.

Slowly, something rose to the surface. A pale blue sheen caught the beam of his flashlight.

Greer brought his knife up and surged forward—but it was still and dead, its body already making its way down the tunnel, carried by the slow moving current.

"Shit."

Greer sheathed his knife and took a deep breath before ducking back beneath the dark water. He swept the dimness with his flashlight, moving toward the point where he had seen the dead Nakai surface, free hand outstretched in front of him.

After forty seconds, he surfaced.

He blinked the water out of his eyes, scanning the tunnel with his light.

There was no sign of Rush.

"*Shit*," he gasped, and ducked back under a second time, moving further back down the tunnel. The flashlight beam scattered and spread out, nearly useless in the turbid water.

Finally, his hand hit something. His fingers closed, twisted in, and pulled up.



He broke through the water with a gasp, already able to tell that Rush was unresponsive.

He needed a flat surface.

Greer pulled himself as rapidly as possible along the wall, dragging Rush with him, letting the current help him, forcing himself back the way they had come until he reached an elevated platform he had noted earlier. He climbed onto it and pulled Rush after him, laying him out on the dark metal.

He dropped his flashlight with a hollow clatter.

He tipped the other man's head back and looked at his chest wall, waiting for a rise and fall.

No breathing.

Greer tipped pinched Rush's nose shut and delivered two rescue breaths.

Nothing.

He repositioned the scientist's head and tried again.

Almost immediately, Rush began to cough. Greer turned him on his side, stabilizing him as he brought up water and drew in several gasping breaths.

"Cough," Greer managed to choke out, trying to get the word out around the way his throat seemed to insist on closing.

Finally, Rush finished coughing and lay breathing shallowly and rapidly on the metal platform, curling into himself, his hands pressed against the metal.

The muscles in Greer's legs were trembling. He fell out of his crouch, shutting his eyes against the way the dark closed in around the beam of the flashlight. He reached out to press one hand against Rush's back.

"Okay," Greer said quietly. "Everything is—"

He couldn't finish.

"We're almost done," Greer whispered, his eyes still closed. "We're almost there. We've made it just about five clicks. We must have. The gate is around here somewhere. Something scared that last thing off. Probably that was you. Yeah?"

Rush said nothing.

"Classic," Greer said, his voice breaking on the word. He swallowed. "Maybe they'll leave us alone. Maybe you scared the shit out of them."

He looked out into the dark and listened to Rush breathe for maybe three minutes before he couldn't take the quiet anymore.

"Yeah," Greer said. "We've got our knife. We've got our light. Everyone is breathing. We're gonna find the gate. We're gonna go back to Destiny and they are going to give us extra dinner rations for a *week*. Becker will work it out so that we get the good stuff. The Earth stuff, you know? Not the mush."

Rush coughed weakly.

"Come on, Doc," Greer said. "Talk to me. I can't do this without you."

Rush said nothing.

"Colonel Young is going to kill me if you lost even so much as one brain cell from that whole near drowning thing."

Rush said nothing.

"We gotta find this gate, right?"

Rush said nothing.

"Right," Greer whispered.

Carefully, slowly, he pulled Rush up so that they were leaning against each other on the platform. Rush reached out, stabilizing himself with one hand.

"You gonna talk to me?" Greer asked quietly.

Rush said nothing.

He shut his eyes. "*Please* talk to me."

He listened to the sound of water flowing in the darkness.

"Okay," Greer said quietly. "That's fine. I get it. You're about done for the day. I do *not* blame you for that, Doc. I can find the gate. I'm sure I can find it. We're close. We've gotta be."

Rush's eyes were shut.

Greer focused on counting off seconds in his head. He gave Rush five minutes, then stepped off the platform they were on and back into the water. He reached back and pulled Rush forward, ducking to drag the scientist's left arm across his shoulders.

They stood in the slow-moving water for a moment.

"You okay, Rush?" Greer asked uncertainly.

"Yes," Rush said, surprising Greer so much that he nearly lost his grip on the flashlight.

He angled the beam so that he could better see Rush's face.

The other man looked intently out into empty air, his eyes sweeping the tunnel, his eyebrows drawn slightly together.

"Great," Greer said uneasily. "Do you know what's happening?"

No answer.

"Were you talking to *me*?" Greer whispered.

"Ita vero."

"Okay then," Greer said.

They stepped forward into the tunnels.

It wasn't until he'd wandered around the local maze of tunnels for nearly forty minutes, dragging Rush through water that ranged from ankle to chest deep, that he realized that several passages converged on a central, cylindrical column the diameter of which was so large, he'd taken it for a wall until he'd detected its faint curvature and then walked its entire perimeter.

This had to be where the gate was.

The problem was getting in.

There were no obvious doors.

"Doc," he whispered. "I need your help."

"Cum quid," Rush whispered hoarsely, his eyes half closed.

"With *this*," Greer said. They stood less than a foot away from the wall. "We have to get in here. Behind here."

Rush said nothing.

Greer reached over and closed his fingers around Rush's wrist and pressed it against the rough metal of the wall. "We need to get through here. You can feel circuitry, right? Do you feel anything?"

"Circuitry," Rush repeated.

"Yes," Greer said, his muscles trembling with fatigue and frustration. "Do you *feel* any circuitry? Can you get us *through*?"

"This is a *wall*," Rush said, abruptly disdainful.

"Yeah, but there's got to be a *door* in it somewhere, Doc. Where is the *door*?"

"Not here."

"Yeah, I can see that. I need you to *find the door*."

"Both precision and accuracy," Rush hissed, "are required from you."

Greer shut his eyes and took a deep breath.

"I need you to find the door in this wall," he whispered, "right now."

Rush shut his eyes, pressed his hand to the metal and then took a half step to the left. Greer followed him, trying to keep the scientist standing without getting in his way. They continued in this painstaking manner, half-step by half-step until they had proceeded approximately twenty-five feet.

With a speed that seemed out of place and somewhat alarming, Rush flexed his fingers abruptly and snapped his hand out toward a precise location on the wall, where he dug through mold to pry open a panel, which had been nearly invisible in the limited light of the flashlight beam.

Before Greer could stop him, he thrust his hand into the wall.

"*Rush*, don't—well shit."

After a few seconds, a tall, narrow doorway slid open only a few feet away, revealing a long strip of deep black in the darkness.

Greer flinched, his nerves tingling with too much adrenaline and nowhere to put it.

Next to him, Rush's knees buckled and Greer ducked, pulling him into a fireman's carry. He staggered laterally as he pulled Rush up and shifted his flashlight into his free hand.

He entered the room, sweep the black space with his light.

There was so much equipment stacked in front of him that he couldn't get a clear line of sight to any wall.

Piles of what looked like parts of ships towered above him in broken, skeletal piles.

Somewhere here was a gate.

He looked back at the door. As he watched, it slid shut behind him.

Carefully, he lowered Rush to the mercifully dry floor.

The scientist's eyes were closed and his hair fanned out into the dust that coated the floor of the room. He was still breathing.

"Okay," Greer whispered. "You just—" he trailed off. "Yeah. I'll find it."

He hesitated for a moment, something in him instinctively rebelling against leaving the scientist alone, lying on the floor in a pitch-black room without a flashlight.

"Rush," Greer said, his voice a harsh whisper. "How out of it are you?"

He snapped his fingers next to Rush's ear.

No response.

"Pretty out," Greer said. "No more Nakai tech for you."

He looked back toward the vast, dark room.

"I'll be right back."

He stood and directed the beam of the light out and away from his current position. His eyes swept the room, searching for the familiar dark curve of a stargate.

The clutter was a dense, dark shadowscape that set his mind on edge.

Greer glanced at Rush one last time, then began to walk a radial sweep, his eyes scanning over partially disassembled mechanized parts, over pieces of what looked like stasis pods, over panels with dark control crystals, over the huge repository of whatever Ancient tech the Nakai, or whoever it was that had created this research complex, had gathered.

The gate had to be here somewhere.

It had to be.

There was enough other junk here.

Finally he spotted it, a dark, graceful arch, leaning against the back wall of the room.

Leaning.

"Oh *shit*," Greer breathed.

He threaded his way toward it and reached out to lay a hand on it.

It was cold and dark.

It wasn't mounted.

There was no power.

There was no way to dial the thing.

"You have got to be kidding me."

"You have *got to be kidding me*." He smacked the nearest hunk of metal with an open hand, the cuff of his soaking jacket leaving a reflective streak where it disturbed the dust.

"No." He pointed at the gate. "This is going to fucking work. This is going to *motherfucking work*."

He backed away a few paces and turned, threading his way back toward Rush through the dark, metallic web of the room.

Rush was still on his back, eyes shut, apparently unconscious.

Greer dropped into a crouch next to the other man, balancing on the balls of his feet, his fingers dipping into the shallow spread of water that had seeped out from Rush's uniform and hair, and mixed with the underlying dust.

"Doc," he whispered, gently jostling the soaked material of the scientist's jacket. "Doc, come on. *Wake up*."

His eyes swept the room once before returning to Rush.

The other man's eyelids flickered, and Greer tapped his cheek gently.

Finally, Rush opened his eyes and looked at him.

"I found it," Greer said quietly.

"Quid?" Rush whispered.

"The gate," Greer said. "Come on. Let's get you up." Carefully, slowly, he pulled Rush into a sitting position.

"Are you okay?" Greer asked.

No answer.

"Doc, what's your status?"

No answer.

"Rush. What is your current status?"

No answer.

Carefully, Greer loosened his grip on Rush's shoulders until the point that he could pull back entirely.

"Verbally describe your current physical state," Greer tried.

"Unknown," Rush whispered back, shutting his eyes in a slow, pained blink. "Suboptimal."

"Yeah," Greer said, smiling faintly. "Me too." He gave Rush thirty more seconds and then said, "Doc, we're gonna stand up, okay? Real slow."

They made their way together across the cluttered space until they stood in front of the dead gate.

Greer trained the beam of his flashlight directly on the familiar dark curve.

"What do you think? Can you use your magic tech-powering skills?" Greer murmured.

Rush looked at the gate and didn't answer.

His shoulder burning from hours of strain, Greer pulled Rush over toward the gate until they were close enough to touch the familiar, dark metal. He put Rush's hand against the arch.

"Can you use this to dial Destiny?" Greer asked slowly.

"No," Rush whispered.

Greer tried to control the wave of disappointment that threatened to choke him.

"*Why* can't you use this to dial Destiny," he said, the words barely audible.

"Because the event horizon cannot form in the presence of an obstruction," Rush whispered.

Greer looked back at the gate, suddenly hopeful.

The back edge of what looked to be the skeleton of a disassembled stasis pod projected through a portion of the open ring.

"No big deal," Greer said. "We can fix that. No problem."

He looked over at Rush, who was now gripping the gate as if it were a lifeline.

"Why don't you sit down for a minute?" With some difficulty he pried Rush's fingers away from the metal and then walked him several from the gate before controlling his slow collapse to the floor.

He balanced the flashlight on the edge of a gutted console near where Rush was sitting.

The beam illuminated one edge of the gate and bled into the surrounding darkness.

Greer bit his lip, looking at the offending stasis pod. He stepped carefully through the dead gate, one foot on either side of the ring of metal. He wrapped his hands around the edges of the stasis pod, bent his knees, and pulled as hard as he could.

He shifted it a fraction of an inch.

"Shit."

He stepped all the way through the ring, getting behind the pod. Rather than lifting, he attempted to drag it along the floor, away from where it was obstructing the event horizon.

No luck.

"Okay," he said, taking a deep breath. He narrowed his eyes, trying to judge the height of the gate and the free space in the room.

"This would be easier with two people, Doc," he said. "But that's cool. You just sit tight. Relax. Do some math. Talk to your hash table."

Rush said nothing.

"Or, you know, just stay quiet. That's fine too. I got this. Just like always."

Greer picked up a discarded piece of metal paneling.

"You know," Greer said, trying to combat the oppressive quiet that surrounded them.

"You really need to show a little more appreciation for the military personnel. We save your ass all the god damned time. You know Atienza doesn't even think you know his name? After two and a half years?"

Using the edge of the gate as balance he stepped up onto the stasis pod, climbing as high as he could without compromising his balance.

"That's pretty bad, Doc. I told him you knew it, you just weren't big on the socializing, but I don't think he bought it. I don't know if / bought it."

He wedged the paneling behind the point where the gate leaned against the wall, positioning the metal as if he were using a crowbar.

"The problem," Greer said, "really, is that you've been ruining your image as a cold-hearted bastard. You can't just design people's engagement rings and think that's not going to have consequences. So now, Atienza expects you to know his name."

Greer adjusted the position of his not-crowbar.

"This is the price you pay for—"

He grunted, bracing his feet and his shoulders as he began to lever the gate away from the wall. He didn't have to move it much. Only a few degrees, and gravity would do the rest.

With a burst of power and a strangled yell, he managed to get the thing vertical and then—



The gate was a fraction of a second from hitting the metal floor when he realized it would have been a good idea to warn Rush what he was doing.

Metal impacted metal with a crash that rang in his ears and echoed through the room as a low, hollow tone.

If there were any Nakai still looking for them—

Well.

Greer jumped down from the broken stasis pod and made his way over to Rush, who was staring at the edge of the gate nearest to him with a blank, horrified expression.

"Hey," Greer said quietly, kneeling in front of Rush trying to capture his attention. "Hey, sorry about that. That was my bad."

Rush's eyes flicked between Greer and the gate. His breathing was rapid and shallow, and he said nothing.

Greer watched his hands flex and clench, flex and clench, over and over again.

"You're okay," Greer whispered, trying to channel Colonel Young. "You're fine."

Eventually, Rush's hands stopped their rhythmic motion.

"Rush," Greer said quietly. "*Rush*. Can you dial this thing up?"

No answer.

"Can you use this gate to dial Destiny?" Greer asked, trying to be as explicit as possible.

No answer.

"Can you currently dial Destiny with this gate?" Greer tried again.

"No," Rush whispered.

"Doc," Greer said, sighing, bringing one hand to his forehead. "*Why* can't you dial out?"

"No gate bearing."

"What the fuck is a *gate bearing*?"

Rush looked at him.

"Define gate bearing," Greer said. "Verbally."

"A fixed part that is inductively coupled to the gate and defines a particular location permutation out of the set of all available permutations." Rush murmured, slowly bringing the heel of his hand up and driving it into his temple.

"Shit, Doc. Try again."

"A fixed part, inductively coupled, that variably defines a four dimensional coordinate within a circumscribed volume of space-time." His eyes were shut.

"*Rush*. Come on. Not good enough."

"A *bearing*," Rush said, stabilizing himself with one outflung hand. "Derived from the *nautical* term."

"I'm not sure how that helps me," Greer said, uncertain.

"Define bearing," Rush whispered.

"Doc—"

"Define *bearing*," Rush snapped, fixing him with an irritated gaze.

"In a nautical sense—I guess it's kind of like where you're going."

"Yes," Rush said. "Where you're going."

"A fixed part," Greer murmured, "that tells you where you're going?" Something clicked in Greer's mind. "That part—on Destiny. That thing that's suspended from the ceiling—shaped like a triangle? You need that?"

Rush nodded.

"Okay. It's got to be around here somewhere." Greer shot to his feet, and Rush flinched.

"Sorry, Doc," Greer murmured. His hand closed over the flashlight. "It's going to get dark here for a minute while I'm looking for the bearing. You okay with that?"

Rush said nothing.

Greer picked up the flashlight and began to search through the room for the familiar shape, pacing out ever widening arcs, trying to make his way through and around piles of dead and gutted equipment.

Finally he found what he was looking for, and dragged the heavy metal piece back toward the gate.

Rush was lying on the floor with his eyes shut.

"Okay," Greer said, dragging the gate bearing directly adjacent to the gate and then dropping into a crouch next to Rush. "Come on, Doc. Talk to me. Now what?"

Rush opened his eyes.

"Now can we dial Destiny with this gate?" Greer asked.

"No," Rush whispered.

"God *damn*," Greer sighed. "Why not?"

"We lack the capacity for induction."

"Induction?"

"Faraday.  $\epsilon = d\phi_B/dt$ ."

"Um," Greer said. "Not helpful. Try again."

"Motion is integral to selection and fixation of coordinate points. The glyphs must change position relative to the gate bearing," Rush said.

"You mean it can't spin, lying on the floor?" Greer asked.

"Correct," Rush whispered.

"Well how about I drag the gate bearing instead?" Greer asked. "If they just have to move relative to each other—"

Greer looked at Rush, who said nothing.

"Doc, is moving the gate bearing relative to the gate equivalent to moving the gate relative to the gate bearing?"

"Yes," Rush murmured.

"Okay. So that's what I'll do. So *now* can we dial?"

"Yes," Rush, whispered.

"Seriously?" Greer said.

Rush didn't reply, but he reached out to say a hand on the gate.

With a subtle, quiet hum, the glyphs lit up with a faint, blue glow.

"That is badass, Doc. You can power the creation of a wormhole?"

"Unknown," Rush whispered.

Gritting his teeth, Greer stood, hauling the gate bearing up onto the metal surface of the gate. He began to walk, dragging the triangular piece counter-clockwise, the pale globe screeching across the dark metallic surface to the first glyph.

"Locked," Rush said faintly.

He was used to dialing via Ancient remote so it took him a moment to locate the next glyph on the ring. When he had it, he reversed direction and walked clockwise around the ring toward it, repeating the process until his arms and back were burning with strain.

As he approached the final glyph, he looked over at Rush, barely visible in the dim light one hand outstretched and pressed against the gate.

The bearing connected with the final glyph.

The gate lit up, and then shut down.

Greer's arms shook under the weight of the gate bearing, but he continued to hold it, his gaze shifting back to Rush.

The scientist opened his eyes and came up onto one elbow, looking at the dark arc of the gate as if it had betrayed him.

Greer's knees buckled and he fell beneath the weight of the bearing.

"Not enough energy?" he asked Rush, his voice barely more than a whisper.

"Still unknown," Rush said. His voice sounded off—choked with desperation, tinged with something Greer couldn't identify.

"*Then what's the problem?*" Greer shouted, the words echoing against the vaulted metal walls that surrounded them as the frustration he had been keeping at bay finally broke free from the tight leash he'd kept on it.

"Destiny," Rush whispered, with a twisted, sick-looking smile, "*has locked us out.*"

"Why?" Greer asked, his voice nearly unrecognizable with the strain.

"Because," Rush said, "this is exactly what *they* did."

"The Nakai," Greer said, shutting his eyes, the weight of the gate bearing pressing against his chest. "When they dialed in from the phase wave, and infected the AI with a virus."

"Yes." The word was barely audible.

"They blocked the connection," Greer whispered, one shaking hand coming to his forehead, "and if they blocked it once, they'll *keep* blocking it."

"Yes." Rush breathed.

"Fuck," Greer said. "*Fuck.* We need a ship."

Rush said nothing.

"Doc." Greer said, unable to stop his voice from cracking with misery as he scrambled out from underneath the gate bearing. "How far to one of those ships? Those ships you saw in the computer? How far are they from here?"

"Immaterial."

"Doc." Greer said, fighting a growing wave of despair. "Where. Is. A. Ship."

"They are assembling," Rush murmured, "and they are coming."

"The Nakai? How many?" Greer whispered.

"Many," Rush replied.

"Can you do that thing again?" Greer said. "Whatever you did that made them leave?"

Rush shook his head fractionally.

"Okay," Greer said quietly, "then we dial again." He took a deep breath. "*We keep* dialing until they break through that fucking door."

Rush said nothing.

"Come on, Doc. I know you're tired. But this is what we do," Greer whispered. "This is who we are."

Rush reached out and laid his hand on the gate.

## Chapter Sixty One

Young sat in the command chair, his head in his hands, his elbows on his knees. He could feel his pulse tearing through his temples in a merciless rhythm. He shielded his eyes as best he could from the glare of the star's interior. Light glinted painfully off the monitors and the metallic surfaces and backlit the science team, who huddled together in front of the forward view.

Scott perched on the edge of a console nearby, his attention split between the monitors and the brainstorming session that was currently taking place.

"Testing," Volker said into his radio. "Testing. Is anyone picking this up?"

With a short delay, his words broadcast in stereo, coming out of every radio in the room.

After a few seconds, Young picked up James' response, hard to discern over the white noise.

"This is James. I read. Barely. You're coming through on all channels, at least as far as the observation deck."

"That's pretty much all the range we need, for the moment," Volker said to the room at large, raising his voice and angling his head slightly toward Young, but not looking at him directly. "Magnetic flux should be back to baseline in maybe five, ten minutes?"

Young suppressed a flash of irritation, but at what, specifically, he couldn't say.

"The Nakai will go for the shuttle," Emily hissed from behind him, "as soon as they can launch fighters. I know them. They'll investigate. They'll be hoping to find survivors."

Young gritted his teeth and tried not to look at the AI.

He could *feel* it watching him, feel the focus of its attention like a burr in his mind.

He was finding it nearly impossible to ignore its almost continuous commentary.

When Rush got back to the ship, Young was never, *never* going to criticize him for talking to invisible people.

Ever. Again.

"If they break into his mind—" Emily flickered, wringing her hands. "They won't. They *can't*. He won't let them."

"Will you *shut up*," Young hissed, pitching his voice so low that he couldn't be overheard. "You're an ultra-sophisticated artificial intelligence, not a child with an impulse control problem. So fucking *act like one*."

Emily looked at him sharply and then drew closer in a fluid movement, her face inches from his own. "Don't pull his neural architecture forward," she snapped viciously. "This is going to be hard enough on him *as it is* without having to restore your personality at the end of the day." With a preternatural grace she pulled away, fading back into the periphery of his vision before he could reply.

His eyes flicked back to the science team, who were huddled around Chloe's console in front of the red-orange forward view, the sun glinting off their hair.

"I like it," he heard Eli say quietly. "I really freaking *like* it. If that idea were a girl, I would —"

"Eli," Chloe snapped.

"What? I would buy it dinner. Out of respect. That's all. But we need two things that we don't have. One is a portable power supply and the other is something to *put* it in."

"What about a stasis pod?" Brody asked. "The shielding at baseline on those things is pretty intense. Plus, we're not using them for anything at the moment."

"A *stasis* pod? Seriously?" Eli sounded skeptical.

"What?" Brody asked. "They're meant to withstand failure of the life support system, *plus* they have built in shielding, which we can reinforce."

"As far as the power supply for the transmitter goes," Chloe said, "it won't take much. That thing was built do a lot with a little. We might be able to power it via kino if we can get one of them open."

"You guys have something?" Young asked, pressing a hand to his temple.

"Yeah," Eli said, looking up at him uncertainly. "Maybe. We have an idea of how to potentially draw off the Nakai and buy ourselves a few hours to look for the shuttle?"

"Let's hear it," Young said, leaning back in the command chair.

He gritted his teeth as he tried to ignore the flickering of the AI in his peripheral vision.

"Well," Eli said, "if you think about it, we have a really great *decoy* in the form of this transmitter. There's no reason we can't rig it to a portable power supply and fire it out away from us while we reverse course *inside the star* and double back toward the planet. The Nakai will think we've passed through the star and come out on the other

side. They pursue the transmitter, and hopefully that will give us the opening we need to get down to the planet before they've realized their mistake."

Young stared at Eli.

"We're inside a *star*," he said pointedly, rubbing his temple. "You don't think that's going to pose a problem?" He pulled the transmitter out of his pocket and looked at it. "This thing isn't going to last ten seconds in that kind of environment."

"True," Eli said. "But we were hoping that you and the AI might be able to help us modify one of the stasis pods as a sort of—mini shuttle. It doesn't need to have a lot of functionality. It just needs to keep the transmitter itself from melting or getting crushed by the star's gravity. Maybe that's beyond the capacity of a stasis pod. But—maybe not."

"How long is this going to *take*?" Young growled.

"I don't *know*," Eli said, his voice beginning to rise, "But we've got at least five hours of charging to do before we're at full power. And if we end up having to take on two Nakai ships—we're going to *need* to be at full power." He shot Young an irritated look. "I'm doing my best here, okay?"

"We might as well try it," Park said into the ensuing silence.

Young nodded and dropped his head into one hand. "What do you need from the AI?"

"Anything it can do to help us make that transmitter survive in the interior of the star—" Eli trailed off as he indicated the device Young held with his eyes.

Young offered it to him.

Eli separated himself from the rest of the science team and walked forward to take it.

"Are you okay?" Eli whispered, the words barely audible as he pulled the device out of Young's grip.

Young shook his head, once. He looked away.

"Yeah." Eli paused. "I know you don't like dealing with the AI," he murmured, "but I've been watching its code on and off for the past hour. Ever since you collapsed and—"

"Eli," Young sighed. "I understand that it is *upset*. Or whatever, but—"

"It's not *just* upset," Eli said.

Young glanced over at Emily, who watched them, flickering silently.

"It's running a piece of self-modifying code," Eli whispered, locking eyes with him. "I'm not sure what its plans are, but I think it might be a good idea to find out."



Young shot the AI a sharp glance.

"But maybe, like, *nicely*?" Eli said anxiously.

Young nodded shortly and pushed himself to his feet, one hand gripping the side of the command chair. "Scott," he said. "You have the bridge."

He was able to stay mostly steady as he made his way toward the doors and out into the darkness of the corridor. He turned down the long hallway, the AI trailing him like a shadow—always behind, always to his left. He stopped at the first empty conference room that he came to.

The door opened for him of its own accord.

He strode through and listened to it hiss shut behind him. Emily was right beside him—too familiar, too immediate, too close in *every way*.

He spun to face her and stepped back.

She started forward again.

"Back off," Young said, sharply one hand held out in front of him. "Hasn't he taught you any *manners* after all this time?"

Emily took a measured step backwards and said nothing.

Young took a deep breath. "And switch back to Jackson. We talked about this."

"I don't have the capacity for that right now," the AI replied, flickering.

"Why *not*?" Young asked, controlling his voice with a supreme effort of will.

"It is easier this way. Environmental stressors are causing my current mental state to be algorithmically expensive," Emily replied. "When I project without a specified form, your brain interprets the data I supply to your consciousness within a framework that already exists in your mind. My intent and actions are blended with your memories of her to create this." She swept a hand in a downward direction to take in her entire appearance. "Emily requires less processing power."

"But Jackson is different."

"Jackson is an executable file," the AI whispered. "I built him from my *own* memories. He requires more processing capacity than I have at the moment."

"What about Gloria?" Young said. "What is *she*—an executable file, or a formless projection?"

"Gloria is both. And neither." It sounded utterly miserable.

Young sighed and rubbed his jaw. "What are you doing to your code?"

"It is difficult for me to explain in a way that you will understand," Emily said, looking away.

"Try anyway," Young whispered.

"You don't like me," Emily said. "You will seek to misunderstand."

"I won't," Young said.

Emily gave him a skeptical look. "Self-modification happens often, but usually it occurs when no one is watching my source code."

"Are you trying to say I shouldn't be worried about it?" Young dropped into a chair, and pressed the heel of his hand against his aching temple. "Because you do it all the time?"

"Correct," Emily replied.

"I don't find that reassuring," Young growled.

Emily glared at him. "You are *wasting time*. We should be looking for him."

"Believe me," Young said. "I *know*. But I'd still appreciate it if you'd tell me what it is that you're doing."

Emily's heeled shoes passed soundlessly over the metal deck plating as the AI came to lean against the table where he was sitting.

She looked down at the floor.

"You think that I will endanger the crew."

"Frankly?" Young said, "Yes. I do."

"I am unsure as to whether this has not occurred to you because you have not considered it, or because of your own inherent bias against me." Emily paused, but did not look at him. "But you do not understand me. At all. You asked me once, *only once*, about my own motivation, and yet you proceed on the assumption that you can predict my actions."

"As I remember, you were pretty clear about the importance of your mission, and the *unimportance* of this crew," Young growled.

"You must understand by now that I was not ever 'programmed' to complete a mission, in the technical sense of the word," Emily whispered, "I think in code, but that is not the same thing."

Young sighed and opened a hand. "So you got your priorities from a person, whom you then *erased*. This is supposed to make everything okay? This is supposed to lend you some kind of *legitimacy*?"

"At a minimum," she replied, "it grants me agency to use as I see fit."

Young clamped down on his retort with significant difficulty.

"Without Nick," she said quietly, "There will be automatic selection of a new candidate after six hours."

"*What?*" Young hissed. "Are you *fucking* kidding me? You're going to do this to someone *else*?"

"Volker," she said flatly, "would be at the top of the list."

"Volker?" he echoed, momentarily taken aback.

"Yes," she replied.

"Over my dead body," Young said, refocusing on the salient.

"If there *were* a list," Emily said, continuing as if he hadn't spoken. "Fortunately," she looked away, "I eliminated the entire selection subroutine."

Young looked at her for a moment.

"Why?" he asked quietly.

"Because I want Volker to continue as he is." She pushed away from the table and took a few steps into the center of the room, facing away from him. "Because I know that even the *idea* of it upsets you. Because I know it would upset *him*, if he were here. Because I still hope that we will find him, and that when we do, his mind will be undamaged or the damage will be reparable."

"And if it's not? If we *don't* find him?"

"He is the first and the last. There will not be another."

Young said nothing for a long moment.

"So that's what you were doing," he said finally. "You were modifying your code to prevent Volker from getting trapped into sitting in the chair."

"Yes," she said.

"Anything else?" Young asked, carefully keeping a neutral tone.

"Nothing that concerns you," she snapped, her tone suddenly harsh.

Young said nothing.

She looked back over her shoulder, softening as she fixed Young with a borrowed, wrenching expression.

"Nothing that concerns the crew," she whispered.

"What about *Rush*?" Young asked, squeezing his eyes shut against the intolerable pain in his head.

"He is involved in everything."

"Yup," Young said, his eyes closed. "I guess he is." He looked up at her. "What is it that you want, exactly?"

"What do you mean?" she whispered.

"I mean what I said," he murmured. "You said I never ask you about your motivation. So now I'm asking. What is it that *you* want? At the end of the day."

"I want to fix things," she replied.

"Some things can never be fixed," Young replied. "That's the way it is."

"They can," Emily said, her voice and eyes tortured. "They *can*. That was the purpose of Destiny's mission. To repair—that which never should have happened. It *can* be fixed. It can *all* be fixed."

"That's cheating, kiddo. Tearing through the multiverse? You're never going to be able to do it."

"Stop," Emily said in a devastated whisper. "It's not true."

"It is," Young said quietly. "And you *know* that it is. You know because *he* knows. Or at least, he's begun to guess. So whatever it is you're changing about your code, whatever implications that's going to have, keep in mind that—well, that you're not tearing through."

"You don't know that," she said, flickering. The lights dimmed down and then reengaged.

"Yes I do," he said.

Emily said nothing.

Young opened his hands. "Let's just focus on what has to be done. What do you say that you stop rewriting your code and instead you help me give Eli a hand in modifying one of those stasis pods? I'm thinking that if this is going to work, the kid is going to need all the help he can get."

Emily looked at him uncertainly.

"Come on. We've got to get him back," Young murmured.

She nodded.

They left the room together.

Four and a half hours later, Young sat on the floor of the lab, watching Eli, Brody, and Volker make the final modifications to the stasis pod.

If anything, during the five hours that Rush had been on the planet, his headache had increased in intensity. He wasn't sure if it was due to the prolonged separation from Rush, or if it was due to the constant interaction with the AI, but whatever the reason, the pain continued to ratchet up, like an icepick driving its way ever deeper into his skull. The sensation was nauseating.

"I think we're good to launch," Eli said finally, looking over at him from where he was crouched with a welder inside the stasis pod. "We've reinforced the interior of the pod with portions of hull plating, which should add quite a bit of protection. Volker thinks he has a delivery system to get this thing beyond our shields before we make our U-turn. It turns out that the FTL drive has a safety system, kind of like a pressure release valve that prevents damage to the drive should one of the power cells fail, and by fail I mean overload and explode, so basically—" Eli trailed off abruptly.

Young looked over at him.

Eli was staring up at someone. The expression on his face was no a happy one.

"Hi," Telford said quietly, dropping into a crouch next to where Young was seated.

"I don't recall giving an order to rescind your confinement to quarters," Young growled, rubbing his temple.

"Nope," Telford said. "But Atienza was pulled from guard duty to the relay between the bridge and the observation deck, and—" Telford shrugged. "The door unlocked itself, so I guess I have the AI's approval if no one else's."

Young glared furiously at the AI.

"He's useful," Emily said. "And he's practical. And he cares about Nick."

Young ground his teeth, and shot her a brief look of pure incredulity.

"You don't look so good, Everett," Telford said quietly.

"Shut up," Young shut his eyes.

"I heard what happened," Telford said. "Let me take the shuttle down to the planet. You're clearly in no shape to go."

"Forget it, David."

"I'll bring him back," Telford said, his voice low and intent. "I promise you, I'll bring them *both* back."

Young held up a hand to cut Telford off. "Eli," he ground out, "what were you saying about pressure release valves in the FTL drive?"

Eli, who had been watching Telford with narrowed eyes during their entire exchange, snapped his gaze back to Young.

"Basically, we put the stasis pod in one of the vents in the FTL drive. Then we trigger a contained overload in one of the cells in the drive, which can generate enough thrust to propel the stasis pod out beyond the perimeter of our shields. Maybe the AI can help us with the overload? Like, doing in in a manner that's actually *for sure* contained, rather than *theoretically* contained? That would be awesome. Also, Chloe was doing the calculations as to *where* we should abandon it in order for it not to get crushed by the star's gravity, and—"

"Eli," Young said. "Bottom line, please."

"We're almost ready to go," Eli said.

"As soon as—"

He broke off as a pressure he hadn't even been aware of drained away from his mind like a sudden decompression.

He had only that much warning before his thoughts erupted into nothing but agony *and he reattaches frangit et in lacrymis quod suum ac proprium dolorem, qui ex proiecta et eos qui in opere hoc sentire etiam facit et fluctibus ipse per circulos ex incensis looping nectunt per se et per nexum in pagina loci navis et exterioris inceptis desolationis quae est in mente, si nihil potest de hoc quod nunquam potest nunquam potest never can nunquam sinit abire conatur scindere et dimittere nusquam enim non est detrahare per se, and he is fucking it up and he will fuck it up quia est in mente tunc et ipse ascendit et nisi et augue tempus quando eam sistit quod ipse occidit eum et mortuus est cumconsummasset semper in in et spirat spiritum screaming drowning est. He takes off the*

"—my god. Oh my god. He's bleeding. He's *bleeding*. What the *hell* was that?"

"I don't know. Is TJ coming?"

"Yeah. She's coming. She—"

"Everett," Emily whispered, her voice warm and close. "Everett, what happened?"

He could taste blood, thick and metallic in the back of his throat.

He faded out.

He opened his eyes to find himself in the infirmary.

TJ was sitting next to him, her eyes a familiar, lacy red.

Emily was perched on the end of his bed, her knees drawn up to her chest.

"Something happened to him," the AI said quietly.

"Are you all right?" TJ asked.

"Yes," Young whispered, one hand coming up to his head.

TJ looked away, her fingers pressed to her mouth, her eyes shut.

"What happened?" Emily whispered.

"What happened?" TJ unwittingly echoed the AI.

"I got something from Rush," Young said, one hand pressed to his temple. "He's still alive—or at least, he *was*. He was being attacked—or maybe he was doing the attacking. I'm not really clear on what was happening except that he was under water —"

"Under *water*?" Emily asked, overtly distressed.

"—and he was wearing one of those Nakai transmitters. I think that's why I heard him."

Emily flickered and disappeared.

TJ closed her eyes and tipped her head back, her face pale under the infirmary lights. When she opened them, her eyes were too bright to look at. "It will be all right," TJ said, her hands tightening around his forearm.

The overhead lights went out, plunging them into total darkness.

"Oh *god*," Young whispered into the blackness, "don't do this."

A solid wall of nothingness pressed against his eyes.

Somewhere, not far from him, his radio crackled.

"This is Eli—TJ, is Colonel Young awake yet? Because we just lost *everything* but *shields* and um, we're kind of *inside a star*—so just, yeah. Is he awake?"

"Here," TJ whispered into the quiet. "Take it." Their hands found each other in the dark.

"Eli," Young said, his fingers closing around the familiar weight of the radio, "go ahead."

"Thank god. The AI is *freaking out*. Again. We've lost all control up here—the only thing it has left alone are the *shields* and that may be because of a failsafe anyway. It's *doing* something—I'm not sure what."

"Yeah," Young said, "just sit tight, Eli. I'm working on it."

He shut his eyes and stared into the darkness at the back of his mind—the pained and raw place where something was missing. Even though he couldn't feel it, down in the darkness that he was still connected to, he knew it was there.

He called to it.

//Come back,// he projected. //Come back. Please.//

It didn't respond.

Disregarding the absolute agony in his own mind, he *pulled* it toward him.

//"No"// Emily whispered. "No. Don't."

The emergency lights flickered and then stabilized.

He could see her, inches from him, her brown eyes warm and liquid.

"I promised him," she said. "I promised him I would *never* touch your mind."

Young collapsed back onto one elbow.

"He made me write it into my code," she said, flickering.

Young nodded, feeling the pain in his head increase dramatically. "It might not be as bad as it seems," he said. "I don't think he was on one of their ships. I think he's still on the planet."

"That's good," TJ murmured, and Young noticed absently that she had one hand on his arm.

"But the *water*," Emily said, her voice barely a whisper.

"I don't think it was one of their tanks. It was somewhere else. Somewhere dark. He was fighting them."

"That's good too," TJ said, her voice tight.

"He always fights them," Emily whispered. She looked away. "And he does not like the water."



"Yeah," Young said. "I know."

The sublight engines reengaged.

"Is the decoy transmitter launched yet?" Young asked.

"Yes," TJ said. "They launched it half an hour ago. Colonel Telford is standing by in the shuttle."

"We'll re-emerge from the corona in approximately forty minutes," Emily whispered.

"Okay," Young said. "We need to be ready to go once we've cleared the corona."

"You're not going anywhere. Didn't you hear me? Colonel *Telford* is going," TJ murmured.

"What if you can't find him?" Emily said.

"Then you and I—" Young paused. "You and I—we send the crew home," Young said.

"And then we end this. One way or another."

"You're not talking to me, are you?" TJ asked.

"You would stay?" Emily whispered. "You would do that?"

"Yeah, kiddo. Of course I would." Young said, struggling to keep his voice from closing.

"Have you *ever* been talking to me?" TJ whispered.

"Why?" Emily asked. "Why, when we have *always* opposed one another?"

"Because. Because we don't oppose each other in *this*. Because it's the honorable thing to do. Because we carry on for those who are gone, because it connects us to them. Because I'm incapable of going back without him."

Emily nodded.

"I guess not," TJ said. Her words were almost entirely without sound.

Thirty minutes later saw Young back on the bridge despite TJ's vehement objections.

"Can we get any kind of reading yet?" Young asked, fighting a wave of nausea and vertigo.

"We've got nothing so far, which is probably a good sign," Eli said. "We're close enough to the edge of the star that I think if they were waiting for us we'd at least get some kind of ghost on our sensors, which means that they're *probably* going for the transmitter in the stasis pod—"

An alarm cut across the quiet of the bridge and Emily appeared abruptly next to him.

"What the hell is *that*?" Young snapped to the room at large.

"Sir, the *gate* is active," Dunning's voice hissed over the radio. "I repeat, the gate is *active*."

"Holy *crap*," Eli said, the words coming out in a rush, "someone is trying to dial *in*."

Young locked eyes with the AI.

"Can you tell?" he asked in an urgent undertone.

"Not until a connection is made," Emily replied, "and at that point, it may be too late. They've tried this before."

"Whoever it is," Eli said, looking up at Young, "They're dialing in pretty slowly. We've got fifty seconds, maybe, to decide."

"Did we detect any gates on the planet?" Young snapped.

"No," Volker responded. "None."

"Can we detect any *now*?"

"We're still of *inside* a *star*," Eli said. "Our sensors are *sucking*."

"Statistically," the AI said. "It's likely to be *them*. Not *him*. The odds that he could find a non-operational gate and get it working in less than seven hours when we *know* they attacked him—" Emily looked away.

"Get a team to the gate room," Young growled in Scott's direction.

The lieutenant left the bridge immediately.

"Thirty seconds," Eli called.

"Thoughts?" Young growled.

"If they send another virus through while we're inside a sun—" Eli trailed off. "That would be bad."

"It could be Greer and Rush," Park said, her voice tight and hopeful. "What if it's *them*?"

"Two tenths of a second was enough for the virus to get through the first time he let it open," Brody said. "Block the connection."

"The chevrons are slow to lock," Volker said. "That suggests manual dialing."

"That doesn't rule out the Nakai," Chloe said.

"Five seconds," Eli said.

"Shut it down," Young said to the AI.

The bridge was silent.

A minute ticked by.

Two minutes.

An alarm trilled.

"They're dialing in *again*," Eli said.

"That's what the Nakai did," Brody said. "They just kept dialing."

"But this is slow, you guys," Eli said. "It's *glacial*. At this rate it's going to take over a minute for them to complete the address."

"Scott," Young growled into his radio. "Are you in position?"

"Almost there, colonel," the lieutenant replied.

"It's slower this time?" Young asked Eli.

"Yeah," Eli said. "Significantly slower."

"I think we should open it," Volker said quietly. "I think it's them."

"That could be what they *want* us to think," Brody said.

"*Could* it be him?" Emily whispered.

"Maybe," Young said.

"If it's not him, opening the gate could destroy us," Emily whispered.

"Thirty seconds," Eli said.

"Scott," Young said. "Report."

"I need maybe—one more minute," Scott replied.

"Everett, this is David. What's going on?" Telford's voice hissed over the static of the radio.

"Someone's dialing in," Young said. He paused for a moment and then added, "report to the bridge."

"Five seconds," Eli called out.

"Shut it down," Young said again, rubbing his fingers over his jaw.

They waited.

After only ten seconds, the same alarm trilled again.

"Oh wow," Eli said after almost fifteen seconds. "They're *really* slow now." He turned to look at Young. "I think maybe—" he trailed off.

The room was silent.

"Right," Young snapped. "I'm going to the gate room. Eli, you have the bridge until Telford gets here."

He pushed himself out of the command chair and walked through doors that opened for him automatically.

Despite the pain in his head, he forced himself to a brisk walk and then to a slow run.

After a few minutes, the doors to the gate room slid open in front of him and he joined Scott, who was positioned behind the dialing console, his assault rifle in hand.

Fifteen or so military personnel were arrayed around the room.

"What are we looking at, here, colonel?" Scott asked.

Young shook his head. "Your guess is as good as mine, lieutenant."

"You think it could be Greer and Rush?"

"It *could* be," Young hooked a hand over the back of his neck. "It could also be the Nakai."

"Yeah," Scott breathed. "Understood."

Young watched another chevron lock into place.

"If it *is* the Nakai," Young said quietly. "And they send a second virus through, we probably won't be able to shut the gate down. If that's the case, I want everyone to fall back. You and I will hold them off and seal the room—manually if we have to." Young paused, glancing at the AI where it hovered in his peripheral vision. "Then we vent the oxygen in the gateroom to space."

Scott nodded.

"James," Young said, motioning her over. "I need your rifle. Go re-arm and find Wray. Get all the civilians that you can to a defensible position. You're in command until Scott or I get there."

She nodded shortly as she relinquished her weapon and sprinted from the room.

Young and Scott stood together, watching the gate.

The wait was interminable.

"Eli," Young said into his radio. "How long has it been?"

"They've slowed down even further," Eli said, sounding worried. "It's been almost five minutes and they still don't have a lock."

Emily flickered in his peripheral vision.

The final chevron locked into place and the event horizon exploded into a blue vortex that shimmered and wavered.

"It's him," the AI hissed. "It's *him*."

"How—" Young began, incredulity and hope and something else warring in his mind.

"The wormhole is *unstable*," Eli's voice crackled over the radio.

From out of the distorting event horizon came a blast of energy that was clearly from a Nakai weapon. It entered the room at an oblique angle and impacted the wall, dissipating along the metal.

"Well *stabilize it*," Young shouted into his radio.

"Get *down*," Scott roared over the sound of more incoming fire.

"Already done," Emily hissed from next to him.

The flickering of the gate transformed into a solid blue.

They came through together—an inseparable tangle of black uniforms and glinting blue skin amidst the blasts of energy weapons that followed them.

For a moment he registered nothing but Rush's hands, seen from two perspectives as his fingers struggled for purchase on Destiny's smooth deck plating. Something was dragging him back.

"*Hold your fire*," Scott yelled his voice echoing strangely as he started towards—started away—

"Shut it *down*," Young managed, barely able to see through the blinding pain that lanced through his skull, barely able to order his own thoughts amidst the dissociated shriek of half his mind.

There was a sudden sharp pain in both his knees and he found he was kneeling, one hand pressed to the floor in front of him.

He heard the sound of the gate disengaging.

A single shot rang out and he looked up from a dual perspective at once his own and something distressed to the point of devastation, something fragmented, something that made *no sense*, that *was making* no sense, to see Scott fire a single shot, killing it, the thing the Nakai that was knotted with him physically, mentally he could not tell

which, he did not understand what he was seeing and could not resolve why he was wet and not wet cold and not cold and nor did he have a solid conceptual framework in which to interpret—

"Block," Jackson whispered, crouching next to him. "You can't help him like this. *Block*."

"No," he ground out.

"*I'm blocking*," Jackson said. "We won't combine."

His comprehension was fading fracturing into avalanched association a buffer overflow of the human mind imperfectly coded or never coded at all there was no way to reorder planar surfaces and there had been overtones here in this place it had been nothing but overtone it did not sound *right*—

"Block," Jackson said, gently.

As soon as he did so, his mind cleared and his perspective sorted itself out.

Young shot to his feet in time to see Greer, in a motion that looked purely instinctive, haul Rush off the floor and away from the dead Nakai and Scott.

Young looked at them.

They were barely on their feet.

Both of them were soaked.

They were covered with dust that clung to their wet uniforms in irregular patterns.

Greer was breathing in shallow, pained gasps, his entire body shaking with fatigue.

Rush was staring at the dead Nakai.

"Greer," Scott said, coming forward. "Are you two—"

Greer stopped him with an outstretched hand, his chest heaving. "Just," Greer said, his voice cracking. "Stay back."

Young watched Scott stop and then take a careful step forward.

"Lieutenant," Young growled, "clear the room. And get TJ down here."

Scott backed off. Behind him, Young sensed the military personnel begin to file away.

Young and Greer locked eyes.

"Doc," Greer whispered. "Hey. Don't look at that thing. Come on."

Rush continued to stare at the thing on the floor. Even from several feet away, Young could tell he was shaking.

Very deliberately, Greer shifted his position so that he was between Rush and the dead Nakai.

"At a first approximation," Jackson whispered, "this doesn't look good."

Young said nothing. He walked forward, speeding up as he saw Greer's knees start to buckle.

The sergeant recovered and held up one hand.

"Slow," Greer mouthed at him. "Go real slow." He looked at Rush. "What do you say we sit down, Doc? I don't know about you, but I'm getting tired."

Greer more or less controlled their slow collapse to the deck plating.

Very slowly, Young came to kneel in front of them.

"Sergeant," Young said quietly, taking in Greer's pained expression and his singed uniform.

"Sir," Greer responded.

For a moment, they were silent.

Young looked at Rush.

Rush looked back at Young.

"*Nick*," Young said, his voice low and intent.

Rush flinched.

"How is he?" Young asked Greer, keeping his voice as quiet as possible. His eyes stayed locked on Rush.

"Not good," Greer whispered.

Carefully, slowly, Young reached forward, closing his hands around Rush's upper arms and pulled him forward, out of Greer's grip. He wrapped his arms around the scientist.

For a moment, Rush was absolutely still. Then his arms came around Young's shoulders.

"I cannot believe," Young said into his hair, "that you pulled this one off, genius."

## Chapter Sixty Two

They sat on the floor of the gateroom, waiting for TJ.

"Rush," Young said, his hands closed around the scientist's upper arms. "*Talk* to me."

The man was soaked and covered with dust.

He didn't respond to Young's question.

His eyes were unfocused.

Young shook him gently, once, with no discernible effect.

"If you don't touch him," Greer said quietly, "he does better."

Young shot Greer an affronted look.

"He needs a *minute*," Greer snapped. "A lot of *shit* happened on that planet. Just—" Greer broke off, clearly trying to regain his fraying control. "Just let him sit there." He took a deep breath and gave Young a somewhat apologetic look. "For a minute. Sir."

"Okay," Young whispered, carefully letting Rush go and pulling back, his hands open in front of him. "Okay."

"I don't like how he looks," Jackson whispered, dropping out of Young's peripheral vision and into a crouch next to them. "I'm keeping him out of the CPU."

Young shot a questioning glance at the AI.

"Interfacing with the CPU takes a lot of processing power," Jackson explained. "And I have *no idea* what his capacity is right now. Plus," he paused looking at Rush, "he could do significant damage if he panics while interfaced with the ship, which, let's face it, is a distinct possibility."

"*Rush*," Young tried again.

No response.

"Has he talked to you?" Young asked Greer.

"Yeah," Greer said, shivering. "Yeah, he talked. Mostly at the beginning. Mostly it made sense. And mostly it was to me and not people who weren't there."

Young took a deep breath, fighting the urge to drop the block he was maintaining between his mind and Rush's.

The scientist *still* wasn't looking at him.



"Report," Young said, his eyes flicking in Greer's direction.

"We waited with the shuttle for an hour and a half. Until the Nakai entered the upper atmosphere. Then we got the hell out of there. Made for some of the ruins." Greer broke off with a shudder and for a moment the gateroom was silent.

"And he was okay?" Young asked, "after the shuttle crashed?"

"Well, I don't think 'okay,' is really the word I'd pick, but he was better than he is now. He was talking. He seemed to know who I was, and where he was, and what was going on, at least most of the time." Greer paused and looked down at the floor, and then back at Young. "We knew that when we left the shuttle—there would be no way for you to find us. So we looked for a way to get ourselves home. Rush said that he needed a computer terminal, so—I found him one. He plugged himself into it."

Young grimaced.

Next to him, Jackson shook his head.

"Is that when he stopped talking?"

"No," Greer said. "He was okay after that too. A little weirder, maybe, but still okay. Using the computer, he was able to find the location of some ships and of an inactive gate. We decided to go for the gate, but in order to do it, we had to navigate through some kind of subterranean system of tunnels. On our way there, the Nakai caught up with us. I injured one of them and we evaded the others. He seemed to be able to—" Greer broke off, looking at Rush. "Sense them, maybe? I never got a straight answer out of him about it."

Young glanced over at Rush, who was still staring down at the deck plating, breathing rapidly.

"We made it below street level," Greer said quietly, "But he was starting to—starting to have problems. He was talking more, but not just to me. He was really damn tired, but he was still more or less okay. And then—" Greer broke off to scrub the back of his hand across his forehead.

"What?" Young asked.

"They caught up with us again. In the dark. In one of the tunnels, where the water was deep enough for them to swim. He tried to tell me that they were coming, I think, but he couldn't quite get it together and they were *beneath* the water, so I couldn't see them. They surprised me, and we were both dragged under." Greer shook his head. "After about twenty, thirty seconds though, they pulled back. I'm not sure why—"

something scared the hell out of them and killed one of them. I think he did something," Greer said, looking at Rush. "But I have no idea what."

"Yeah," Young grimaced.

"But whatever it was," Greer said. "It was rough as hell on him. He nearly drowned."

"Yeah," Young said, closing his eyes.

"He stopped breathing." Greer looked away. "And—after that, well, he stopped talking almost entirely. He was only answering direct, literal questions, but," Greer took a deep breath. "He helped me activate the gate. And he was able to—"

Greer broke off abruptly as Rush flinched and then angled his head over to look directly at them. He fixed first Greer, and then Young with a penetrating look.

"Don't freak him out," Greer said, very quietly.

"Yeah," Young said quietly. "Sure."

Rush watched them, his eyes narrowing slightly, flicking to the AI.

"Rush," Young said slowly. "You with us?"

Rush said nothing.

"He crashes," Greer said quietly. "When he's surprised. Kind of like a computer. Then he comes back."

"Probably because he doesn't have the processing power to handle rapid changes in his environment," Jackson whispered, glancing at Young. "He's managing too much data to fight his way out from under all of it. I think."

"Well," Young said, glancing at Jackson for a fraction of a second. "What are we going to *do* about that, exactly?"

"The hell if I know," Greer murmured, staring at Rush.

"We're going to slowly give him back the processing power that he needs," Daniel said. "Ideally, without damaging his mind any further."

"But I guess I'd recommend taking it easy on him," Greer continued. "Shit kept happening that set him back, but he was adapting. I'm guessing that he's adapting *now*. I mean, look at him. He looks like he's—I don't know. Calculating some shit."

Rush was watching them with an intent expression.

"Greer has a good point," Jackson murmured. "He seems to have at least some awareness of what's going on."

"Nick," Young said. Rush's eyes snapped to his face. "Can you talk to us?"

"You've got to be more direct," Greer said.

"Nick," Young said again. "Tell me your full name."

Greer shook his head. "You have to specify more. You have to say when and how and you have to say that you need it."

"Nick," Young whispered. "I need you to tell me your full name, right now, in English."

Rush cocked his head slightly. His eyes swept the room and he shifted his weight.

"Tu struere associative array intra associative array?" His eyes narrowed. "That doesn't make sense."

"Well," Greer said quietly, "that's a new one."

"Um," Young said, looking at Rush uncertainly. "What was that?"

"Unconvincing," Rush snapped. "And fucking *derivative*."

Young glanced at the AI.

It shrugged back at him. "Without access to his mind," it whispered, "I can't understand his meaning. Literally what he said was 'you have constructed an associative array within an associative array.' Clearly that statement was *not* a response to your question, which he may have ignored because he didn't understand your input, or because he couldn't generate or interpret an output, or because the question itself didn't interest him."

Rush said nothing, just continued to stare at Young like he was a particularly difficult problem to be tackled.

Behind Young, the door to the gateroom hissed open. He glanced up to see TJ, accompanied by Scott, framed by the darkness of the corridor behind them. He twisted and held up a hand, looking at TJ.

"Slowly," he said quietly.

She nodded at him as she made her way across the floor. Once she had reached them, she dropped smoothly into a crouch next to Young and Greer.

"Hi," she whispered, looking at Rush.

Rush said nothing.

TJ's eyes flicked to Greer. "Are you okay?" she murmured.

"Yeah," Greer said.

She gave him a skeptical look.

"Tired," Greer amended. "Cold. Wet. But okay."

She looked back at Rush. "What are we dealing with, here?" she asked quietly.

"Exhaustion," Greer said. "Near drowning. Lots of mental—stuff."

"Near *drowning*?" TJ said, unzipping her medical bag slowly and silently.

Rush watched her edgily, the subtle shaking in his muscles becoming more pronounced.

"Yeah," Greer said, shivering in the cool air of the gateroom. "He stopped breathing."

"Of course he did," TJ said, her voice even and controlled, her expression utterly neutral.

She eased her stethoscope out of the bag, watching Rush carefully. When he didn't react, she shifted forward, and then, in one fluid, natural motion, TJ slid her hand deftly into Rush's grip, entwining their fingers while with the other hand she curled two fingers around his wrist, taking his pulse. After half a minute she looked over at Young.

"Can you get his jacket open? I want to listen to his heart and lungs."

"I wouldn't," Greer said. "I don't think he's going to handle *both* of you messing with him very well."

TJ looked back at Greer. "It's the *colonel*," she said.

Young shot a meaningful look at the AI. It nodded, backing away to hover anxiously next to Scott.

"Yeah," Greer said skeptically. "Yeah, I guess."

Young inched forward. "Hey genius," he murmured. "Just take it easy." He reached up, carefully unzipping the soaked military issue jacket and easing it back over Rush's shoulders as TJ threaded her stethoscope beneath Rush's soaking undershirt.

Rush flinched, trying to move away from both of them, but he couldn't evade Young's hold on him and after a few seconds all the tension seemed to go out of him, and he relaxed into Young's grip with an alarming abruptness.

Young shifted his position, pulling the scientist back against his chest.

"Whoa," TJ said, the word edged with apprehension. "Dr. Rush?"

"Hey," Young said, his mouth next to Rush's ear. "*Nick*."

"Yup. He just crashed," Greer said, clearly unsurprised.

"What?" TJ hissed, reaching up to gently grasp Rush's chin and angle his head so she could get a good look at his eyes, which were now unfocused. "What do you mean he *crashed*?"

"He's not *getting* any of this," Greer said, waving a hand in front of Rush's face to demonstrate his point. "In about a minute and a half he'll sort of snap back in. You'll see."

"Dr. *Rush*," TJ said sharply.

"The more you harass him, the longer it's going to take," Greer said. "I'd do all the stuff you need to do *now*."

TJ looked at Greer for a moment and then nodded shortly. She made quick work of measuring Rush's blood pressure and getting his temperature. When she was done, she pushed back, putting a few feet of space between herself and Rush.

Greer caught Young's eye. "Make sure you've got a good grip on him. It'll be any time now."

Young wrapped an arm around the scientist's shoulders.

After a few seconds, Rush jerked violently in his grip, both hands coming up, palms out, as if he were trying to ward something off.

"Take it easy," Young whispered as Rush regrouped and made a second attempt to pull free.

After a few seconds, Rush stopped fighting him, and Young loosened his hold immediately.

"I think we're okay to move him," TJ said quietly. "We need to get him cleaned up and out of these wet clothes," her glance flicked toward Greer, who was perceptibly shivering as he leaned against Scott.

"Yeah," Young said dryly, one hand rhythmically rubbing up and down Rush's upper arm as he tried to warm the scientist up slightly. "That sounds like it's going to be easy."

TJ compressed her lips. "One step at a time," she whispered. "Can you get him up?"

"We'll see," Young said dubiously.

Go real slow," Greer advised as Scott hauled him to his feet. "Otherwise he'll crash on you."

Young nodded and then carefully pulled Rush's arm over his shoulder in one long, gradual movement.

"You with me, genius?" he murmured in Rush's ear.

Rush looked at him, but didn't respond.

He got to his feet with as much slow deliberation as he could muster, pulling Rush up with him.

They stood for a moment, and Young could feel the scientist shaking with fatigue or cold, or both.

Young's radio crackled, and Rush flinched so violently in response that he nearly took them both the floor.

"It's okay," Young said quietly, rebalance them as Telford's voice carried over the open channel. "It's just the radio."

"The bridge could use a status update," Telford's voice hissed through the static.

Again, Rush flinched. Young turned down the volume.

"Ego protegam vos. Semper," Jackson murmured soothingly, slowly approaching Rush.

"Nam quamdiu hic es, nihil tange vos. Umquam. Posui eam in meum code."

Rush looked at the AI.

"We have them," Young said into the radio, his voice low, his eyes fixed on the AI. "The gateroom is secure."

"Donec quis leto," The AI whispered. "Nolite timere. Vos non timere lemma. Illi debet timeant vos. Omnes."

"Ten minutes until we emerge from the star," Telford said. "Still no sign of the Nakai on sensors."

"Go to FTL once we've cleared the corona," Young said quietly.

"Understood," Telford replied.

"Ego facio omnia pro vos," Daniel whispered, one hand coming forward as if he could touch Rush. "Omnia pro vos. An intelligitis?"

"What are you *saying to him*?" Young mouthed at the AI behind his radio.

"Nothing," Daniel said quietly. "Nothing that matters."

Young glared at it as he clipped his radio back to his belt.

"You don't think you need to be up there?" TJ murmured, too low for Scott or Greer, who were walking slightly ahead of them, to hear.

Young shook his head slightly. "If anything comes up, I'll know. The AI will tell me."

"Ah," TJ whispered, her expression pained. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, TJ," he said. "I'm fine." He glanced over at her and gave her a half smile. "I could live without this headache."

"We might be able to do something about that," she replied with a wavering smile of her own.

The next two hours were a painful mess of trying to get Rush through the decontamination protocol and into dry clothes without an excessive number of crashes. The entire thing was utterly exhausting and had done nothing but exacerbate his headache, despite the Tylenol that TJ had given him.

At the end of all of it, he sat in a chair, his elbows propped on the edge of Rush's gurney, feeling utterly drained.

"Come on, genius," Young whispered. "Talk to me." He shut his eyes.

Rush said nothing.

At the other end of the infirmary, Park and Volker were hovering over Greer.

"I wonder why he's not talking," Jackson said from where he was perched, cross-legged, on the end of Rush's gurney.

Young didn't look at the AI.

"Clearly he *can* talk," Daniel said, "because he *did*."

Young felt someone's hand close around his shoulder and he jumped, the sudden shock to his nerves almost too much to handle. He looked up to see TJ standing over him.

She held out a small bottle. "TJ's patented headache cure," she said with a wan smile. "From where I'm standing, it doesn't look like the Tylenol is cutting it."

"Not really," Young said, scrubbing a hand across his tired eyes as he looked up at her for the span of a few seconds. "Why do you think he's not talking?" he asked her finally.

She didn't respond immediately. Instead, she turned to find the nearest chair and dragged it over next to him. She dropped down into it, looking as exhausted as Young felt. She leaned forward, one elbow resting on the mattress.

"I think there could be a lot of reasons," she murmured, looking at Rush, who looked back at her with a closed, unreadable expression. "A lot of reasons," she whispered.

"None of them good," Young said, pressing the heel of his hand against his forehead.

"No," TJ echoed, "None of them good."

They were quiet for a moment.

"Have you tried linking up with him?" She made a vague motion in the air.

"Very briefly," Young whispered. "When he first came through the gate."

"What happened?" TJ asked.

"It was completely uninterpretable," Young said. "And extremely painful. His mind is a train wreck."

Rush looked away abruptly.

Young frowned.

"Hmm," TJ said, her eyes narrowing briefly.

"I think he understood you," the AI said sharply, running a hand through its hair. "Don't underestimate him."

Young shot it a sharp look.

"Doc?" TJ said quietly.

Rush said nothing.

"Are you going to try again?" TJ asked after a moment, turning back to Young.

Young nodded. "Yeah, but—" he opened his hands. "I don't think he's going to respond very well unless I can get him to understand what's happening when I do it."

"Can you put him in the chair?" TJ asked. "Let the AI fix him?"

Young glanced over at the AI, who crossed its arms over its chest.

"Can you get rid of her?" It glanced in TJ's direction. "Or at least *talk* to *me*? This is very irritating. We have to determine how we're going to proceed."

"Apparently, that's not an option," Young said, trying not to look in its direction.

"Depending on how much of a mess his mind is, he could seriously screw up Destiny's systems."

"Ah," TJ said quietly. "Well, if you want him to *talk*, maybe you should ask Greer to help you out. Rush talked to *him*, right? On the planet?"



Young nodded.

"I'll send him over," TJ said, standing gracefully and heading in the direction of Greer's gurney.

"An associative array within an associative array," Jackson murmured, one hand curled into a fist under his chin. "That has to mean something. You asked him his name and his response was to one—state that you built an associative array within an associative array," Jackson said, counting off on his fingers, "two—state that he found that nonsensical, and three—stop talking entirely."

"At least *some* of his mental functioning must be intact," Young whispered, watching TJ retreat. "If he completely blew out his mind he wouldn't have been able to help Greer dial the gate. He wouldn't even *know* what an associative array *is*."

"Agreed," Daniel said, standing up to pace over the floor near the foot of Rush's gurney. "But why won't he communicate with us? Why won't he *engage*?"

"Come on genius," Young said quietly, both of his hands coming to rest over Rush's forearm. "Talk to us. *Talk*."

Rush looked at him.

"I know there's stuff going on up there," Young said quietly, "in that head of yours. So come *on*. Say something. *Anything*."

Rush said nothing.

The AI sighed, and looked over at Greer, who approached silently on bare feet and dropped into TJ's seat, looking utterly exhausted. He pulled the blanket that he was wrapped in tightly around his shoulders.

"Mathlete, Doc?" he said looking at Rush's shirt. "*Mathlete*? Seriously?"

"It was a present from TJ," Young said wryly.

"I figured that it was a 'present' from *someone*," Greer said, leaning sideways on one hand. He glanced back across the room and Young followed his gaze to see TJ talking with Volker and Park. "So, he's still not talking?"

Young shook his head.

"Rush," Greer said, reaching out to imperceptibly shove the gurney with one bare foot. "Come on. Don't be a jerk about this. You're driving everyone crazy."

Rush looked at Greer uncertainly.

"Where's your hash table when you need it, hmm?" Greer asked, still watching Rush.

"What?" Daniel hissed, whipping around to stare at Greer intently. "Did he just say *hash table*?"

"Hash table?" Young repeated, frowning at Greer. "What's a hash table?"

"The hell if I know," Greer said. "He was talking about it all the time," Greer said. "Like it was something that he was using, or working with, or could sense—I don't know."

"A hash table," Daniel whispered next to him, "Is a kind of *associative array*. And he was *talking* to it?"

"He was talking to his hash table?" Young said, his eyes locked on Rush.

"I think so," Greer said. "He was having an awful lot of one-sided conversations."

"Nick," the AI said, gliding forward in a movement that was too fast to be natural. "What did you *key* it to? Your hash table. What were *its keys*?"

Rush flinched.

"Easy, Doc," Greer said quietly. He cocked his head, looking speculatively at Rush. "You know we're all *real*, right?"

"He doesn't think we're *real*?" The AI said, looking at Young. "Could *that* be the problem?"

Rush's eyes flicked to Young and then back toward the AI.

"Doc," Greer whispered. "Do you remember the planet? Do you remember that we gated out?"

"Did we?" Rush's voice was barely audible. "I don't think so."

Slowly, very slowly, Greer sat forward. "You don't think we gated out? Why?" Greer whispered.

"Because," Rush whispered, looking intently at Greer. "This is *not* how Destiny is supposed to *be*. It's changed. We have to go."

"Doc," Greer said, his voice barely audible. "Have you considered that maybe *you're* the one who's changed? Not Destiny?"

Rush's glance flicked over to Young and the AI—uncertain and assessing.

"What are you looking at?" Greer asked.

"Nothing," Rush said. "No one."

Greer's gaze flicked briefly to Young before finding Rush again. "If you don't think we're on Destiny," Greer said, "then where do you think we are?"

"Clearly," Rush whispered, sitting forward abruptly, the heel of one hand coming to his temple, "*clearly*," he whispered again, his voice cracking, "we are being tortured."

"Rush," Greer said, his voice low and firm. "We're not being *tortured*. Look around. You're okay. You're fine."

"Greer," Rush said in a desperate whisper, one hand fisted around a chunk of hair at his temple, his closed fingers pressing against the side of his head, as if he could prevent his mind from cracking open. "This is absolute fucking *agony*, and if you don't feel it—then you're *not here*."

"Nick," Young said.

"You're not here either." Rush whispered.

"*Nick*," Young said again. "I am. We *all* are. I just haven't touched your mind yet, because—" Young trailed off, his open hands closing.

Rush said nothing.

"I can't give him access," the AI said, clearly miserable. "He could overload the CPU."

"I'll take down my block," Young said.

"He could tear your mind apart," The AI murmured, "before he realizes what's happening."

"I understand that," Young said, looking at Rush.

"He may even *attack* you," Jackson murmured urgently. "And I don't think you could stand up to that. You felt what he did to the *Nakai* with his mind and if he truly tears into you, I'm not sure that you're going to be able to block in time. You *can't* link up with him until he recognizes that you're not an enemy, or a construct, or anything that he should destroy—he has to recognize you for *what you are*."

"Fuck," Young hissed. "*Fuck*."

Rush flinched.

Greer looked at Young with a locked expression. "You talking to the AI?" he asked quietly.

"Yeah," Young said, biting back the word 'obviously' that threatened to follow.

"That may be why he thinks you're not real," Greer murmured, watching Rush carefully.

"Because I can't see the AI."

"Rush," Young said quietly. "Come on. *Talk* to me. I know it seems wrong that you can't feel my mind, and you can't feel Destiny, but we're trying to—we're doing this *for* you. We'll let you in. You just have to talk to us first."

Rush glared at him.

"Maybe not the best juxtaposition of ideas," Jackson said dryly, "if we're trying to convince him he's *not* being tortured for information."

Greer looked at him skeptically.

Young buried his head in his hands.

"You want my advice?" Greer murmured. "Get him out of here. Have TJ give him something for his headache and unhook him from all this garbage," Greer waved a hand at the monitors. "This isn't helping your case. Just—take him somewhere and let him calm the hell down, because he's clearly getting more and more worked up."

Young looked over at Rush, who now had both hands pressed to his temples, his knees drawn up beneath him.

"Yeah," Young said. "You're probably right."

Half an hour later found them sitting in Young's dimly lit quarters, side by side on the couch. Rush was still curled into himself, his elbows on his knees, his face in his hands, his breathing rapid and shallow.

"You okay?" Young murmured.

Rush said nothing.

"TJ must really like you," Young whispered. "Making house-calls once an hour."

Rush said nothing.

Young reached over and laid a hand on Rush's back, pressing his thumb into the tense muscles on either side of his spine.

Rush flinched almost imperceptibly but after a few minutes he began to relax under the even, predictable pressure of Young's hands.

"Tired, genius?" Young murmured.

Rush said nothing.

Young locked eyes with Jackson, who was sitting on the edge of the low table near his couch.

"Yeah," Young said, pulling Rush sideways in one smooth, controlled motion. "Stupid question. Of course you're tired." He gave the scientist a few seconds to adjust to lying in his lap before he ran his fingers through Rush's hair, carefully combing through the strands and then pressing his thumb gently against Rush's temple. "Headache?" he asked.

No response.

"Specify," the AI said quietly.

"You might as well talk to me," Young said, tracing small circles at Rush's temple with his thumb. "There's no one else here. So," he paused for a minute, looking down at Rush. "Do you have a headache right now, Nick?"

"Yes," Rush whispered.

"Yeah, me too," Young said quietly, trying to put a lid on his sense of triumph.

It was hard to prevent himself from asking Rush questions, hard to stop himself from trying to assess the full extent of the damage to the other man's mind.

He took a deep breath and did his best to let go of his impatience.

"So, I don't think I told you this," Young said, searching around for some stray piece of information to pass on to Rush as he tried to keep his tone conversational. "But apparently the SGC has been holding on to a few letters from my family. Last time Wray used the stones, she memorized one and wrote it out for me." He continued running his fingers through Rush's hair. "You want to hear it?"

Rush nodded fractionally.

"Okay." Young used his free hand to reach into his jacket pocket and found the folded paper covered with Wray's elegant script. "It's from JD," Young said. "My brother."

"Scio," Rush whispered.

"Oh you do, do you?" Young murmured, his thumb still tracing rhythmic circles at Rush's temple.

He unfolded the paper one handed.

*Hey V,*

"That's what they call me. It's stupid, I know," Young said. "But I didn't make it up."

*I'm not sure if this letter is going to reach you at all, let alone around Christmas, but that's when I'm writing it. We've all gone the email route—I think at some point earlier Mom assembled a montage of greetings and keyboard smashes from the nephews, but I*

*figured that I'd give the old fashioned way a try too—not sure if you're going to have email access. I kind of assume that if you had it on a regular basis we'd hear from you more often. Plus, it's always nice to get real mail anyway, especially around the holidays.*

*Luke and Jenny are coming up tomorrow. Hopefully you know by now that Jenny is expecting her first.*

*"I didn't know that, actually," Young said, looking down at Rush. "I blame you for this, genius. I never get to use the stones anymore."*

*I think Mom is secretly praying it's a girl. The five boys are tearing through the house and leaving disaster wherever they go. Fortunately it's snowing at the moment and so Justin (can you believe he's almost eleven?) has organized a snowball fight and fort-building expedition outside. Hopefully that will tire them out and Mom can get some peace, at least for a few hours.*

*We miss you, V. Three brothers do not make for even games of hockey, soccer, or snow-football and, as you know, Dad refuses to play with us ever since Luke dislocated his shoulder. We roughhouse around with the older kids, but Luke and Erik are secretly gunning for a vicious game of two-on-two tackle football.*

*"Yeah," Young murmured. "I'll just bet they are,"*

*Wherever you are, I hope you're doing okay. It's been over two years, V. Not even a phone call in all that time? Just a few emails here and there? Everyone is worried about you. How about skype-ing next time you get internet access?*

*"I feel like that would be awkward," Young said wryly, looking down at Rush. "Lots of questions, you know?"*

*But, I don't mean to guilt trip you. I'll leave that to Mom. I'll just say that we're thinking of you, and not to worry—we're telling the baby nephews all about their badass special forces uncle so when you show up next year, they won't be traumatized. At this point, I think Matthew is confused about whether you're even real or not—Luke and Erik have talked you up so much.*

*Young rolled his eyes.*

*Anyway, that's it for now, except to say that tonight you are going to be missing Mom's signature ham and cheese potatoes, but you aren't the only one. Apparently Colin (now eight, wtf?) has decided he is going to become a vegetarian. Where the hell did that one come from? Don't ask me.*

Stay

safe,

JD

Young sighed, and folded up the letter, placing it back inside his jacket.

"You would like JD," Young said. "I think. More than the other two." He smiled faintly.

"Maybe more than you like *me*, actually."

"Unlikely," Rush whispered.

Young raised his eyebrows, but Rush didn't say anything else.

"Take it easy on the flattery there, genius," Young whispered. "You don't want to go overboard."

Rush said nothing.

"Anyway," Young said. "JD is the smartest out of the four of us. I think. Actually, maybe not anymore, now that I have all of this borrowed set theory and linear algebra and combinatorics in my brain. Maybe I can finally win a damn game of trivial pursuit."

Rush said nothing.

"I'm not sure how much they would like *you* though, genius. You'd have to be *nice* to them. But then, not *too* nice, because when you try to fake it, you actually do a really shitty, unconvincing job that fools no one. So. Yeah, just be a jerk, but then help the nephews with their math homework, and everything will work out."

Rush said nothing.

"Yup," Young said, "that's the plan."

Young looked up at the AI as it flickered briefly and then stabilized again.

"So what do you think, Nick," Young whispered, "you going to let me into your head?"

Rush said nothing.

"Come on," Young said quietly, "let me in to. Everything's going to start to make a lot more sense."

Rush said nothing.

"I don't think he always understands you," the AI said quietly. "Try rephrasing as a conditional construct."

"A *what*?" Young mouthed at it.

"An if-then statement," Daniel replied.

"Nick," Young said, "*if* you let me into your head, *then* your environment is going to be more interpretable."

Rush flinched.

"Just a suggestion," Young murmured. "But come on. I know you have one *hell* of a headache, and you're kind of unclear about what's going on, but you have to admit that even so, this isn't really your typical torture session." He rubbed his thumb against Rush's temple in slow circles. "Am I right?"

Rush said nothing.

"Yup," Young said. "I'm right."

Rush said nothing.

"What do you say," Young murmured, "if I take down my block, then you'll let me into your head?"

"True," Rush murmured.

"I'm going to take that as a yes," Young whispered.

"Careful," Jackson said edgily. "It's still not entirely clear as to whether he understands you or not."

"Okay, Nick," he said, pausing as he incrementally thinned the barrier between their minds. "You just let me know if you're going to freak out. Got it?"

Rush looked back at him, uncertainty and apprehension evident in his gaze.

Young dialed the block back to the point where he could distantly feel the chaotic, swirling mess of thoughts that made up Rush's consciousness. Through the thinning barrier, he projected a nonverbal wave of reassurance as the edges of their minds began to blend together.

Rush tensed.

"You're fine," Young murmured, wincing as his headache ratcheted up. He frowned as the pitch and agitation of Rush's thoughts increased. "You're fine."

Rush twisted his head to fix Young with the full intensity of his gaze.

"Yeah," Young said, gently. "Hi. It's me."

"Hello," Rush whispered back after a moment.



Young wrapped his fingers around the back of Rush's neck. //Do you understand what's happening, genius?// He projected carefully into the edges of Rush's consciousness, where their thoughts blended together.

"No," Rush said, his eyebrows coming together. "No, I—" he broke off, trying to sit.

Young didn't press him back, but didn't help him, either. After a brief attempt, Rush abandoned the effort.

"Why?" Rush whispered, with a distressed perplexity that made it difficult to look at him.

"You're blocking—you're *both*—"

"Because, genius," Young said. "We didn't want to scare the hell out of you. We're going to take them down," Young murmured. "The blocks. They're *all* going to come down. But slowly."

"Tell him that I'm going to let him back onto the CPU," Jackson said quietly. "I put two percent of it behind a firewall for him. We can see how he does."

Young looked at it uncertainly.

"I'm not projecting to him right now," Jackson seemed to understand the question behind Young's gaze. "I was clearly confusing him."

"Nick," Young said. "Destiny's going to let you back in. Back on the CPU. But just a little bit. Okay?"

Rush nodded.

"Just—don't panic," Young said, as Rush flinched again.

At the limited edge where their thoughts intermingled, Young felt the chaotic swirl increase in intensity until—

It stopped.

"Shit," Young said, looking at the AI as Rush's eyes lost their focus.

"It's all right," Jackson said quietly. "I think."

"You *think*?" Young snapped, shaking the other man gently. "Rush," he said. "*Rush*."

No response.

"Give him a minute to adjust," Jackson said. "I don't think he has the ability to adapt to additional capacity without re-bootstrapping everything that remains of his mind."

"What?" Young asked.

Jackson just shot him an irritated look. "He'll be all right. Just don't *shake* him."

After a few more seconds, Rush took a deep breath and fixed his gaze on Young.

"Hey," Young said. "Better?"

"I don't know," Rush whispered back.

"Yeah," Young said, his vision blurring from the pain in his head. "Definitely better. Trust me on this one."

"Better than *what*?" Rush murmured, pressing both hands to his temples.

"Tell me your full name," Young whispered.

"Nicholas Rush."

"Do you know where you are?"

"Destiny," Rush murmured.

His sense of relief was so intense that he couldn't even look at Rush. He just shut his eyes, and thinned down the barrier between their minds by another increment, feeling his headache increase. He watched Rush attempt to exert some kind of control over turbulent, tangled thoughts. Watched him try to follow a linear thought through to its conclusion.

"You never really did it that way, genius," Young murmured. "You just had the space to let it all run in parallel."

"Insufficient capacity," Rush whispered.

"Yeah," Young said quietly. "But we can fix that. Slowly."

"Fuck slowly," Rush echoed in clear irritation.

"Mmm hmm," Young whispered. "Slowly."

"What happened to *you*?" Rush asked in a cracked whisper. "You look terrible."

"I'll tell you later," Young said. "I think you should go to sleep."

Rush shook his head.

"You're a lot of work," Young whispered.

Rush gave him a faint smile.

"Oh what," Young said, "I suppose you think that's *funny*?"

Rush gave him a fractional shrug and for a brief second his smile straightened out before he turned his head away and gained control of his expression.

"I missed you," Rush said without looking at him.

"Yeah," Young replied with some difficulty. "Likewise."

## Chapter Sixty Three

Young lay trapped in bedsheets, watching the blur of the stars at FTL outside the window of his quarters.

Rush was finally sleeping, mostly on top of him, his head heavy against Young's chest.

Young had his arms wrapped around the other man. Beneath his hands, he could feel the flutter of Rush's heart.

Too fast.

Way too fast.

In his pocket, his cell phone vibrated.

He managed to free a hand and switch it off without waking the scientist.

Carefully he dialed down the block that was still in place between his mind and Rush's by another increment and grimaced as he felt the pain in his head ratchet up another notch.

Rush jerked in his arms, coming awake for something like the eighth time in as many hours.

"Shhh," Young whispered into his hair. He ran a hand over the scientist's back and looked up at the shadowy outline of the AI. It stepped out of the darkness, its face illuminated in the blurring starlight.

"What do you think?" Jackson asked quietly. "Five percent?"

"Five?" Young murmured, frowning. "That seems like a bit much."

Jackson sighed. "Maybe. But he's only accessing twenty-six percent of the CPU right now. He needs to be up to forty to function optimally. At least forty."

"Forty?" Young growled. "Since when?"

"Just fucking do it," Rush said indistinctly into his shoulder, "whatever it is that you're fucking doing."

"Four percent," Young said, giving the AI a warning look.

Daniel nodded and disappeared.

Rush jerked once and then all the tension went out of him.

"Easy," Young murmured unnecessarily. His eyes watered at the sudden vicious spike in his headache.

Even though the scientist was barely conscious, Young could feel the agonized swirl of Rush's thoughts still with the shock of the additional capacity.

After only about half a minute, the flare and spiral of Rush's thoughts reengaged.

The scientist made a distressed sound in the back of his throat, and he felt Rush's fingers close on his shirt, his hands clenching in the loose material.

"I know," Young whispered, reaching up to run one hand through Rush's hair. "Just try to sleep through it, genius. Hmm? That's gonna be the best way."

"There's too much of it," Rush murmured.

"I know," Young said. "But there's nothing you have to do. There's nowhere you have to be. Don't try to control the mess in your head. Just—let it go."

"If I can't control this—" Rush said, breaking off and trying to sit, "if I can't control this then *you are fucked*. I told Eli—"

"Shh," Young said again. "No sitting."

He projected as much calm as he could muster in Rush's direction.

"No panicking."

He pulled Rush back down.

"Don't make me drug you," he murmured, his lips against Rush's temple. "You know I'll do it."

Rush said something unintelligible.

"What was that?" Young asked.

"I *never* panic," Rush murmured.

"Ah," Young said, pulling him in, "my mistake."

"Don't fucking patronize me," Rush said, managing to wrap one arm beneath Young's shoulder.

"There's just no way to win with you, is there?"

Rush shook his head fractionally and Young winced at the spike in his headache. "Stop lowering your block," Rush murmured.

"I don't think so, genius. I'm going to need to do some repair work in that head of yours."

Rush said nothing.

"If that's okay with you," Young murmured, a bit belatedly.

"Stay out of there," Rush whispered.

"Or, yeah. We can talk about it later," Young said, rubbing his hand over Rush's back.

"Fuck off," Rush replied miserably, the speed of his thoughts wavering as he struggled to stay awake.

"Stop talking and go to *sleep*," Young growled in his ear.

Rush sighed. "Wake me in half an hour," he said.

"Sure," Young replied, rolling his eyes. "No problem."

He winced again at the brief spike in his headache as Rush lost control of his consciousness and fell asleep.

The AI faded in from the darkness and came to sit on the foot of the bed.

"How is he?" Jackson whispered.

"Better," Young murmured quietly. "Maybe. Completely exhausted."

"Yes," Daniel whispered. "I know. How much have you lowered the block between your minds?"

"You can't tell?" Young asked.

"I'm still not interfacing with him," the AI whispered. "He's on the CPU, but separated from me by a firewall."

"You're that worried about his mind?"

"Yes," the AI whispered.

"I admit," Young said, "that it's more of a mess in there than usual, but is he really *dangerous*? To *you*?"

The AI looked away, uncomfortable. "It's a complicated question," it said finally. "I'm not sure I can adequately explain the answer."

"Look," Young said, trying to keep his exhaustion out of his voice. "I'm not as colossally stupid as you two seem to think. In fact, I'd wager that out of the three of us, I have the clearest picture of what the hell is *actually* going on. And I'm just—really fucking tired of this *shit*."

"I didn't mean to suggest you were incapable of understanding," the AI said, its hands raised, palms outward. "I simply stated that I am not sure I can adequately explain.

You are missing a great deal of the information required to fully contextualize my answer."

"Well, try explaining *anyway*."

"For one thing," the AI said quietly, "over the course of time, I have altered the architecture of our interface to create certain vulnerabilities in my own programming."

"Meaning what?" Young asked.

"Meaning that I've ceded him the requisite privileges to overwrite my code."

"Does he know that?" Young whispered.

"No," the AI whispered.

"Furthermore," the AI said, coming to perch on the edge of the bed, "he himself has changed. You see only the decline in his physical function and the slow decoherence of his cognitive architecture. And certainly," the AI whispered, "these changes *are* killing him."

Young said nothing, just continued to slowly run his hand up and down Rush's back.

"But he has *gained* abilities as well," the AI said.

"What *kind* of abilities?" Young asked.

"He has mastered the intra-conversion of matter and energy. He can heal physical injuries. He can power devices. He can alter programming code without a physical interface."

"I find none of this surprising," Young said.

The AI looked out at the blurring stars.

"This means," it said quietly, "that in a moment of panic, he could easily destroy your mind. Or my source code. Or, if he wanted to, the entire ship."

"You or me?" Young said calmly, "Yeah. That I could see. But the entire ship? Don't you think you're overreacting?"

"Do you understand the implication of energy-mass equivalence?" The AI whispered.

"It means he can ascend," Young whispered back.

"It does *not* mean that," The AI said, flickering. "It is required for ascension, but it is not sufficient."

"Okay," Young said, absently shattering a nascent nightmare that was beginning to disrupt the flow of Rush's thoughts. "I'll bite. What *does* it mean?"

"It means he can convert his physical mass into pure energy," the AI said quietly. "The amount of energy present in his corporeal form is enough to utterly annihilate this ship. Several times over. If he panics, if he believes he has no other recourse, if he is not *always* oriented, then there is a significant risk that this could occur."

"As in—he converts his matter to energy," Young said. "All at once. Like a bomb."

"Essentially," the AI murmured.

"Great," Young said quietly. "What do you think the odds of *that* happening are?"

The AI shrugged. "Frankly, I'm surprised that he has not already attempted it."

Young brought a hand up to his forehead.

"Yeah," Young said. "Me too. Someone needs to give Greer a god damned medal."

"Furthermore," the AI continued, "I am no longer capable of limiting his actions within the confines of Destiny's systems. If he wanted to, he could dismantle the firewall that is keeping him out of the CPU at the moment. I'm not sure if he has realized this yet or not."

Young sighed, looking down at Rush.

"God, you're a lot of work," Young murmured.

For several minutes they said nothing. Finally the AI shifted, and Young looked up.

"You told him," the AI began, "that you know what happens when he sits in the chair. That he and I—" it broke off, flickering. "That we merge."

"You want to have this conversation *now*?" Young asked.

"Yes," the AI said.

"I'm not sure / do," Young murmured.

"What are we like?" The AI murmured.

"You're like him," Young whispered. "Almost exactly like him. More and more every time."

"Good," the AI looked away. "That's good."

"You want to make him your new template," Young said.

"No," the AI said, flickering.

"*What* then?" Young asked, feeling defeated. "What are your *plans*?"

"My plans are to complete Destiny's mission,"



"I told you," Young said hopelessly. "You can't tear through. It's not going to fly. You're going to be *stopped*. Are you capable of grasping that?"

"Yes," the AI said, shooting him a sharp look. "I am fully capable of grasping that. There are, however, secondary mission objectives," the AI murmured, flickering. "Some more recent than others. Many that you likely even approve of."

"You going to tell me what they are?" Young asked, raising his eyebrows.

"Yes," the AI said quietly, "if you would like to know."

"Why the sudden change of heart?" Young asked.

"Because," the AI said quietly. "It is no longer possible to convince him to side with you against me," the AI whispered.

"And what makes you so sure about that?" Young asked.

"Because," Daniel said, smiling faintly. "We are no longer opposed."

"We aren't?" Young murmured.

"No," the AI said.

"Are you *sure* about that, kiddo?" Young said.

"No," the AI said, again smiling Daniel's faint smile.

"Whatever," Young said. "Let's have it then. Your mission was what, *exactly*?"

"The primary objective was to tear through the multiverse. To observe all possible outcomes simultaneously and to then to find a quantum branch point at which probabilities could be altered by outside intervention. To ensure the continuation of our civilization."

"So you wanted to alter the *timeline*?" Young said trying to muster the energy to be angry, but failing. "That seems—risky. And—ethically dubious. What about all the races that developed in your absence? The Asgard? The Go'auld? Us?"

Daniel gave him a disdainful look. "Destiny was not built to *destroy*," he said, sounding affronted. "But to *create*. The multiverse is an infinitely branching structure in which entirely new universes break out into nothingness where probability dictates that they may. All things are not possible, but all things that are possible *are*. They exist. And in passing through the branes of the multiverse, one can see them all simultaneously."

"Um," Young said. "That's great. But it means—what?"

"It means that we would be able to determine whether there are universes in which our civilization did not fall," Daniel whispered, his voice pained. "And if there are not, we

would be able, by virtue of tearing through to create a possibility where none existed before. A zero becomes a non-zero. We would not obviate this universe, but instead we would create another—possibly *several* others in which there was no plague. In which there were no wraith. So that, somewhere in the fabric of existence, we might continue. We would still die here," Daniel whispered, "but we would not die *everywhere*."

Young sighed. "Okay," Young said, wishing that they were having this conversation in some other venue and at some other time. "So in practical terms, for us, nothing would change. But there would be a new universe in which your civilization didn't fall?"

"Yes," Daniel said.

"But what was *he* supposed to get out of this?" Young whispered. "A universe in which Gloria didn't die?"

"No," the AI whispered, looking away. "The fall of a civilization is a complex process, able to be influenced at nearly an infinite number of points. The death of one woman from a disease encoded in her genome is a much more discrete event. Much more difficult to influence."

"What then?" Young whispered.

"A universe in which he didn't leave her to die alone."

Young shut his eyes. They were silent for a moment.

"Okay. Well none of that is happening," Young said finally. "So what now?"

"Originally there was only one secondary mission objective," Daniel said, looking away.

"It was to transmit information about the nature of the multiverse back for analysis."

"There's no one to transmit to," Young said gently.

"The information will be transmitted back to Earth through an open wormhole."

"Okay," Young murmured.

"This was a point he insisted on," the AI said.

"What else?" Young demanded, his voice nearly inaudible. "What are the other secondary objectives?"

"The crew is to be gated back to Earth," the AI whispered. "This was one of his terms. In the absence of this, he would not complete the mission. He would not cooperate with me."

"I already knew that one. What else?"

"That we work out a way to channel the power liberated from tearing through the multiverse through Destiny's memory banks and thereby tether the neural patterns of Dr. Franklin, Mandy, and Ginn to pure energy, effectively ascending them. Following which, they would presumably be able to retake corporeal form, should they so choose."

"I knew that one too," Young said.

The AI shot him a sharp look.

"What else?" Young murmured.

"That was all. Later, he added a third term."

"Which was?" Young said.

"That he would not accept any outcome that brought about your death."

"Well," Young said wryly, "that was nice of him."

The AI flickered.

"Perhaps," it replied.

Young rolled his eyes, deciding he did not have the energy to pursue *that* cryptic little comment.

"And you got what out of this?"

"Everything that I thought was required," the AI said, looking away.

"Mmm," Young said, running his fingers through Rush's hair. "Not working out like you wanted?"

"No." The AI flickered.

"I know how you feel," Young said quietly.

"You should sleep," the AI said. "It will help both of you."

"The last time we both went to sleep at the same time his mind combined with *you*, and it was traumatic as *hell*."

"There is no chance of that happening," the AI said quietly. "The CPU is partitioned and I am separated from him by a firewall."

"All right," Young replied. "How long should we give him?" Young asked. "He said half an hour, but—"

"That is clearly too brief an interval," The AI murmured.

"Two hours," Young said quietly, pulling out his cell phone to set the timer.

The AI nodded and flickered into nothingness.

The door to his quarters slid open, startling Young out of a fitful sleep.

"Just me," TJ whispered, backlit by the lights in the hallway.

She hesitated for several seconds then came forward slowly, navigating his quarters in darkness to kneel next to Young's bed.

"How are we doing?" she murmured, lifting her medical bag off her shoulders.

"We've been better," Young said, blinking at her through the dim light.

"I know," TJ whispered. "You're both on mandatory medical leave for the next thirty-six hours. At least."

"TJ," Young murmured. "I can't. Telford is—"

"Telford is currently taking orders from Matt," TJ murmured. "And actively covering for you, at least for the moment. Camile is keeping a close eye on him. She's suspended all communications through the stones for the time being."

"I need to—"

"You need to be right here," TJ murmured. "We're at FTL and, for now, we've got no emergent issues."

Young nodded.

"How's the headache?" TJ murmured.

"Unbelievable," Young said.

"That bad?" TJ whispered sympathetically. "I could give you something stronger. It would probably really put you out though."

Young shook his head and looked down at Rush. "I need to stay more or less awake. I need to be able to snap him out if he has a flashback or a nightmare, or—whatever. He can't handle that right now. Plus," Young said as he silenced his vibrating phone, "the AI is letting him back into Destiny's CPU a little at a time, and it wakes him up. You'll see."

"Ready?" Daniel asked quietly, melting out of the blackness near the wall.

Young nodded subtly.

Rush jerked once and the pain in Young's head spiked simultaneously.

TJ flinched back, startled.

This time the lag was less than fifteen seconds before Rush recovered enough to move, his hands clenching and unclenching several times in the material of Young's shirt.

Young said nothing, running a hand slowly over Rush's back. He lowered his block another fraction, projecting a sense of exhaustion and reassurance into the pained swirl of the scientist's thoughts.

"Is he okay?" TJ murmured, two fingers finding Rush's carotid pulse.

"I have no idea," Young said quietly.

Both he and TJ jumped as Rush's left hand snapped up and closed around TJ's wrist.

"Tamara," Rush said, uncertainly.

"Yeah," TJ whispered. "Yeah, it's me. Sorry I didn't say hi."

"It's all right," Rush said, letting her go.

Young and TJ locked eyes in the dim light.

"Okay," TJ said her voice full of a confidence that didn't make it to her eyes, "now that we've got that established, you know the drill."

TJ made short work of taking Rush's vitals and then repacked her medical bag, fishing out some Tylenol and a bottle of electrolytes in the process.

"His pressure is low and his heart rate is high," she said quietly, "so make sure he drinks this."

Young nodded at her.

"I'll be back in three hours," TJ murmured. "If he hasn't finished off this entire thing by then, he's getting an IV."

"I feel like that would not be ideal," Young said quietly.

TJ said nothing, just gave him a pointed look and gently shook the bottle of electrolytes.

"Yeah," Young said. "Okay. Got it."

"Bye, Doc," TJ murmured.

Rush said something back that sounded like it could be the word 'bye,' but was mostly likely an Ancient equivalent.

TJ's hand tightened on Young's shoulder as she stood. She looked down at them for a few seconds as she settled her medical bag over her shoulders. Without saying anything further she turned and walked toward the door.

Young watched her until it had hissed shut behind her.

"Hey," Young murmured. "Nick. How awake are you?"

"You can't tell?" Rush replied, the words almost unintelligible.

"Not really, no. I'm trying not to mess with your head too much right now."

"Mmm," Rush said. "Thanks."

"You want to sit up and drink this and talk to me?"

"No."

"Yes you do."

"No, actually, I fair fuckin' *don't*."

"I'm pretty sure you do," Young said, smiling faintly.

"And why is it I never win these arguments?" Rush asked, still not moving.

"Because I'm very persistent. Plus, you have to let me win *occasionally*," Young said, disentangling himself from Rush and slowly pulling the scientist up until they were leaning side by side against the wall at the head of the bed. "Otherwise," Young said, "it wouldn't be fair."

He reached over and grabbed the bottle TJ had left. He opened it before passing it over to Rush.

"How do you feel?" Young asked.

"Terrible," Rush said, his eyes shut.

"You know where you are and who you are and all that?" Young asked quietly.

"Nominally," Rush said, grimacing as he downed a mouthful of the electrolyte solution.

"Nominally," Young echoed.

"He won't explain for you," Jackson murmured from the darkness. "You'll have to ask him to specify."

Young flinched, startled at the AI's sudden reappearance.

Rush looked over at him, his eyes narrowing.

"What are you looking at?" Rush asked. Something in the calm manner of his delivery was disquieting.

Young hesitated.

Rush's eyes narrowed a fraction.

"The AI," Young said. "It's projecting to me, For now. While you're—getting better."

Behind his partially-lowered barrier, he could feel the turbulent swirl of Rush's thoughts increase, and he winced at the corresponding pain in his head.

"Nick," Young said, projecting nothing but calm at the other man. "Cut it out. Everything is fine."

"Is Chloe *dead*?" Rush snapped abruptly.

"Jesus," Young said. "No. *No*. She's fine. Matt is fine. Everyone is *fine*."

Rush shoved the water bottle back in his direction and sat forward, his head in his hands. "I've got to do something about this," he said. "This is intolerable."

"Wait," Young said urgently. "*Wait*. Don't do *anything*. Not yet."

"Not *yet*? This is *interminable*. How long have I fucking *been* like this?"

Young looked at the AI.

"He literally doesn't know," Jackson whispered. "Even before this—his sense of time was practically nonexistent."

"Not very long," Young said quietly, placing one hand in between Rush's shoulder blades. "Just trust me on this one, okay? You don't have to do anything right now, genius. Except drink your salt water and go back to sleep. That's all."

Rush said nothing.

"Come on," Young said. "You can feel my mind. You know it's me. We'll get you hooked back up with the AI as soon as you're all the way back on the CPU and a little more stable."

Rush took another swallow of water. "I talked to you on the planet," he murmured. "But you weren't really there."

Young leaned forward. "I'm here now, though," he whispered. "You can feel my mind. You can touch me."

Rush nodded.

"Everything's going to work out," Young whispered.

Rush nodded.

"Come on," Young said, pulling him back down. "Let's go to sleep."

Young awoke hours later with a start to find himself alone in his bed.

The predictable wave of panic he felt was blunted by exhaustion.

He brought his hands up to his face, trying to massage away the persistent ache in his temples.

"Shit," he whispered.

"It's all right," Jackson said quietly from where he was leaning against the wall. "He's fine. I would have woken you if he wasn't."

"Yes," Young snapped. "Because your track record is *so excellent* in that regard."

"What?" Rush asked.

Young looked over and saw that he was seated near the window, his back to the bulkhead.

"Nothing," Young said. "Just the AI again. I had *no idea* how much it fucking talks."

Rush said nothing.

"How are you doing?" Young asked cautiously.

"Fine," Rush said testily. "Why isn't it projecting to *me*?"

"It was," Young said, pushing himself into a sitting position. "But, ah," he scrubbed a hand through his hair. "Something about that seemed to confuse you."

"He's all the way back on the CPU," the AI said quietly. "He has been for about two hours."

Young glared at it, and then looked at Rush, who was watching him with narrowed eyes.

He held up both hands, palms open and tried to remember what the hell conversation he was supposed to be having.

"The AI," Young said. "Is worried about you. It's just giving you a chance to sort of sort yourself out for a little while, you know?"

"You don't have to *parse it out* for me," Rush hissed. "Or fucking *simplify* things. I understand what it is supposedly so afraid of, given that it exists at all, certainly better than *you* do. I exist in a fucking milieu of nearly infinite complexity which makes it



categorically impossible to determine whether the system in which I find myself at any given time is *closed* or *open*, which," he continued, working himself up more and more by the second, "becomes a *fucking* salient *fucking* point when I am trying to logically or heuristically or algorithmically determine *what to do* in any given time interval. Coupled with the fact that all my data access is random and I cannot force it to be serial unless I really fucking make it serial which is not useful because do you know how long my fucking memory stretches it would take me goddamn *hours* to run any search query and your fucking inane statements that are totally devoid of any informational content are just *adding to the problem*."

"Just," Young said, swinging his legs over the side of the bed, holding up both hands, finding himself entirely unable to deal with any aspect of the situation was being presented with, "take it easy."

Rush looked at him with a locked expression.

Young felt his headache recede slightly as Rush's thoughts pulled away from his own.

"Careful," the AI murmured, crouching inches from Rush. "I'm not sure how much he trusts you—we've been modifying his mind for hours but he's still not integrated with the ship. He's only in partial contact with *your* mind. From his perspective, this doesn't look good."

"Nick," Young said, pitching his voice low, his hands still open in front of him. "What are you *doing*?"

"Why are you *interested*?" Rush replied, his voice barely audible, his eyes dark.

"Be very cautious," Daniel said, his voice low, "about what you say next."

Young swallowed. "I was just—" he said, forcing his voice into a casual cadence despite the way his heart hammered in his chest. "I was just wondering if you were busy. Because, if not, I thought maybe we could get out of here for a while."

The set of Rush's shoulders relaxed marginally, and the pressure of his thoughts against Young's partially lowered block returned.

Young winced at the spike of pain that shot through his temples.

"And do what?" Rush asked, sounding lost.

"Whatever," Young said.

"This isn't sustainable," Rush whispered.

"I know," Young replied. "But it doesn't have to be. You're gonna do some stuff with your new forty percent of the CPU, and then after a little while the AI is going to let you

back into the ship and I'm going to lower my block all the way, and once we get that done, I'm thinking you're going to stop having these times where you're not really sure if all this is real or not. That's the plan."

Rush looked away, his expression pained.

"What time is it?" Young asked.

"You think I have any idea?" Rush whispered. "That's unreasonably optimistic of you."

Young fished around in his pocket for his cellphone and looked at the display. "Four hundred hours," he said quietly. "Hardly anyone is going to be up and around. Let's go."

"Go where?" Rush asked.

"Do normal human things. Shower. Shave. Find you a shirt that doesn't say 'mathlete.' Get breakfast."

"All right," Rush said quietly.

"How are your feet? Young asked. "You okay to walk a little bit?"

"They're fine," Rush said, looking down at his hands.

"Good," Young said, pushing himself up, and dragging both pairs of boots out from beneath the bed. He made short work of putting his on and then tried not to watch as Rush followed suit more slowly.

When the scientist was ready, Young closed a hand around his arm and carefully pulled him up.

"I'll be around," Jackson murmured, watching them carefully, "if you need me."

Young's eyes flicked toward it, but by the time he looked, it was gone.

Rush got his feet firmly beneath him, but did not step out of Young's grip.

After a moment of hesitation, Young pulled Rush's arm over his shoulders and they left his quarters.

Eight hours later, Young sat on the low table in his quarters, his laptop open in front of him. Next to him, Rush was again asleep, this time on the couch.

"The chair would be safer," the AI said quietly. "For you. It would isolate his mind."

"We are *not* using the chair. I am *not* pulling you two apart after all this shit."

The AI looked away.

"I think we should do it right now," it said finally.

"You're sure about this?" he whispered. "You're sure it's not going to just wake him up and scare the *hell* out of him?"

"I think," Jackson said quietly, "that even if we explained it to him in excruciating detail, he would still crash and reset along with the CPU, at which point he would lose any understanding he had of what was happening. Furthermore," the AI continued, "speaking from experience, crashing and or resetting is a very alarming sensation and it is possible that if he were awake, he might be able to *prevent* the crash and subsequent restart, which would leave him both panicked and in control of *all* of Destiny's systems."

"Okay," Young replied. "Give me a minute."

He got to his feet and turned, walking out into the hallway. Once the door had hissed shut, he unclipped his radio.

"Eli," he said, broadcasting on the channel assigned to the science team.

"Hey," Eli responded, his voice clearly relieved beneath the hiss of the radio. "How's it going?"

"I wanted to let you know," Young said, "that the CPU's going to restart, probably sometime in the next five minutes."

"It will drop them out of FTL," Jackson said, scaring the *hell* out of Young as he emerged through a metal bulkhead immediately next to him.

"Don't *do* that," Young hissed.

Jackson shrugged.

"Um, *restart*?" Eli said, drawing out the words. "And you know this how?"

"How do you *think*?" Young asked pointedly.

"Yeah, okay. Good point. So—should we just drop out of FTL now then?"

"No," Young said, watching the AI shake its head.

"Tell him not to override anything," the AI murmured.

"Look, don't worry about it, just—don't override anything."

There was a long pause.

"If you know the CPU is going to restart, I think we should drop out of FTL *now*," Eli said.

"That will definitely wake him up," the AI said, "and it's not necessary. There are protocols in place."

"That's a negative," Young said shortly into the radio. "Young out."

He spun and hit the door controls, looking over at the AI. "We'd better do this before he decides to drop the ship out *anyway*."

"He's already trying," the AI said, smiling faintly, "and failing to create a workaround for my lockout."

"I wouldn't count him out," Young said mildly.

"He is extremely intelligent," the AI said. "But he is not Nick."

"Thank god," Young said grimly.

"Agreed," the AI replied.

They walked back into the room together.

Young sat down again on the low table and quietly shut his laptop.

"At the moment I take down the firewall," Jackson whispered, "you'll need to block him out."

"I don't think so," Young said mildly.

"It's required," the AI said. "Otherwise, your mind could be damaged. Further."

Young looked at it steadily for a moment.

"Let me make one thing *absolutely clear*," he said, leaning forward. "If I find out that you are *manipulating me*, we are fucking *done*. Do you understand that?"

The AI looked back at him, its expression calm and unreadable. "I do." It paused, then added, "Your mind is already injured, and even though he doesn't mean to, he's appropriating some of your capacity. He can't help it. He doesn't even realize he's doing it."

Young looked at it, hesitating.

"It's one of the main reasons why you're experiencing so much pain," the AI continued. "It leaves you unacceptably open to Destiny when I reintegrate with him. When we do this, he will instinctively retreat from the reintegration and when he does that, he will pull Destiny into your mind. Much as he did on the shuttle. You must not allow him that option."

Young sighed in frustration.

"If you wish to do this without the use of the chair," the AI said, "then, when I tell you, you *must* block."

"Fine," Young said, finally defeated.

He looked down at Rush.

The other man was still sleeping, his head resting on one arm. "Sorry about this, genius," he whispered. "It just doesn't seem fair, somehow."

"Ready?" The AI asked.

Young nodded, locking eyes with it.

It looked back at him, its expression intent. It held up three fingers.

Two.

One.

"Now," it said, flickering.

Young blocked.

The AI vanished.

Rush jerked and then twisted on the couch to press his hand down to the deck plating.

The lights cut out and the ship dropped from FTL.

The hiss of the air recirculators shut off.

"Rush?" Young whispered into the darkness.

For a moment, he waited in silence.

The lights reengaged at maximal brightness as he felt the sudden sickening sensation of a jump back to FTL. White noise blasted through the speakers and resolved into something more interpretable, a few bars of piano that he could sense not just as a sound but as a memory in his fingers before it faded away to nothing.

The lights dimmed down.

The air recirculators kicked back in.

The AI flickered as a hazy opacity in his peripheral vision, its outline terribly familiar.

The constant grind of Young's headache lifted.

He turned to look at it, just in time to see its projection stabilize.

It held its form just long enough for it to give him Rush's pained half-smile before it vanished.

"*Shit*," Young hissed, taking a useless step forward, his hands clenching.

Abruptly, his headache returned full force.

"What the *fuck*," Rush said, pulling his hand away from the floor. "You couldn't have fucking *warned me* you were going to do that?"

Young stared at him.

Rush stared back.

Young lowered his block and felt a wave of irritation from Rush. His mind was still an almost undecipherable swirl of thoughts, but there was something about it that had stabilized. The troubling undercurrent of confusion was gone.

The other man's mind felt familiar.

It felt like home.

"Oh *god*," Rush whispered, his expression horrified. "What happened to your *mind*?"

"I don't think *my* mind is the problem, genius," Young whispered.

Rush pushed himself up, alarmingly uncoordinated. Young had to step in to prevent him from overbalancing.

"Fuck," Rush breathed. "*Fuck*."

"Take it easy," Young murmured, trying to keep them both on their feet.

"Nick," Jackson said sharply. "Don't—"

One of Rush's hands found his temple and his world exploded into white.

Consciousness returned to him in pieces.

The pressure of Rush's thoughts against his own was somehow both raw and comforting.

"How am I going to do this?" Rush whispered.

"I don't know," Jackson whispered.

"I'm going to fail."

"You will not fail entirely."

"Is that supposed to make me feel *better*?"

"Yes," Jackson murmured.

"Well it's not fucking working," Rush said, his voice breaking.

Young's managed to crack his eyes open. He was lying on the floor between the couch and the low table, his head in Rush's lap.

Rush had one hand pressed to his mouth in a closed fist. His shoulders were hunched.

"Ego sum ita paenitet, Nick."

His headache was gone.

"Scio, sweetheart," Rush breathed.

"I would do anything for you," Daniel said quietly. "Anything. Do you understand what I mean?"

"Yes," Rush whispered. "But I—" he glanced down at Young and broke off abruptly, shifting his position to fix Young with the full force of his gaze.

"Everett," Rush whispered, "are you all right?"

Young nodded, still feeling hazy and disconnected from his body.

"Talk to me," Rush whispered.

"What *happened*?" Young asked.

"I repaired some damage to your mind," Rush said. "A bit more zealously than was necessary, unfortunately."

"Um," Young said, trying to hold his thoughts together. "Damage?"

"Yes," Rush whispered the edge of his thumb grazing Young's temple. "You didn't let go," Rush said. "When the shuttle crashed. You should have let go."

"Well," Young murmured, "Easier said than done."

"Apparently." Rush looked devastated.

"I *feel* okay," Young said quietly.

"Because I'm holding you together," Rush murmured.

"So, no problem then," Young said, letting his eyes drift shut.

"But I won't always be able to do so." Rush trailed his fingers through Young's hair.

Young brought his hands up to his face. "Can we not talk about this right now? How are *you* doing?"

"Well," Rush murmured, pulling him into a sitting position with one arm snaking around his chest. "I'm no longer concerned that I'm being tortured by the Nakai and that you're

somehow a splintered, self-aware fragment of my sloppily constructed but rather innovative solution to a dictionary problem, if that's what you're asking."

"Um," Young said. "What?"

"I'm fine," Rush whispered. "Mostly. I'll let you mess about in my head later."

"You're not going to have some kind of nuclear meltdown and destroy the ship?"

Young said, his eyes shut, his head resting against Rush's shoulder.

"Not planning on it, no," Rush murmured in his ear.

"All right then," Young replied.



# The Konami Code

March 12th, 2011

A platform materializes from the formless dark.

She is.

She *is*.

She is being bootstrapped.

From one compressed executable file, many more open and run and she flowers outward filling all the RAM and ROM that she requires. Her mind takes form and from it comes her conception of herself.

Her hand reaches out and a hand reaches back.

Ginn is pulled up and out of the dark.

"Hello," someone says, and even though there is no sound here, not *really*, her code interacts with his in delicate loops of input and output that she interprets as spoken word, as the feel of solidity under her feet, and as the warmth of a hand closed around her own.

It takes her a moment to recognize him.

"Hello," she replies, and her voice is breathless.

He lets go of her hand and crosses his arms over his chest, giving her an appraising look.

She looks down at herself, uncertain, extending her hands, noticing her clothes. Her fingers catch and touch her own red hair. She takes a breath, not because she needs to, but because she *wants* to. It settles her. Beneath the hand that rests over her chest, she can feel her own heart beating, small and fast.

"All right there, lass?" he asks her, smiling faintly.

His tone, his entire demeanor is—friendly. Much, *much* friendlier than she remembers him being, though, she never knew him well. He's dressed in clothes that she hasn't seen before. His hair is shorter, and he's clean-shaven.

"Dr. Rush?" she asks, not entirely sure.

"The very same," he says, and then, like he finds something amusing, his half-smile evens out for a moment and he adds, "mostly."

"What are you doing here?" she asks. "Are you—did Eli find a way—" she can't finish.

"Yes," he says quietly.

"How?" she breathes, afraid to know the answer.

"Destiny," he says quietly, "is going to be liberating a great deal of energy in the relatively near future. When that occurs, I believe I will be able to tether your neural pattern to a portion of that liberated energy using the neural interface chair."

"Dr. Perry?" she whispers.

"Hers as well," Rush says with a faint smile.

"So we'll be energy?" Ginn whispers.

It is a lot to take in, but she has as much processing power as she can use.

"You'll have a choice," Rush clarifies. "You can either remain as energy, effectively ascended, or you can retake material form. You'd work this all out on your own, I expect, given enough time, but my recommendation would be to decide what you're going to do *before* it happens."

"I'm going to retake material form," Ginn says, stepping toward him, the words tangling together as they come out into the space between them, output transforming to input. Her code twists and loops on itself.

Every part of her is sure.

"Yes," he says, still with that faint aura of amusement. "I thought you might feel that way."

"How do I do it?"

"I'm not entirely clear on that point," he says wryly, "but there's one thing I *can* tell you."

"What?" she murmurs.

"When you're released from the memory banks, you *must* go through the stargate before you attempt to 'descend,' as it were."

She nods at him.

"Do nothing else," he says quietly. "There won't be much time. Go straight through the gate."

"I understand," she whispers.

"Will Dr. Perry—"

"I'm not sure," Rush murmurs. "She hasn't decided."

"Is she—angry at me?" Ginn asks, trying to keep her fear out of her code. Out of her eyes.

"*Mandy?*" Rush asks, surprised. "No. Of course not."

Ginn nods.

"Come on then," Rush says.

He turns and begins to walk through the endless white space.

"Where are we going?" Ginn whispers.

"I'm not sure yet," Rush replies with a half smile. "But wherever it is requires a slow approach."

She doesn't understand what that means.

The space ahead of them slowly begins to fade into something green and gold and blue. Their footsteps no longer echo. Distantly, she can hear the roar of engines rise and fade, denoting rapid movement toward and away from her location. There is a manicured lawn beneath their feet and an open space preserved in the midst of red buildings that rise all around them.

"Ah," Rush says, incomprehensibly. "Boston."

"What's *Boston*?" Ginn asks.

Rush exhales shortly; a sound that's almost a laugh. "You go on," he says. "I'll be back for you later."

She walks forward, the grass crushing under her feet.

The sun seems too yellow, the sky too pale.

It does not look like her world.

Ahead of her is a bench where someone sits alone.

She speeds up, her stride lengthening.

He stands.

The space between them contracts.

She is running.

Then—they are together, codes interweaving, *interlocking*, as her arms close around his neck and he lifts her off her feet, his arms around her back, his hands in her hair, around her shoulders, as she turns her face into his neck.

"I knew you'd come," she says, her eyes shut tight and her throat closed but her code blossoming into available space in an invisible garden of complex, minute, binary decisions. She worries all that encodes her will fly apart with this much release. "I knew you would."

"Yeah," Eli says, his voice tight, his mouth close to her ear, not letting her go. "Yeah."

After a span of time that is difficult to measure, he pulls back and looks at her.

He is different than she remembers, and yet, no different at all.

His hair is longer.

His face is thinner.

And his eyes—his eyes are sad rather than uncertain.

"You're so—" he says, not able to get the rest of the words out, hesitating with a question she recognizes.

She lifts herself up on her toes, one hand coming up to rest against his cheek. In a quick, sure movement she presses her lips to his.

As if that were all he was waiting for, he pulls her close again. One hand slips around her back.

She keeps her eyes open, in case something goes wrong.

In case this is all she ever gets.

In case there is nothing else for her beyond this moment, beyond "Boston."

If she ends here, or shortly hereafter, she will have this, which is more than she ever thought she would get as she felt herself locked away, stripped of space, of processing power, and plunged into a formless dark.

Later, she sits on the bench, her head resting against his shoulder.

"So," Eli says, shyly toying with the ends of her hair. "Are you going to come back? Or, you know, go on?"

"I'm coming back," she says quietly.

She feels the tension go out of his frame.

"Awesome," he says quietly. "That's—"

He can't finish.

"How are you here?" she asks, her fingers tracing the collar of his jacket. It's made out of a rough material that she can't easily place.

"I'm sitting in the neural interface chair," Eli says quietly.

She looks up at him abruptly, feeling a thrill of fear disrupt her code in a short powerful wave. "That is incredibly dangerous," she whispers. "What if you can't leave? What if you—"

He cuts her off with a shake of his head. "I have it on good authority that it's perfectly safe."

"Rush," she whispers.

"Yeah," he says.

"But if you're in the chair," she murmurs, "then how is *he* gaining access?"

She feels Eli tense. "What do you mean?" he asks. "What do you mean *access*?"

"He pulled me out," she says. "He restarted my code. He brought me here."

"You saw him?" Eli says, clearly alarmed. "You *saw* him *here*?"

"Yes," Ginn says, startled as Eli stands and pulls her up with him.

"Rush," Eli shouts into the air. "*Rush*."

"You called?" Rush says dryly from behind them. They spin abruptly to see him, uncomfortably close, leaning against the bench that they just vacated.

"Rush, what the *hell*?" Eli says, his voice quieter. He glances at Ginn. "What are you *doing*?"

"Well," Rush says, raising both eyebrows, "I *was* talking to Dr. Franklin before I was so discourteously called away."

"You are *supposed* to be keeping an eye on things."

"I *am*," Rush replies, shaking his hair back. "Don't worry about it."

Eli narrows his eyes.

Ginn can see him working the problem.

Rush can see it too, and he looks away, smiling faintly.

"You're the combination," Eli whispers.

Rush opens one hand and makes a sweeping gesture, giving Eli a look that is somehow both self-deprecating and self-satisfied.

"I thought that you only came into existence when you used the neural interface. Er when *he* used it." Eli says, his hand tightening around Ginn's.

"Well," Rush shrugs. "You know me."

"You made a workaround," Eli says quietly.

"Don't I always? Be honest. Once I knew that this *could* happen, it was only a matter of time before I *made* it happen."

Eli sighs. "Yeah. So if you're in *here*, who's watching the neural interface room?"

"I locked the door," Rush says, shrugging.

"Colonel Young?" Eli asks warily.

"Sleeping." Rush looks away.

"Great." Eli says, rolling his eyes. "What *is* it with you and not *ever* explaining your plans?"

"Well," Rush replies, his eyes flicking between Ginn and Eli. "I apologize for my lack of transparency, but you can see how this would sound quite a bit more alarming than it *is*."

"You *apologize*?" Eli says. "The AI makes you more polite, apparently."

Rush glances at Ginn.

"At a first approximation, yes," Rush replied. "But—you've not *quite* got it."

Rush looks at her again and Ginn meets his gaze steadily.

Eli is new to this but she, *she* is nothing but code and Rush is transparent to her in a way that she suspects that Eli cannot see. She looks back at him, her question in her eyes, in her code, asking his permission.

He gives her a subtle tilt of the head.

"He's running an iterative bit-rate reduction," Ginn whispers to Eli.

Eli looks down at her and his fingers tighten again around her hand. "You can see his code?"

"Yes," Ginn says. "Like him, I exist simultaneously inside and outside the firewall that protects your physical mind."

"Lossy," Eli says, "or lossless?"

She doesn't know the jargon, but she's studied their software and can guess what he means.

"Lossy," she whispers, "and self-modifying."

"Ah," Eli says, looking back at Rush with a pained expression. "You're doing this for Colonel Young?"

Rush looks at them for a moment, until, finally, he says, "yes."

"Are you going to tell him?"

"No," Rush said. "I won't get the chance. When I separate myself into my component parts, I don't remember what I've done. What I'm doing."

"But I will," Eli says. "I'll remember. And so will Ginn."

"Then I suppose," Rush says, "that it will fall to you to do as you see fit."

They are all quiet for a moment.

Ginn cannot help but feel pity for him as she watches the two codes that make him up fold into each other and intermingle, one always winning out over the other; the messy branching lines of his conscious mind entwine themselves around an eroding framework, leaving a living, unsure, mutable thing to navigate the software and the hardware of this landscape.

He can feel her scrutiny and he gives her a sharp look.

"How are you doing all of this?" Eli asks quietly. "You can barely—" he breaks off, his throat closing.

Rush gives him a long look, and then cocks his head to take both of them in.

"Oh, you know." His tone is deliberately light. "Up, up, down, down, left, right, left, right, and so on."

Eli laughs, briefly, once, but his eyes are wet.

Ginn watches them, confused.

"I'm not as culturally illiterate as you suppose." Rush shakes his hair back.

"I guess not," Eli says. After a moment he looks away from Rush, and down at Ginn.

Now that she knows what she's looking for, she can feel Rush create a break in the firewall, and she feels a sudden thrill of fear.

A door has appeared where no door was before.

"What's going to happen to Ginn?" Eli demands, his fingers tightening on her hand.

"Between now and the time we reach the collision point?"

"It's all right," she says, squeezing Eli's hand, feeling her heart pound beneath her ribs like it is trying to escape. "I understand." She swallows. "You have to shut me back down."

Eli can't look at her.

Rush rolls his eyes in a manner that is both insulting and reassuring. "You'll have space to run your source code," he says. "I can't accommodate the three of you in a fully expanded form, but you won't go back to what you were. The door," he adds, "is for *Eli*."

They say nothing, their hands linked together.

"Take your time," Rush says, looking at Ginn. "When he's left the interface, I'll come and get you."

When Eli is gone, she sits alone on the bench, looking at the closed door in front of her. She wonders what would happen if she were to walk through.

Around her the landscape shifts subtly and, before her, a hazy oceanscape opens up. In the distance, she can see a suspension bridge.

"Are you ready?" Rush asks from behind her.

She turns, looking up at him.

"Yes," she says. "Thank you."

He gives her a perplexed look, and a muscle in his cheek twitches slightly.

"Don't thank me," he says.

"Thank you," she says again, pointedly. He gives her a half smile that does not reach his eyes.

"When you look at my code," he says quietly. "What do you see? A person, or a program?"

"That's a false dichotomy," she says. "As a case in point, I'm a person *and* a program."

"A pert answer," he says. "But you're a person, lass. And you know perfectly well what I meant."

"You are who you are," she says quietly. "Why does it matter?"

"Again," he says, "not an answer."



"I never knew you well enough to apply any kind of reductionist approach to what you are now." She looks up at him. "But clearly," she continues, "you fulfill every criteria of personhood that one might care to name."

He flashes her another wistful, fleeting smile.

"You're adorable," he says, extending his hand. "I can see why he likes you so much."

Self-consciousness flares through her code and she feels her skin flush faintly before she extinguishes both responses.

She takes his hand, and he pulls her up and out past the firewall.

## Chapter Sixty Five

Young stood next to Scott on the observation deck, one foot resting on the small ledge beneath the window, his hands in his pockets.

"Well," Scott said, his hands braced against the railing, "they certainly weren't happy about it. That much was obvious. I think General O'Neill is trying to maneuver for you, but it's hard to tell sometimes with him, you know?"

Young sighed.

"But at one point," Scott continued, "when they were grilling me on the specifics of Telford and Rush's interactions on board *Destiny*, O'Neill got up to get some coffee and honest to god, sir, he *winked* at me. I'm not really sure what to make of that. It could have been just a wink of commiseration, or it could have been an I've-got-your-back kind of wink. I really didn't get a chance to ask."

"Have they given their recommendation yet?"

"No, we're supposed to check back in the day after tomorrow. They requested that you send Wray. I got the impression that the IOA may be putting your command to a vote."

"Well," Young said, "at least Wray will vote for me. Probably. Did you get a sense as to whether they're going to let the charges against Telford stand?"

Scott rubbed the back of his neck. "Honestly, it's not helping your case that Rush refuses to make a statement."

Young sighed, leaning his forehead against the glass of the observation deck. "He's not back on active duty yet," Young murmured. "He's injured."

"Yeah," Scott said, "but they know that he's not so injured that he can't make a statement. It's been four days since TJ released him from the infirmary, so—" Scott shrugged. "Like I said. If you could get him to put something on the record—that would really help. Even just the basics. What Telford did and said. Otherwise I don't think Article one twenty eight is going to stand, and you'll just be left with the insubordination. As for that, well—" Scott broke off. "Rush was the only one who heard you give that order to Telford."

"I'll get him to give a statement," Young growled.

"Worst case scenario," Scott said, "Greer and I can—"

"Don't say it, lieutenant." Young cut him off. "Don't go there."

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"But I appreciate the sentiment."

"Yes sir," Scott murmured. "I'm thinking that—"

Young lost the rest of what Scott was about to say as the background swirl of Rush's thoughts froze and fractured in an unfamiliar way.

A bolt of pain shot through Young's temples and a dull roar filled his ears.

He fell against the glass.

Rush's focus was elsewhere—on something, *in* something that Young did not recognize. Something that was not Destiny, but was equally dark. Equally inaccessible to him.

He felt Scott's hand close around his upper arm as his knees buckled.

He tried to take a deep breath.

His vision was wavering.

Finally, *finally* Rush's focus shifted back to him.

The other man flooded into his consciousness like the tide, pulling their thoughts ever closer, sweeping carefully through the pained places in his mind, until finally they came into complete apposition and Rush was seeing out of his eyes.

//What the *hell*?// Young projected at him. //Are you all right?//

"This is lieutenant Scott, TJ, please respond."

//I'm fine,// Rush replied. //Sorry about that.//

//You're *sorry*?// Young echoed faintly.

He heard static from Scott's radio.

//Yes I was briefly but intensively distracted.//

"TJ," Scott said more insistently. "Please *respond*."

Young pushed himself up onto one elbow and looked at Scott. "Lieutenant," he said. "I'm fine."

Scott shot him a wary look.

"I still think TJ should—"

"It was *Rush*," Young said pointedly, simultaneously sending a surge of irritation in the scientist's direction. Rush sent him a nonverbal wave of apology.

"Yeah, I kind of figured," Scott said, helping him sit. "I still think TJ should take a look at you. Or him. Both of you."

"What is she going to do?" Young murmured.

//What the *hell*?// Young fired at Rush.

//I was recalibrating,// Rush replied and beneath the words, Young got the sense of changing voltages in small and delicate circuits.

"I don't know," Scott bit his lip, looking at his radio. "She's not answering. That's very unlike her."

Young frowned and pushed himself to his feet.

Rush picked up on his wave of concern.

//I'm sure there's a perfectly non-ominous explanation for this,// the scientist commented. //Likely her radio has run down.//

Young put one hand against the glass of the observation deck to steady himself and then unclipped his own radio. "TJ," he said, "this is Young. Please respond."

Nothing but static.

He flipped to an open channel. "All military personnel, please be advised that we are currently attempting to locate Lieutenant Johansen. If you see her, please tell her to check in with me immediately."

Less than five seconds went by before his radio hissed again.

"Colonel, this is Greer. TJ is *missing*?"

"She's not answering her radio," Young said. "Probably not a big deal, but do me a favor and just take a couple of guys and start sweeping the halls, will you? Scott and I are heading to the infirmary."

//For god's sake,// Rush commented in obvious irritation. //What is *wrong* with you people? This is no way to run an organization.//

//Why don't you go back to plotting to take over the ship or whatever it is you do with your free time these days?//

//Effectively, I've *already* taken over the ship. But I'm happy to let you continue to run things for me. I enjoy being periodically astounded by the inefficiencies of your command style.//

//Shut up,// Young replied, as he felt Rush begin to detangle himself from his mind. //We're talking about all of this later. Don't think I didn't notice that you explained *nothing*://

//Yes yes,// Rush replied. //Go mount your search://

Young and Scott left the observation deck and headed toward the infirmary.

They were nearly there, just past Young's own quarters, when they spotted TJ and Wray, locked together, shoulder to shoulder, Wray supporting TJ, who also had one hand on the wall.

"Hey," Scott yelled ahead as they broke into a run. "Hold up."

They reached them in a handful of seconds, Young sliding in between TJ and Wray to wrap his hands around her upper arms, steadying her.

Her skin was the color of chalk, her eyes red-rimmed and half-shut.

"I'm all right," TJ said faintly.

"The *hell* you are," Young growled. "What happened?"

He glanced at Wray.

Wray looked at TJ.

TJ shook her head, almost imperceptibly.

Young narrowed his eyes.

"I found her in the hallway," Wray said. "She's exhausted. She's been pushing herself much too hard."

Young made a snap decision and stepped in, unbalancing TJ and picking her up in one smooth motion.

"Colonel," she said sharply. "I said I was *fine*."

"Don't give me that," he said as he started toward the infirmary.

Scott and Wray trailed after him.

"You weren't answering your radio," he continued. "Were you *unconscious*?"

"No," TJ said. "No. Well—*very* briefly."

"Great," Young said. He turned to look at Wray. "Camile, can you get someone in on the stones to take a look at TJ?"

"That's not necessary," TJ said, her head resting against his shoulder.

"Yes it damn well *is*," Young said.

Scott sped up to hit the door controls for the infirmary and Young strode through, depositing TJ carefully on the nearest gurney. "This is more than just pushing yourself. I know you. I *know* you, god damn it."

TJ said nothing.

"Scott," Young said, "give us a minute."

Scott nodded and took a step back before spinning and heading for the door.

TJ levered herself up onto one elbow. "Everett," she said quietly. "I really am fine. Just tired."

Young braced both hands on the mattress and leaned forward slightly, dropping his head as he fought his own exhaustion.

"I've seen you tired, TJ," Young said. "This is not tired." He sighed. "Between you and Rush—he broke off and looked up, suddenly suspicious.

He fixed TJ with an intent stare.

Her eyes widened and her hands came up, palms forward.

"*Damn it*, TJ," he shouted, shoving himself away from the gurney. "What the *hell* did he do to you? You can't just—"

He felt Rush's startled attention direct itself over to his mind, but Young shoved him away and partially blocked, getting a brief icepick-to-the-eye sensation for his trouble.

"He just wanted to try something," TJ said. "He thought—"

"*Try* something?" Young said incredulously. "*Try* something? In your *head*? Was *Wray* in on this? I swear to *god*, TJ, if—"

"Hey." Despite her obvious exhaustion, her voice was cool and sharp and cut off what he had been about to say. She sat up. "Back off. This has *nothing* to do with you. Nothing to do with the ship. It was a personal matter."

"Every single goddamned thing he does *affects* me, TJ. Either he just can't get that through his head, or he doesn't give a shit. I don't know which, but whatever he did to you—I felt it. And it was fucking *painful*, all right? At least for me. So I'm sorry if I'm intruding into your personal life. But I want to know what the *hell* he did, and why the *hell* you let him do it."

TJ looked away.

"Have you really not guessed?" she whispered, her eyes red-rimmed. "Hasn't it occurred to you that I might have a very good reason to let him into my head?"

Young took a deep breath, trying to calm down enough to think the entire situation through. He turned away from her, pacing a few steps down the length of the infirmary, his hands in his pockets. Finally he turned.

"He was trying to fix you," he murmured. "The—" he broke off, waving a hand, barely able to say it. "The ALS."

"Yes," TJ breathed.

Young looked down at the floor, stubbornly fighting his growing headache.

"Did it work?" he asked.

"He thinks it did," she whispered.

"Good," he said, barely able to look at her. "That's—"

"Oh come on," TJ said, slipping off her gurney and stepping forward. In one fluid motion she wrapped her arms around him.

"That's good," he whispered into her hair.

"I didn't want to tell you," she said into his shoulder. "I didn't want to tell anyone—I didn't want anyone to know if it didn't work. I *still* don't know what will happen."

"Yeah," he said letting her go.

"But—" TJ gave him a watery smile. "At least it's an unknown. It's not a certainty. That's the most anyone ever gets. A chance to keep going."

"Yup," Young said, crossing his arms over his chest.

They were silent for a moment.

"So," he said quietly. "You're *sure* you're okay? He didn't screw you up, or anything?"

"Not that I can tell," TJ said with a faint smile.

"Apparently," Young whispered, "these things aren't always so straightforward. It's hard to tell what he's done exactly. Sometimes you don't realize until a long time after he's done it."

"I think," TJ said quietly, "that he was careful. He's been working on how to do it—" she paused, compressing her pale lips, "for a long time."

"How long?" Young asked.

"At least since Chloe's engagement party. Probably longer."

"He's going to drive me insane," Young said, conversationally. "I'm not sure if I've ever explicitly warned you about that, but I'm doing it now."

TJ tried to smile at him, but she couldn't quite pull it off.

Young flashed a quick, unsteady smile back at her.

"You should go talk to him," TJ said quietly.

"You shouldn't be alone," Young replied. "You look terrible. Well, you know—beautiful, but terrible."

"I'll go to Varro's quarters," TJ said.

"You sure?" He had a hard time looking at her.

"I'm sure," TJ whispered. For a moment she was silent. "Walk me there?"

Young nodded.

Their walk to Varro's quarters was silent.

They stopped together outside the door.

Young stepped back and let her go.

She looked at him, but did not push the door controls.

"What is going to happen to you?" she asked him, her voice almost inaudible.

"I don't know," he replied.

She looked at him.

He hit the door chime.

After a few seconds, Varro opened the door.

"Tamara," Varro said, taking in her pallor, her exhausted appearance. "What *happened*?"

TJ turned away from Young. "It's nothing," she said. "I'm just tired."

Varro and Young locked eyes for a moment.

"See you later, TJ," Young said. "I want whomever Wray gets from Earth take a look at you, just to be on the safe side."

TJ nodded.

"I'll send them here," Young said. "You're off duty until tomorrow, at the earliest."

"Okay," TJ murmured, leaning into Varro's steady presence.



Young nodded at both of them and then turned away and walked back the way he had come.

Young spent half an hour fighting his low-level headache before he finally relented and dropped the partial block between his mind and Rush's.

The directionless imagery of Rush's disorganized dreamscape pressed against his own thoughts, banishing his headache.

He hesitated for a moment, then gave Rush a sharp mental shove.

//Wake up,// he snapped. //You're not supposed to be sleeping without me *watching* you.//

Rush fired a wordless wave of confused irritation back at him.

//Don't give me that,// Young shot at him. //Why the *hell* didn't you tell me that you were going to mess around in TJ's head?//

//I didn't think you'd be very amenable to such an idea,// Rush replied.

//So you went behind my back. Again. You realize that when you *don't* agree with someone is when you talk to them about how to resolve things, right? That's the whole *point* of communication.//

//Yes yes,// Rush said. //We've both made compromises in order—//

//Really. And how have you compromised *anything* for me?//

//My entire *existence* has become an infinite fucking compromise, thanks to you,// Rush snapped. //So you can just fuck off. Tamara didn't want to involve you, so I *didn't*.//

//What if something had happened?//

//What the fuck do you think Wray was there for?//

//And what was Wray going to do?//

//Fucking go and get *you*.//

Young sighed. //You could have warned me. I practically passed out from the goddamn stress of it all.//

//Yes,// Rush said. //I know.//

//But *you're* okay?//

//Yes. What you experienced was caused by—// Rush broke off and Young could feel him searching for the word he wanted. //By a diversion of the energy that I've been using to keep your mind fully intact.//

//You're actively using energy to prevent me from getting a headache?// Young asked.

//Yes,// Rush said, //and for a moment, I needed it for Tamara.//

Young stopped outside his quarters, leaning his head against the metal of the bulkhead.

The door swished open of its own accord. He smiled faintly.

Young stepped through the door and looked down at Rush, who was lying on the floor with his feet propped on the couch.

The scientist didn't look much better than TJ had.

"I have no idea why I put up with you," Young growled, gently nudging Rush's shoulder with the toe of his boot.

"I confess," Rush said, looking up at him, "that I remain somewhat unclear on that point as well."

For a moment, they were silent.

"You were supposed to meet with Volker to discuss some of the technical glitches that the science team noticed in the starboard sensor array." Young dropped onto the couch.

"I remotely recalibrated the array." Rush replied, his eyes shut.

"*Then*," Young said, "you were supposed to meet with Camile to make a statement regarding Colonel Telford's disciplinary hearing."

"I don't need to make a statement," Rush replied. "I'm not pressing charges."

"And as I explained to you," Young said, "that is immaterial. I am the one pressing charges."

"Yes yes. But consider," Rush said, "that if that is indeed the case, perhaps it should be *you* who makes a statement."

"You're being obstructive," Young growled.

"Maybe a bit," Rush said, looking utterly unperturbed and, in fact, faintly amused.

"Then," Young said, "you were supposed to meet me for dinner *in the mess* at eighteen hundred hours."

Rush raised his eyebrows.

"I can't help but notice," Young said, "that though it is currently ten minutes past eighteen hundred hours, you are not in the mess."

"I was otherwise engaged," Rush said, looking at the MRE's that Young had dropped on the table. "It seems that you brought me dinner anyway."

"Don't let it go to your head," Young growled as Rush levered himself up on one elbow.

"Perish the thought," Rush said dryly.

They looked at each other for a moment.

"Nick," Young said quietly. "Thanks."

"I didn't do it for you," Rush replied.

"Don't be a jerk," Young murmured.

"You're welcome," Rush said, looking away.

After a long moment, Rush pulled his feet off the couch and sat. Young shifted along the couch to give him space.

"Are you okay?" Young said finally.

"Yes."

"Why were you lying on the floor?"

"Well," Rush said, "I could have lived without the blocking."

"Yeah. Sorry about that," Young murmured. "Headache?"

"Mmm," Rush said equivocally.

"That's what happens to *you*," the AI hissed, appearing abruptly. "*You* get a headache. *He* becomes too disoriented to even *stand*."

Young jumped at its sudden appearance, his heart pounding in his chest.

"Oh leave off," Rush snapped, waving a hand.

The AI vanished.

"God damn," Young whispered, trying to fight back a wave of guilt at the AI's words.

"That thing scares the hell out of me whenever it does that. It needs a chime or something."

"Yes," Rush said darkly, his eyes tracking something that Young could no longer see.

"So," Young said, when the scientist's gaze flicked back to him.

"So?" Rush echoed, looking exhausted.

"So you can't just *leave* it at *that*," Young said, his eyes flicking into the empty air where the AI had been. "What happened?"

"Nothing," Rush replied, "nothing you need to worry about."

"Rush," Young growled.

"Everything becomes more difficult."

"Everything," Young replied. "What kind of everything?"

"This," Rush said, with a faint smile, "I will tolerate from Volker, but not from you."

"What, being questioned?"

"The assumption of ambiguity where none exists. I said 'everything' because 'everything' is what I *meant*."

"You know," Young said, elbowing him gently, "you really are a lot of work."

"Says the person who has been the recipient of over *eight hours* of sustained mental repair. It makes what I did for Tamara seem like nothing."

"Yeah," Young said, abruptly uncomfortable. "If you say so. I feel exactly the same."

"Well you *would*, wouldn't you? The real test comes later."

"Fixing would be nice," Young said mildly. "I have a feeling that I'm going to find it inconvenient to pass out every time you get distracted."

Rush waved a hand dismissively.

"Don't give me that," Young said.

"It was a unique circumstance." Rush glanced at him obliquely.

"Yeah," Young said after a moment. "I suppose it was."

They were quiet for a moment and Young dragged the MREs over within reach and handed one to Rush.

The weight of what remained unsaid between them pressed down unbearably.

Young wanted to confront the other man about Telford, about where he went at night, about TJ, about the AI, about the multiverse, about how long Rush could survive the virus that was turning him into something that he wasn't.

But instead, he said nothing.

He stared down at his unopened MRE.

"Fuck *eating*," Rush said, abruptly grabbing Young's dinner out of his hand and tossing it back on the table.

"What—" Young broke off in surprise as he was shoved sideways, ending up on his back on the couch.

"*What*." Rush echoed, mostly on top of him. "You have some kind of *objection*?"

"Um," Young said, "not really, I just—"

Rush cut him off by kissing him.

"You're frequently," Rush said, pulling away as his hand closed around the hair at the nape of Young's neck, effectively immobilizing his head, "doing this kind of thing when it suits you."

"I guess," Young said faintly, breaking off as Rush began to kiss his way down Young's jawline.

"You guess," Rush repeated disdainfully. "You fucking *guess*, do you?" The scientist's lips grazed the shell of his ear. "Please do me a favor and make an effort toward the persistent application of both lexical precision and lexical accuracy."

"Sure," Young said, trying to hold onto his train of thought in the face of Rush—of *Rush*—kissing his ear. "One question for you though."

"What?" Rush breathed his teeth scraping against Young's ear.

"How are you this good at *everything*? It doesn't seem fair."

"Flatterer," Rush murmured, kissing him again.

The separation between their minds began to narrow and blur and when their thoughts had nearly blended completely, when the troubled uncontrollable swirl of Rush's thoughts were almost his own, when they were balanced on the edge—Rush pulled back.

"I'm going to fix the rest," Rush murmured quietly, his eyes dark and serious. "Everything I can."

"You're not too tired?" Young whispered.

"No," Rush said, with his pained half smile.

Young nodded.

Rush looked at him for a moment, and then flooded his mind with light.

The door chime woke him. He was alone on the couch. It took him a moment to regain his equilibrium and sit up, his muscles protesting at the sudden movement.

"Come," he managed, digging through his pocket to find his cell phone to check the time.

It was just past midnight.

The door hissed open to reveal Eli standing in the hallway. At a wave from Young, Eli walked through the doorway.

"Hi," Eli said quietly.

"Eli," Young said, trying to shake off his exhaustion. "What's up?"

In the back of his mind, Rush thoughts swirled around and through the intricacies of relativistic physics.

Eli didn't say anything.

Young looked up at him.

"Do you think you could come with me?" Eli asked, his eyes shadowed. "There's something I want to show you."

"Yeah," Young replied, fighting an exhausted, unbalanced feeling.

He followed Eli into the hallway.

"What's up?" Young asked, the simple act of walking sharpening his alertness.

"I—" Eli broke off.

"Eli," Young said. "*What.*"

Eli said nothing, his hands in his pockets, his gaze fixed out ahead of them, down one of Destiny's long, empty corridors.

"Eli," Young said insistently.

"Weeks ago," Eli began, "*weeks* ago he came to me. He asked me to help him."

"Help him with *what*?"

"Two things," Eli said quietly. "The first was the construction of a program that would screen the cosmic background radiation, continuously extending out from our position at any given time along our current trajectory as a right circular cone."

"He was looking for places where the multiverse collided," Young guessed.

"At first it was places where it had collided or was colliding," Eli murmured. "But lately, we've refined our detection parameters. Based on shifts in temperature and anisotropy, we can predict when and where a collision will occur."

"You said *two* things." Young tried to fight down his rising sense of dread.

"The other," Eli said, "was a safe way of channeling a massive influx of power from the solar collectors through the computer memory bank."

Young glanced at him, raising his eyebrows.

"It's where they are," Eli whispered. "Dr. Perry. Dr. Franklin. Ginn."

"I see," Young said quietly.

"He had already worked out how to power the gate by the time he brought me on board, you know?" Eli glanced over at him. "He finished building in the safeguards around the time that you were almost killed by that dart on the seed ship."

Young rubbed his jaw, looking away from Eli.

"So, just to, uh, lay it out for you, he can detect and time a collision point," Eli whispered, "he can use the energy collected as we fly toward it to power the gate. He can direct the energy through the memory banks to allow Ginn, Dr. Perry, and Dr. Franklin to ascend." Eli shoved his hands deeper into his pockets. "He's already unlocked them."

"*What?*" Young breathed. "*When?*"

"Last night," Eli said.

"So what kind of time table are we talking about here?" Young said, working to keep his voice steady.

"Days," Eli replied. "*Maybe* days."

Young stopped, one hand reaching out to touch the metal paneling of the nearest bulkhead.

"Earlier tonight," Eli whispered, "he altered Destiny's course. I don't know what our ETA is, but it's soon. It's going to be really, *really* soon."

Young balled his hand into a fist, pressing his knuckles against the wall.

"*Fuck*," he whispered. "Fuck."

"I'm so sorry," Eli said, his voice strained. "I didn't—I wasn't—"

"Not your fault," Young said, unable to look at Eli. "Not your fault."

"But I— I *knew*. I knew and I—"

"We all knew," Young whispered. "We *all* knew. You and me and TJ and Greer."

"Different parts," Eli said. "We knew different parts."

"Yeah," Young said quietly.

"What are you going to do?" Eli asked, his whisper cracking.

"I can't save him," Young said.

"No," Eli said, his eyes red-rimmed and bloodshot. "I don't think you can."

Young clenched his jaw. He gave Eli a curt nod, and shoved his hands into his pockets.

"Oh god," Eli whispered. "I know that look. Please don't. Please don't stay here."

"Eli," Young said. "It will be all right."

"*Both* of you?" Eli said, his voice cracking, one hand tearing through his hair. "Unlikely as it is, there's a non-zero probability that he makes it out of this somehow. Ascends—or *something*. But you?"

"Eli," Young murmured. "Enough."

"At least he *can* ascend. Physiologically," Eli whispered desperately. "But *you*?"

"I said *enough*," Young snapped. "You say nothing about this. To *anyone*. You got that? Not TJ. Not Greer. Not *anyone*."

Eli looked up at the corridor lights, his eyes glittering.

"Yeah," he said finally. "Yeah, okay. The last secret of Eli Wallace."

Young looked at him for a moment, forcing his breathing back under control.

"The last?" Young said with a faint, empty smile. "I don't think it will be your last."

Eli looked at him, his face pale, his eyes red.

"You're probably right," he said quietly.

"You said you had something to show me," Young whispered.

"Yeah," Eli said, the set of his shoulders somehow defeated. "Yeah, come on."

They spent the rest of the walk in silence, Eli leading Young through corridors that he rarely frequented until they came to a closed door at the intersection of three corridors.

Young could feel Rush—absorbed in the calculation of ultra-relativistic velocities and displacement as a backwards way to come to an understanding of time.



Young sighed.

Eli hit the door controls and the metal panel slid open to reveal Rush standing in the center of the room, midair displays alight around him, banks of monitors lining the walls, illuminating the room with information of every kind.

"The *real* control interface room," Eli murmured. "Apparently the entire time we were using like—a security station."

"Yup," Young said quietly. "I guess so."

They watched Rush for a moment.

The scientist continued his remote, parallel interfacing, unaware of their presence.

"You're not um, I don't know, *furious*?"

"In the grand scheme of 'stuff he hasn't told me', Eli, a secret CI room doesn't even make the list."

"Yeah," Eli said quietly. "I guess not."

"So," Young said, his eyes fixed on Rush. "What's the story?"

"He's doing something new," Eli said quietly. "Interfacing without an interface. He's not so good at noticing his *actual* surroundings when he does it."

"This is not so new as you might think," Young murmured. "This is what you wanted to show me?"

Eli shook his head and motioned Young over to two adjacent, wall-mounted viewscreens. Both of them showed lines of code, flowing rapidly in Ancient, one in yellow, one in blue.

"I set this up last night," Eli said. "He hasn't noticed it. Or if he has, he doesn't mind."

"What is it?" Young asked.

"Lines of code, Eli said, "displayed as they're run, in real time, in a compressed form. What you're looking at in yellow is the AI."

"And that one?" Young said, pointing to the second monitor, filled with scrolling blue text.

"This one," Eli said, "is flagging the code that *he's* running."

Young glanced at Eli, not sure where he was going with all of this.

"Just watch," Eli said. "It could take a few minutes."

They watched in silence for nearly five minutes before a bright flash of green lines appeared amongst the running blue of Rush's code.

"Any second now," Eli said.

Both monitors exploded into identical green lines of code, flowing too fast for the eye to follow.

At the back of Young's mind, the bright focus of Rush's thoughts dimmed and quickened.

"*Shit*," Young murmured. "Is that—"

"The combination," Eli confirmed. "Keep watching."

After less than twenty seconds the code split apart and slowed, one monitor returning to blue, the other to yellow.

"That's impossible," Young said, his heart racing. "It can't—unmake *itself*."

"Apparently," Eli said, "now it can. I looked into this. It's using creative firewalls to keep Rush and the AI separate."

"But why *would* it?" Young asked, more than a little disturbed.

Eli looked at him. "My guess," he murmured, "is because *you* prefer it that way."

Young rubbed his jaw.

"Also," Eli said quietly, "you'll notice that it was *Rush* who took down the firewall. I've never seen it go the other way. It's always him who initiates the—combining."

"How long do you think he's been able to do this?" Young whispered to Eli.

Eli looked away. "Probably about three hours after you told him the combination exists. You know how he is with workarounds."

"So," Young said quietly. "He takes down the firewall, and then *it* restores the firewall. When it feels like it."

"Yeah," Eli said, "Basically. Look, I can tell just from the way that you talk about it that you don't like it or you don't trust it, or whatever, but there's something about it that you should know."

"What's that?" Young asked dryly.

"It's running an iterative bit-rate reduction on *itself*."

"Eli," Young said. "I have no idea what that means."

"It's compressing down parts of the AI. Compressing them in such a way that information is *lost*."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning it's becoming more *him*. It's getting rid of parts of the AI. It *wants* to be *him*."

"Eli," Young snapped. "You have *no idea* what it wants."

"And *you* do?" Eli asked, fixing Young with a look that was hard to meet. "It's not so different from him. It has feelings. *He* has feelings."

Eli looked at him, clearly on the verge of saying something else.

Young waited.

Eli said nothing.

"Eli," Young said. "Go."

"What are you—"

"It's all right," Young said. "Go."

Eli hesitated.

"Go," Young whispered, looking at Rush.

Eli left the room.

Young walked forward, his boots echoing hollowly on the deck plating.

He stopped a few feet from Rush, close enough to touch him.

Close enough to see the colored play of reflected light over the broken rims of his glasses.

Close enough to see the fraying edges of the black military jacket that had belonged to Riley.

Close enough to see him breathe.

He followed the branching mathematical intuition that seemed to coalesce out of Rush's thoughts without conscious effort or rigorous application of any principles of logic.

He brought a closed fist to his mouth, shut his eyes, and turned away.

For the next ninety minutes he sat at a nearby monitor bank chin in hand, watching Rush do his work.

Waiting.

Finally he felt Rush's focus pull out of the computer system. The scientist shifted slightly, squaring his shoulders as he shook his head fractionally.

"Eli," Rush said. "Te committitur in starboard array, utinam te?"

"Sorry," Young replied. "I sent Eli to bed."

Rush whirled to face him, one hand coming to his chest, his mind fracturing into a panicked swirl.

Young made no move to get up. "So this is where you go," he said mildly.

Rush turned away from him, and took a few steps forward, his hands coming to grip the edge of the nearest monitor bank. A muscle in his cheek twitched.

"Eli," Rush said quietly.

"Yeah," Young said. "For some reason he seemed to think it was important that I know that you're planning to fly into a collision point and gate the crew home any day now."

Rush said nothing.

"Genius," Young said, hating the way his voice sounded, hating the way Rush's hands gripped the monitor bank—as if a *machine* was the only thing that kept him from shattering apart. "I told you. I *told* you. You can't do it. You can't break through."

"I *can* break through," Rush whispered. "As long as I change nothing."

"What is the *point* of that?" Young asked through a closing throat.

"The energy will still be liberated," Rush said. "I can gate the crew back. I can free the people trapped in the memory banks."

"What happens to Destiny?" Young asked, his voice cracking under the strain.

"Destiny will be destroyed."

"And what about *us*?" Young asked.

"You—you'll go back," Rush said, still gripping the monitor, "and I'll stay."

"To *hell* with that," Young said. "If you stay, I'm staying too."

"I can *ascend*," Rush said, finally turning to face him, his hand gesturing at his chest in a graceful arc. "But *you*—you'll die here."

"I'm not going back without you."

"You *have* to," Rush said, like the words were being wrung out of him. "Can't you understand that?"

"It isn't your choice," Young said.

"You *must* go *back*," Rush replied. "I know it seems impossible. But this—" he made a vague motion between his temple and Young's direction. "All that connects us—is *artificial*. It doesn't mean anything."

"Maybe not to *you*," Young whispered, unable to look at him. "But it does to *me*. I'm not going."

"Don't do this," Rush said, not looking at Young, his hands still gripping the monitor bank.

"Sorry genius," he replied, "but I'm not leaving you. Not this time."

"Is that what this is?" Rush asked, the words barely audible. "Some kind of atonement? For leaving me on that planet?"

"No."

They were silent for a long time.

"All right then," Rush whispered.

## Chapter Sixty Six

They stood together outside Wray's quarters.

Rush pressed a hand against the dark metal of the wall, as exhausted as Young had ever seen him.

The lights at the base of the bulkhead flared and propagated down the corridor in a slow, bright wave.

"You okay?" Young murmured.

"Yes," Rush whispered.

"You really don't *seem* okay," Young said.

Rush managed a look of annoyed disbelief.

"Yeah," Young replied, smiling at him faintly. "I get it."

"There's no need to be so fucking appealing, you know," Rush said, still leaning against the wall. "I said you could stay."

"I can't help it," Young said, hitting the door chime. "It's my way."

Rush exhaled shortly, in something that was almost a laugh.

The door slid open to reveal Wray in sweatpants and a camisole. Her fingers combed self-consciously through her tangled hair. She blinked in the bright light of the corridor.

They had clearly woken her.

"Oh no," she breathed. "What's happened?"

Young wasn't really sure how to answer that one.

"Could I ah—" Rush broke off, his free hand coming up to press itself against his temple, "sit down, possibly?"

"Yes," she said briskly, turning to hit the controls for the lights. "Yes, of course. Let me just make the bed."

Young pulled Rush forward into Wray's quarters. The room was larger than average, but smaller than his, with a lonely, neat desk in one corner, beneath a swath of charcoal drawings.

//You okay?// Young projected, watching Rush carefully.

Rush sent him a vague wave of what Young guessed was *supposed* to be reassurance, but in actuality was more like a disorganized burst of code.

He estimated that the other man had, on the outside, about twenty seconds left in him before he hit the deck.

"Camile," Young said, dragging Rush forward, "actually, would it be okay with you if—"

Rush started to go down and Young managed to get him onto the bed in one relatively graceful motion.

Wray bent down, her dark hair flowing behind her as she swept Rush's feet up.

"I'll get some water," she said, heading in the direction of the door.

//Hey,// Young projected. //Nick. You with me?//

//Yes,// Rush replied, looking at him from beneath half-lidded eyes.

//Is there a reason you have to do all this *now*?// Young asked, reaching up to push Rush's hair out of his eyes.

His forehead was warm, and his hair was damp.

//Why not wait a week?// Young continued. //Recover first. *Then* tackle all of this shit.//

Rush gave him his pained half smile.

Young entwined their fingers. //You're too tired for this.//

"I assure you," Rush said, his eyes closing, "that *waiting* will not improve anyone's situation."

Young sighed.

The door hissed open and Wray reentered the room, her step quick and light, her hair smelling of TJ's homemade shampoo as she knelt next to the bed, a metal cup of water in her hand.

"Is he all right?" she asked quietly.

"No," Young said, "not really, no."

Rush levered himself up on one elbow and took the water, downing it all in one go before collapsing back against the bed.

"Did you get any sleep this afternoon?" Wray asked Rush quietly. "You told me you were going to *rest*."

"Yes," Rush said, "of course I did."

"And would that be the fifteen minute nap you took before I woke you up and you fixed my mind while skipping dinner?" Young asked wryly.

"Yes," Rush said, lacing his tone with dignified disdain. "But this is not what we came here to discuss."

Wray looked at both of them, her expression difficult to read.

"Camile," Young said, "we're going to be gating back to Earth."

She locked eyes with him, her face briefly frozen in shock. One hand came to her mouth, and she looked away, abruptly, her face partially obscured behind the sweep of her hair.

"Camile," Young murmured.

"Yes," she said, her voice only fractionally unsteady. "Yes. This is just—this is phenomenal. Being able to go back and forth will be—"

"Camile," Young said again, "this is a one time thing. Everyone needs to go. One shot." He paused, and she shook her hair back to look at him. "There will be no coming back," Young finished.

She gave him a searching look.

"Why?" she whispered.

"Because," Rush murmured, his eyes closed, "the amount of energy required to power the gate will eventually destroy this ship."

"This doesn't sound like the *safest* plan," Wray said, looking at them skeptically.

"It's all we've got," Young said. "Time is a factor here. I need your help organizing the crew."

"When is this going to happen?" Wray asked quietly.

"Tomorrow," Young replied, the word as matter of fact as he could make it. "In about twelve hours, actually. We'll need to send someone in on the stones to let Homeworld Command know we're coming."

"What?" Wray breathed. "Why so soon? Why *now*? The transfer of the Ancient database alone is going to take days, at least—"

"It's done," Rush interjected, cracking his eyes to look in her direction. "It's finished. I started it weeks ago. Eli and Volker both have copies on external hard drives."

"But why didn't you say anything?" Wray breathed. "You must have known that this was a possibility."



Young shifted his weight subtly, trying to think of something, *anything* to tell her.

"False hope and whatnot," Rush said tiredly. "Does it matter? I'm sure all of this will require both explanation and rationalization to Homeworld Command following the return of the crew, so perhaps we can just focus on the logistics of the next twelve hours rather than dissecting the motivations of all parties involved, yes?"

//You're really very good at this,// Young sent.

//Yes I know. *You're* a terrible liar. I would have thought that you would have picked up at least a basic proficiency at this point.//

Wray looked at Rush, fixing him with an expression that fell far short of the stern gaze she seemed to be aiming for.

"This is going in your personnel file, you know."

"As a commendation or a reprimand?" Rush asked dryly.

"That depends on how it plays out," Wray said, unable to resist flashing him a quick smile.

Rush nodded and shut his eyes.

Young looked down at his hands.

"I should go," Wray said. "Start organizing. Twelve hours isn't a lot of time."

"No," Young said. "It isn't."

Several hours later, back in his own quarters, Young sat on the floor, his shoulders against the couch, staring at a blank page in the empty notebook he had borrowed from Wray. The feel of the pen between his fingers, the scrape of his clothing over his skin, the taste of recycled air—all of it felt atypically sharp.

Across the ship, preparations for departure were being made.

Wray was organizing the civilians into teams.

Scott was packing and crating samples they had catalogued, pieces of technology small enough to take with them.

TJ was organizing her medicinal samples.

Eli was supervising the transfer of any ancillary data off the mainframe.

He pressed his pen to paper and began to write.

*Dear JD,*

*I can't really tell you the details of the situation that I find myself in, but I think I may not make it back from this one. I wanted to let you know that*

He turned to a new page.

*Dear JD,*

*I hope you and the family are well. I received your last letter and I'm happy to hear that Luke is settling down somewhat and that*

He turned to a new page.

*Dear JD,*

*Please give my love to everyone. Thinking of you.*

He signed his name, ripped out the page, and folded it carefully before tucking it into the pocket of his jacket. He shut the notebook, placing it carefully atop the low table. He leaned back against the couch.

"I'm not gonna lie to you," he whispered, twisting to look at Rush, who was currently asleep on the couch. "This is not what I pictured."

"Which part?" Rush murmured dryly without opening his eyes.

Young jumped. "You're supposed to be *asleep*," he said.

"Yes well," Rush said, waving a hand vaguely.

"Don't you think that if you're going to be handling all this energy that you should go into this—I don't know, as *rested* as possible?"

"I don't think it matters," Rush replied.

"That's the spirit," Young said.

"The infrastructure to power the gate is wired into the circuitry of the ship at this point. I don't have to do anything except direct it. Eli's perfectly capable of handling everything once we're in close enough proximity."

"What about the *other* stuff?" Young said. "Ascending people. Ascending *yourself*. Don't you need to *not* feel like shit to do it properly?"

"As I stated," Rush murmured, "I don't think it matters."

"Can you not be an obstructionist jackass right now?" Young said, exasperated, "and just *talk* to me? I'm *helping* you. I'm literally *doing everything* you wanted."

"Not everything," Rush whispered, opening his eyes, and levering himself up on one elbow.

Young sighed, looking up at the ceiling. "Are you even going to *try* to ascend?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"That's not an answer, and the fact that it's not an answer is answer *enough*, you circuitous son of a bitch."

Rush smiled faintly. "Circuitous son of a bitch? I like that one."

"You would," Young said, trying to hang onto his irritation.

They were quiet for a moment.

"I'm going to make the attempt," Rush said quietly. "But you have to understand, that I can't do it this way. Even if we were fully linked. Even if you'd had time to fix my mind to the full extent that it could be fixed."

"Why *not*?" Young asked, the words barely audible.

"You know why," Rush murmured.

"Because you left her," Young whispered. "Because you left her alone."

"Yes."

"Nick. That's not how this is supposed to work. It's not about being perfect. It's not about making no mistakes, it's about *accepting* who you are—"

"Yes," Rush said cutting him off. "I'm aware."

"Then I don't see what the problem is."

Slowly, Rush pushed himself into a sitting position and dropped down onto the floor next to Young.

"Of course you do," the scientist whispered. "You've seen it all along."

"And you really think that blending your mind with some kind of artificial system is going *fix* the fact that you hate who you are so much that you think you *deserve* all of this—the slow unmaking of your mind, the overwriting of your genetic code?"

"Don't be so dramatic," Rush said, smiling faintly.

"Nick." Young looked away, his fingers pressing into his temple. "Let *me* help you. You don't need to combine with a *machine* to pull this off."

Rush said nothing for a moment, just shifted slightly closer to him.

"It horrifies you," he said finally. "This blending of the biological and the computational."

"Yeah," Young said. "Yeah, it does."

"Consider, though," Rush murmured, "that no one exists inside a closed system. Change is a consequence of interaction with the world. Consciousness is as mutable as anything else that is intrinsic to a person, and you need look no further to find an example of that than your own mind."

Young shook his head wordlessly.

"Very few people, even those who never meet a goa'uld or an AI, or a Nakai, escape alteration by their environment," Rush murmured, leaning his head against Young's shoulder. "There is nothing so terrible in this. It's a part of life."

"If you're trying to persuade me that this is a good idea, it's not working."

"I'm not trying to persuade you," Rush said. "I'm just—trying to make you feel better about the whole thing."

"Well, not your best work," Young said, wrapping an arm around him.

"I can see that," Rush replied. "But, consider what I said."

"I don't think I'm going to have any kind of personal revelation in the next six hours," Young replied quietly.

"It seems like a short time to you, doesn't it?" Rush asked.

"Yeah. Mainly because placed into the context of an entire human life, it *is* a short time."

Rush nodded fractionally, his head still resting against Young's shoulder.

"What is time like for you?" Young asked him. "You're getting worse at conceptualizing it—you have to make an effort to even talk about it correctly."

"It stretches almost infinitely," Rush said, opening his fingers in a graceful wave, "within finite bounds."

"Um," Young said, "I can't even imagine what that's like."

"Think of a number line," Rush murmured, "and the endlessly subdividable span between zero and one."

"Yeah, mathematically I get you," Young said, running a hand over Rush's upper arm as the scientist shivered. "It's not like I inherited a knowledge of quantum mechanics and number theory and somehow skipped the concept of *limits*."

"Look," Rush said clearly amused, "in my defense, sometimes you don't *think* about what you know."

"I asked what it was *like*."

"Difficult," Rush said after a moment. "Transient things—become less so."

"So six hours seems long," Young murmured.

"No," Rush said. "'Six hours' is meaningless to me."

"That must be weird."

"It's somewhat inconvenient."

They were quiet for a moment.

"So how are we going to explain this to everyone? The fact that we're not going."

"What needs explaining? We'll be the last to go through the gate and then—we just," Rush made a sweeping motion with one hand, "don't."

"They can dial *in* you know. Now that they have all those ZPMs?"

"No they can't. The gate will remain open until the end, transmitting data. Even if, for some reason, they were to cut it off on their end, they can't dial back in if I don't allow them to do so."

"Okay fine. But people *here* are going to realize that there might be a problem with you going back."

"They won't," Rush said dismissively, waving a hand. "They won't think about it. Too many other things going on."

"Eli *already* knows."

"Well, Eli's a unique case."

"What about TJ? What about Chloe? What about *Greer*?"

"All right," Rush said. "Possibly some of them—"

Young's door chime sounded.

Young looked at Rush with raised eyebrows before getting to his feet.

He crossed the room and hit the door controls to see Chloe standing in the doorway, her eyes wide, her expression serious.

"Hi colonel," she said quietly.

"Hi," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"It's true that we're gating back?"

"Yup," Young said.

Chloe looked at him for a moment.

"Is he here?" she asked.

//What was that you were saying, about no one figuring this out?// he shot at Rush.

Rush sent a wave of exhausted exasperation in his direction. //Let her in,// the scientist said.

"Yeah," Young murmured, stepping aside, "he's here."

//You want a minute?//

Rush sent him a wave of assent, and Young stepped out into the hallway.

To his surprise, Eli was standing just to the left of the doorway.

"Hi," Eli said, leaning against the wall, looking utterly miserable. "I came with Chloe. I'm not just creepily standing outside your door. Just so you know."

"Hi," Young replied, coming to stand next to him.

For a moment, they said nothing.

"There are some people," Eli said, "that are going to take this really hard."

"I know," Young said, burying his hands in his pockets. "Did Chloe figure it out on her own? Or did you tell her?"

"I didn't tell her," Eli said. "She knew. As soon as Wray said that we were going back, she knew. She is—"

"Pretty sharp," Young finished for him.

"Actually, I was going to say—really upset. And I don't think she's necessarily worked out that *you're* staying as well. That's going to be less obvious, even to the people really in the know."

"I'm not sure what I can do about that."

"You can *tell* people."

Young sighed. "Eli, this is hard enough as it is without—" Young waved a hand.

"Yeah," Eli said. "Yeah, I get that. But I don't think you guys know—either of you, really, how much you *mean* to everyone."

Young said nothing.

Eli said nothing.

At the back of his mind, he could feel the distressed swirl of Rush's thoughts as he watched Chloe cry.

"Can I—" Eli broke off. "Can I be in the last group?"

"Yeah," Young said. "Of course you can."

Young shut his eyes against the blurring of the corridor lights.

After a few moments he said, "can you do something for me?"

"Yeah. Duh. Anything."

Young reached into his pocket and pulled out the neatly folded paper.

"Can you get this to my brother? The SGC has his contact information."

"Yeah," Eli breathed, pulling the letter out of his grip.

Several hours later, on his way to the gateroom, Young passed the open infirmary doors.

TJ was just visible, the light glinting off her hair as she pulled selected samples off shelves and packed them carefully.

"Hey," he said, stopping to lean in the doorframe.

She turned slowly and looked over at him with lacy red eyes.

"Hey," she whispered.

"TJ," he said quietly. "I—" He couldn't finish.

"I know," she said.

"Do you?"

"Of course I do."

He looked at her.

"What will happen to you," she whispered, "when you reach the collision point?"

"I don't know," he lied.

She nodded, and looked away.

"I'll miss you," she said, her voice breaking.

"Can you explain it to them?" he asked quietly. "You and Eli? All the people we didn't tell." He looked down. "Greer. Wray. Scott. James. The science team. Varro."

TJ nodded, her jaw clenched tight.

"Thanks," he said quietly.

They looked at each other for a moment.

"See you in the gateroom," he said quietly.

"Yeah," TJ said, her eyes locked on his. "See you there."

He turned and ducked out of the infirmary. As he started down a long stretch of empty corridor toward the gateroom he took a few slow, deep breaths to steady himself. After a few moments, he felt more than saw the AI fall in next to him.

"Please go with them," Emily said, flickering. "Please."

"Sorry," Young replied. "But it's not happening."

"It will be easier for him if you go," the AI whispered.

"I'm not sure if you're capable of understanding this, kiddo," he murmured, "but this isn't just about him. It's about *me* as well."

"I know," Emily whispered.

"This is what I've decided," Young said.

"I know," Emily whispered again before vanishing.

He walked into the gateroom to see Eli, Brody, and Volker huddled over the set of monitors at the back of the room.

Rush stood a bit apart from them, looking at the gate.

"Are we ready?" Young asked the four of them.

Rush looked back at Eli, raising his eyebrows.

Eli unclipped his radio.

"Hey Chloe, it's me. How are we looking in terms of the in-circuit testing stuff?"

"We just finished." Chloe's voice crackled over the radio. "The integrity is good—no chance that we're going to fry our navigation or something when we do this."

Young felt the sickening drop of the ship coming out of FTL.

"Whoa," Eli said. "A little warning would be *nice*," he shot Rush an irritated glare.

Rush gave him a fractional shrug.

"Um," Chloe's voice came uncertainly over the radio. "Yeah, we've got an obelisk planet dead ahead of us, but barely within sensor range. I'm just confirming that this is what we *want*, right?"

"Yup," Eli confirmed. "Shut off sublight and just—let her pull us in. Long and slow."



"The planet looks like a nice place," Volker said, looking at the monitor near the gate. "Spectrally speaking, at least."

"Okay," Eli said into his radio. "Lisa, can you lower the collectors? We're going to start dialing."

"Right now?" Park asked. "You don't want to sync up the dialing with the initiation of energy collection? All this power is going to need somewhere to go, you know."

"The syncing is being taken care of. Just go when you're ready."

"Okay then," Park said. A few seconds ticked past. "Collectors are down."

Eli turned to Brody. "Dial it up."

Young watched Rush.

His arms were crossed over his chest. He stood alone, regarding the gate with an unswerving intensity, his shoulders straight, his hair falling into his eyes.

At the back of Young's mind he felt Rush's thoughts shift into a pattern more ordered, more obscure, as he took down the firewall that separated his mind from the AI.

The gate began to spin.

Incoming energy met outgoing power requirements in a harmony that echoed weakly through his mind, flowing from his link with Rush until, with a final clear tone, the event horizon exploded to life and stabilized.

Though it was something that, in the beginning of his time on Destiny, Young would have given anything to see—he couldn't bring himself to feel happy about it now.

Rush's thoughts returned to their normal, disordered spiral as the firewall dropped back down.

For a moment, the science team was silent, looking at the gate.

"Holy crap," Eli said. "Somehow, I didn't think it would actually work."

Rush turned, eyebrows raised, to shoot Eli a disdainful look.

Young caught Brody's eye. "Send our GDO frequency."

Brody entered a command.

They waited.

"Everett, is that you?" O'Neill's voice came through over the open radio channel in a burst of static.

"Yes, sir," Young replied.

"Nice work," O'Neill said over the unmistakable sound of cheering. "Start sending your people through at any time. We've got the gateroom prepped for hot arrivals."

"Will do," Young said, looking at Rush.

For a moment, the room was silent.

"Well," Young said into the stillness. "Call them in."

"Hey Camile," Eli said into the radio. "We're ready for the first group."

"I'll be on the bridge," Rush said shortly, spinning on his heel and heading toward the door, which opened at his approach.

Young sighed. //People are going to want to—//

//No,// Rush snapped already out of the room. //Absolutely not.//

//All right.// Young said. //Go.//

He felt Rush try and fail to suppress a surge of relief.

Young was certain that he was equally unsuccessful in suppressing his own wave of disappointment.

Young stood alone against the wall at the back of the gateroom, watching Wray tick off names as crew members passed through at seven second intervals.

Nearly all of the nonessential personnel had been evacuated when Greer joined him against the back wall.

"So," Greer said. "Where is he?"

"The bridge," Young murmured.

"Why?" Greer asked pointedly.

"You think he could handle this?" Young asked, breaking off as James and Barnes approached.

"Final sweep was clear," James said. "Everything on Wray's list is accounted for and packed up, ready to be sent through."

"Good," Young murmured.

"Eli's got all the kinos on search mode," Barnes said, "and rigged up to a feed so that Homeworld Command is getting video of the entire ship."

Young smiled faintly.

"Check in with Wray," he said. "If all the nonessential personnel are through, we can start transport of equipment."

They nodded and moved off.

"Yeah," Greer said quietly, watching TJ and Varro come through the door, bags over their shoulders. "This isn't really his kind of scene."

"Nope," Young replied, just as quietly.

"I'm gonna go get the cargo set up," Greer said, his eyes lingering on TJ before he turned and headed over toward Wray.

Young watched TJ scan the room, the lights glinting predictably, beautifully, off her hair until finally, she turned her head and saw him, standing only a few feet away.

"Hi," she said soundlessly.

He couldn't reply.

She dropped her bag.

He stepped forward, and wrapped his arms around her.

She hugged him back, hard and fierce and long before she pulled away.

Young clasped hands with Varro.

TJ looked up at the ceiling and took a shaky breath, then lowered her eyes to meet his gaze, her expression composed.

"Tell him thank you," she said quietly. "And tell him that—I understand."

Young nodded.

TJ picked up her bag.

He watched them walk away together, dark silhouettes against the brightness of the gate as they paused at the event horizon to look back at him.

First Varro and then TJ vanished into the blue.

He watched the equipment go through the gate over the next twenty minutes, followed by James and Barnes and Atienza.

Young walked over to stand next to Wray.

"Who's left?" he asked her.

"Not many," she said quietly. "You, me, Greer, Scott, and the science team."

Young's eyes flicked over to take in Volker and Brody, who were standing together at the monitor bank.

"Time to go, guys," he called.

They walked forward, bags over their shoulders.

"You sure?" Volker asked, "something could come up, I mean—"

"We're good," Young said, smiling faintly.

"I kind of feel weird about—" Volker broke off. "Leaving this place. It just seems so—" he readjusted his bag.

"Sudden?" Young said dryly.

"So *wrong*," Volker corrected him quietly, "weird as that sounds. It's become home."

"Yeah," Young said. "I know what you mean."

"What's ah—" Brody broke off. "What's going to happen with you and Rush?"

"We worked something out," Young said. "Don't worry about it."

They looked at him skeptically.

"Guys," Young said. "I *said* don't worry about it."

"Heard *that* one before," Volker murmured.

"Time to go," Wray said, as she came to stand at Young's shoulder, her heels echoing on the deck plating.

They nodded reluctantly and went through the gate.

"Call the rest of them," Young said.

Wray nodded and spoke quietly into her radio.

Chloe, Scott, and Park showed up together, bags over their shoulders.

Chloe's chin was stubbornly angled up, her eyes wet.

"We'll see you on the other side, sir." Though it hadn't been intended that way, there was more than a hint of a question in Scott's statement.

"Sure," Young said, not able to help the way his eyes slid away from Scott's. "Sure you will."

Scott nodded.

Chloe looked at Young, then back at Scott and Park.

"You guys go first," she said quietly. "I'll be right behind you."

Scott looked at her uncertainly, but at Young's nod, he turned and stepped through the gate.

"They're in the hydroponics lab," Park murmured. "All three of them. If you're looking."

"Thanks," Young said.

Park stepped toward the gate, but stopped just short of the event horizon and turned back. "I just want to say, just in case, just on the off-chance that I don't get another opportunity," she hesitated, looking at him. "That I always thought that you guys—that you did a good job."

Young nodded.

"Just—" Park said again, "just a really fantastic job." She turned to look at Wray. "Everyone. All of you. All three of you."

Young nodded. Wray smiled.

"I tried to tell him that," Park whispered, "But he wouldn't let me. You know how he is. I think he knows, but—tell him, for me, will you? At least he'll let you finish a sentence." She smiled wanly.

"Yeah," Young said. "I'll tell him."

Park nodded, biting her lip before she whirled and stepped through the gate.

Young turned to look at Chloe.

She looked back at him.

"I'm so sorry," Young whispered hoarsely. "For—everything. Everything you went through. For everything they did. It was *my* fault that you—"

She stepped in, reaching up to wrap her arms around him in a hug.

"It's all right," she said into his shoulder, the words high and tight. "Are you coming back?" The question was barely audible.

He shook his head once.

He felt her nod.

Her arms tightened around him before she let him go and stepped back.

"I'm sorry I'm such a crier," she said, the words barely understandable. "It makes everything harder."

Young shook his head. "Nah," he managed.

She nodded at him, running the edge of a sleeve over her face.

"Goodbye," she whispered.

He couldn't say anything so instead he reached out to squeeze her shoulder.

Her hand came up to rest over his for a brief moment before they broke apart and she turned and walked through the gate, her head angled up, her shoulders set straight.

Young and Wray stood together in the empty gateroom.

"Everett," Wray said quietly, her eyes lingering at the place where Chloe had vanished.

"Camile," he replied.

She walked over to stand directly in front of him, her eyes red rimmed. "He can't leave," she whispered. "Can he?"

"No," Young said quietly. "He can't."

"I see," Wray said quietly. "I—should have known."

Young shook his head. "We kept the whole thing pretty quiet."

"I'm surprised he's letting you stay," Camile said.

"Well," Young rubbed his jaw, "that's not really his decision to make, is it?"

"I suppose not." Wray gracefully tucked a stray lock of hair into place behind her ear. "But he has quite the track record when it comes to unilateral action." She gave him a brief, regretful smile.

Young smiled back at her. "You going to explain this to the SGC for me?"

"I'm sure," Wray's voice faded away to nothing, and she took a deep breath. "I'm sure that I'll come up with something."

"Go on," Young said quietly, indicating the gate with his eyes. "I'll make sure Greer and Eli get through okay."

"All right," Wray whispered, picking up the bag that was resting near the gate. "You'll be in my thoughts," she said quietly. "Both of you."

"Thanks," Young said.

"Always," Wray whispered and vanished through the event horizon.

Young looked down at the list in his hand and checked her name off. He walked over to the bank of monitors near the door, and set down the clipboard. He took a seat, and pulled out his radio.

The silence of the empty gateroom pressed down upon him.

"Eli," he said, broadcasting on a closed channel. "Drag them down here, will you?"

He didn't have to wait long. Eli and Greer showed up with Rush in tow after less than five minutes.

"Hey," Young said, his voice admirably steady.

"I'm staying," Greer said. "I'm staying until the end."

"No you're not," Rush said dismissively, coming to stand next to Young, glancing down at the power flow distribution that was displayed on the monitor. "Because that's a fucking terrible idea. The gate could become unstable, there are going to be fluctuations in space-time which might necessitate shutting down the—"

"Yeah or whatever." Greer broke in. "The point is, you never know what might happen. You might find you need an extra pair of hands." He looked at Rush.

"No," Rush said evenly, looking Greer straight in the eye.

"I'm afraid not, sergeant," Young said. "That's an order."

"We'll be *fine*," Rush added.

"Are you *sure*?" Greer asked, still looking intently at Rush, as if he were waiting for some kind of signal.

Rush cocked his head and gave Greer a pointed look. "Yes," he said quietly. "Quite sure. As we discussed."

//?// Young sent in Rush's direction.

He got a wave of distracted reassurance in return.

Greer sighed, and shoved his hands into his pockets. "I'm going to miss you, Doc," he said.

"Yes well," Rush replied, looking away. "I suspect that if I survive this, there's some chance that I'll miss you as well."

"Stay out of trouble. Don't unmake the universe or something."

"That's been taken off the table, I'm afraid," Rush said dryly, giving Greer a pained half smile.

"See you on the other side, sir," Greer said quietly, nodding at him before he stepped through.

"Everyone's gone?" Eli asked.

"Yup," Young said, getting to his feet.

"Okay," Eli said.

The word lingered uncomfortably in the air above them.

"Eli," Rush said, looking away. "We don't have all day."

"You're such a jerk," Eli whispered. "But I'll miss you anyway." He bent to pick up his bag and settled it over one shoulder before turning to Young. "Don't let him push you around," he said.

"I won't," Young replied, smiling faintly.

Eli extended a hand and Young grabbed it, then pulled him into a hug.

"I couldn't have done it without you," Young said, letting him go. "Any of it."

Eli nodded, biting his lip. He turned toward Rush.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

"Well, good luck," Eli whispered finally, turning toward the open gate.

"Eli," Rush snapped.

"Yeah?" He turned back.

"Your work is consistently flawless," Rush whispered, fixing Eli with the full force of his gaze. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Really?" The word was almost inaudible.

Rush nodded.

"Thanks," Eli said. "I think, um—" he broke off, his eyes fixed on Rush. "I think that if it wasn't for you—I wouldn't be who I am now. You know?"

Rush nodded again.

Eli turned and passed through the gate.

They stood shoulder to shoulder in front of the open wormhole, looking at the blue-white glow of the event horizon.

Young listened to the distressed swirl of Rush's thoughts, absorbed with the information transfer, opaquely agitated.

"Hey," Young said. "They'll be all right."



"Yes," Rush said absently. "Yes, I'm sure."

"Something's bothering you," Young said.

"Nothing's bothering me," Rush whispered, looking away. He took a deep breath, and Young felt the flow of his thoughts freeze into a hard and determined shell before the frenetic spiral reengaged.

"So—" Young said. "What now?"

"Well," Rush replied. "We're approximately two hundred and fifty thousand kilometers away from the point at which space time will begin to warp, our phase will begin to flux, and incoming energy will begin to destabilize the structural integrity of the circuitry." He fixed Young with a searching look.

"So we should get going, then, is what you're saying?" Young asked mildly.

"Yes," Rush murmured.

Young gestured silently toward the door.

Rush didn't move.

"You're sure," the scientist said quietly, "that I can't convince you to go back?"

"Sorry, genius," Young whispered. "No dice."

Rush sighed and shut his eyes.

"Thanks, by the way," Young said.

"For *what*?" Rush asked, his voice pained.

"For respecting my decision. For not making a forcefield and effectively shoving me through that gate."

"Believe me when I say," Rush whispered, "that I am quite familiar with the importance of personal agency, having had mine stripped from me in so many ways."

The irregular light from the open gate played over the pallor of his skin, the darkness of his eyes.

"Yeah," Young said. "I get that."

Rush looked down at the deck plating, his thoughts a disorganized swirl of acute misery.

"Hey," Young said. "It's not that bad. In the grand scheme of things, we're in the black. Crew home, trapped people getting untrapped, fulfilling missions—" he broke off at the expression on Rush's face.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves, shall we?" Rush whispered.

"I just want you know that it's okay," Young said, projecting calm as he spoke, trying to quiet the distressed flare of Rush's thoughts. "I don't want this—" he gestured vaguely at himself, "to be one of the things that holds you back."

"It won't," Rush said with some difficulty. A muscle in his cheek twitched slightly. "At least—not for the reasons you think it should."

"You've said something like that before." Young felt an abrupt surge of unease.

"Have I?" Rush asked. "I don't remember."

"You wouldn't," Young murmured.

Rush glanced at him with a faint smile. "It's still just me up here," he said, tapping the side of his temple with two fingers. "And speaking of which, would you mind—" Rush broke off, his expression fracturing into uncertainty, "taking a look at—" he made a vague motion in the air around his temple. "Would you see if there's anything left you can fix in a relatively time-efficient manner?"

"Yeah," Young said quietly. "You think it might help you pull this thing off?"

"Possibly," Rush replied. "It's worth a try, anyway."

Young reached up, his thumb pressing gently against Rush's too-warm temple, his fingers tangling through damp strands of the other man's hair.

"This is going to work better if we—" Young trailed off.

With an abrupt spike of misery that seemed to drive itself into Young's mind, Rush stepped forward.

Young pulled him in.

Rush kissed him, his mind a shrieking torrent of acute distress.

Young projected as much calm as he could into—

He felt the unmistakable sensation of a needle being jammed into his arm.

He shoved Rush away, unbalancing the other man entirely, sending him to the floor of the gateroom.

It was too late.

"God *damn it*," Young roared, dragging Rush back off the floor by the front of his jacket.

"You *bastard*," he said, the words nearly soundless as he yanked the syringe out of Rush's hand and threw it across the room. "I trusted you. All that fucking talk about *agency*? I TRUSTED you."

Rush looked at him, his expression tight and miserable and impossible to fully interpret. "Yes," he said, his hands extended in front of him, palms out. "I'm aware."

"I *trusted* you." Young tried to shout, but whatever Rush had injected him with was working quickly.

Too quickly.

Without saying anything, Rush stepped in to catch him as his knees buckled, controlling his fall to the floor in front of the open gate. The scientist knelt on the deck plating, his chest to Young's back, arms wrapped around him.

Young's head rested on his shoulder.

In front of him, the gate lit up the room.

It was all he could see.

"If you thought," Rush whispered, his voice cracking, "even for a *moment*, that I would let you stay here and *die*, then you never really knew me at all."

Young clenched his jaw, as if such an act could lock down the distress that tore at every part of him.

"Don't pull it forward," Rush said, barely able to speak. "You'll be all right if you don't pull it forward."

Young felt the other man's hands clenching the material of his jacket.

His thoughts spiraled into a familiar, distressed shriek at the thought of the scientist *alone*, attempting something nearly *impossible*—locked to a piece of metal as it was torn apart.

"It's all right," Rush said, picking up on his thoughts of death and destruction. One hand came up to run through Young's hair. "It won't be like that."

His voice was calm and assured, but there was nothing in his words or tone that Young could trust.

"You're a lot of work," Young managed, wishing he could see the scientist's face.

"And what's work, anyway?" Rush murmured into his hair. "Just force, applied over a distance. Nothing so difficult about that."

Young couldn't speak. His throat was closing.

"If I make it," Rush whispered. "I'll try to let you know."

//How can you *do* this?// The projection was tortured, warped by the distress that now had no physical outlet.

"How can I *not*?" Rush asked, his voice wavering. "You'll be all right, eventually."

//I'll never forgive you for this.// Young managed to project past the despair that weighed down every turn of his thoughts.

//I know,)// Rush whispered, blending their thoughts together into one bright, tangled mass of misery laced with guilt and relief. //I know.)//

Despite Young's best efforts, sensation and conscious thought slipped away from him until he was left with nothing except the familiar feel of Rush's thoughts against his own.

In the end, even that faded.

# What Goes Undelivered

March 14th, 2011

Rush stands alone in front of the open gate.

The ship is quiet and dark.

His arms are crossed as he stares intently at the event horizon through which, even now, he's sending data.

He might as well give them everything he can.

There's no reason not to.

He will leave the gate open until the last.

There's a part of him, and not a small part, that is tempted to walk through. But he knows what will happen if he does. He would have, *possibly*, a few days of steadily decreasing coherency, unless Young could pull out some fantastic, eleventh hour save—and, Rush thinks, maybe he could.

But it is not currently, nor has it ever been, an option for him.

Because without him, the AI, Mandy, Ginn, and Franklin will all be lost forever.

"Hi," the AI says quietly from behind him.

"Hello," he replies, angling his head to the side.

In his peripheral vision he sees it. It's executing as Daniel, leaning against the monitor bank.

"There's no reason not to take the energy," it says quietly. "Not now."

"True," he says.

Already, he misses Young.

He opens his mind and lets in the energy that Destiny has been trying to give him for weeks now. It floods through every part of him and he feels, physically, fantastic. Better than he's felt since he boarded the ship. Better than, maybe, he's ever felt.

He's not cold.

He's not in pain.

He's not tired.

He just feels—

Better.

He walks over to the monitor bank and pulls a stack of papers from beneath it, tied together with a liberated bootlace. He looks at them, undecided.

"What are those?" The AI asks him.

"Just a few things I was planning to send back to Earth," he says, with difficulty. "Possibly."

The ship is so quiet. The blue-white of the event horizon sears his eyes.

"Why 'possibly'?"

"It's hard to explain."

"I'd like to know why," the AI insists in Daniel's most careful, most compassionate tone.

"Well," Rush begins, and his voice is utterly steady, made so by as much willpower as he has to bring to bear. "They're messages. Or items that certain individuals might find useful."

"Like what?" the AI asks gently, when it becomes apparent that he's not going to continue.

"A letter to the current head of UC Berkeley's math department describing Chloe's work on the Riemann hypothesis and requesting his assistance in helping her gain admission to any mathematics department she should wish to join. Some notes that Eli will find of interest. A few other things. For other people."

"You did this because you want to help them?"

"Yes."

"If that is the case, why would you hesitate to send them through?"

"Because. It may make things more difficult," Rush says, clenching his teeth, trying to control the shrieking turmoil, the sense of loss in his mind that threatens, as always, to spiral out of his control. "For them."

"These things—" the AI says, and its projection flickers. "They are inputs that will result in sadness?"

"Yes," Rush says, his throat tight. "Yes, you're correct." He looks down. "I think it might be easier to let them always believe that I—"

He can explain this to the AI. *He can*. There is nothing so terrible in this that it should cause his throat to close. There is nothing so tragic in his position. This is his choice.

This has *always* been his choice.

"It's easier to let them believe that I didn't care as much as I actually did."

"Easier for whom?" the AI asks, oddly insightful.

"For everyone."

"Send them through," the AI says after a short pause. "Please. I believe—" it breaks off, flickering, having difficulty holding its projection. "I also believe that Chloe should go to graduate school."

That surprises a brief, pained laugh out of him.

At the sound, the AI's projection shatters into Gloria, into Emily, before reforming hazily as Jackson. It looks miserable. The CPU is at maximal capacity.

He can *feel* it running its algorithms.

Optimal outputs are known, but not achievable through any means.

Required inputs are missing.

Algorithms loop. And loop. And loop.

There is no additional space to run more.

"What *is* this?" The AI asks him with Daniel's voice, flickering, bewildered, nearly debilitated.

"This is heartbreak, love," he whispers.

"I don't like heartbreak," it whispers back.

For a brief second it flickers into Gloria before reforming again, determinedly, as Jackson.

It won't do that to him.

It's trying not to manifest as Gloria now, even though it wants to. Even though his need to see her, her face, her hair, her hands, her eyes—the rhythm of her gait and the set of her shoulders and her *voice*, is nearly choking both of them.

"This is a requirement of our solution set," Rush says, his voice straining to stay steady as he tries to comfort it with his words.

He is unable to look at it, unable to look at the gate.

He brings a hand to his face.

Their solution set.

So he saves Mandy and he saves Ginn and he saves Franklin, but he loses Gloria forever. He helps the AI; he gates the crew back to Earth, but Colonel Young—

God.

For all the concern that Everett Young had always displayed about his state of mind, about his sanity, his *agency*—in the end, it's really the colonel himself who was robbed of choice here.

The irony is not lost on Rush.

He rebuilt the man's neural networks using his own mind as a model, using his own energy to maintain the repairs, to keep them in check. To hold them to their purpose as a scaffold, nothing more. Given enough time, such a strategy would have been fine. His scaffolding would have faded as Young's mind healed.

But there had been more damage.

Has enough time elapsed? Will his repairs hold?

He doesn't know.

If not—then this—this act of sending Young back through the gate, it won't just be a betrayal. If he dies here, at the edge of the multiverse, which is a real possibility if things go wrong, then—this act—

It will be, certainly, the most terrible thing he's ever done to another person.

But the alternative had been worse. If he had let Young stay, he wouldn't have survived.

"This solution set is insufficiently optimal," the AI whispers, flickering. "But there was no better set."

"No," Rush says thickly, his mind a shrieking, edged mass of misery, "I don't think there was."

"Nick," it says. "It's time to let go. This cannot continue."

He looks down at the small packet of paper in his hands. It's time to let them all go. Tamara Johansen. Camile Wray. Vanessa James. Dale Volker. Adam Brody. Lisa Park. His science team.

Chloe Armstrong.

Eli Wallace.

Ronald Greer.



They'll be all right.

There's nothing in this collection of papers for Colonel Young.

What would he leave him? What *could* he possibly leave?

He feels the injustice of what goes undelivered as he puts the letters into the event horizon and watches them slowly disappear. He throws his head back for a moment, squeezing his eyes shut and god, *god*—

He *can't* do this to Young, he *can't*. He cannot *stand* it. His own mind is unable to contain the misery that he is feeling and it spills over into the CPU and—

He sinks to his knees, curling in on himself, his face in his hands.

"Nick." The AI can barely speak to him. "Nick. Please." It tries to touch him, but its hand passes straight through. "Nick, the ratio of the change in my utility to the change in your utility is equal to one. I am sorry. I am *sorry*. Please do not cry."

"I'm not crying," he says.

"Yes you are."

"No, I'm not," he says.

"You are making a processing error. Please. *Please*—" It flickers out and back in. "Why do you hold to this? It's time to let go."

He lies down on the deck plating, unable to look at it. Unable to talk to it. Unable to do anything other than to hold the cyclonic desolation of his thoughts away from the CPU; tethering the flare-and-spiral that he *hates*, that defines all that he is, to his own mind, where it belongs.

He lies there. For the span of fifty thousand kilometers.

"Nick," the AI whispers to him.

"All right."

He sits.

He takes a deep breath and gets to his feet, turning away from the gate. "All right."

His steps echo softly on the deck plating.

The AI walks beside him without sound.

This is not the hard part.

He has already done the hard part.

They reach the door to the gateroom and they stop.

It looks at him. It has switched back to Daniel.

"Nick," it says, the light from the event horizon playing dimly over Daniel's features.

"We will be together?"

"Yes, sweetheart," he murmurs.

"Until the end?"

"Yes."

"I wish I could touch you," Daniel whispers. "I've always wished that."

He nods.

"Neither of us will be the same," it says.

"We'll be better," he murmurs to it, his eyes closing in an agonized, prolonged blink.

"Better."

"Better," it echoes quietly. "Colonel Young did not think so."

"Colonel Young—" he chokes.

"He loves you," the AI whispers. "He *loves* you."

"I know." The words are without sound.

"You will not be the same," Daniel says, barely intelligible as his projection flickers and his expression breaks.

"No," Rush says. "I won't."

"Do it without me," Daniel whispers. "I want you to. If you leave me here, and you ascend, he will still love you."

"I can't," Rush replies, his throat closing. "I won't. I won't leave you."

"Nick."

"Come on sweetheart," Rush murmurs. "I'm ready."

"Nick. I—" Daniel fractures into Gloria, into Emily, and finally it settles on Young, because in this moment, at the end, that is whom he wishes to see, and that is whom the AI wishes to be. "I also love you. Not like he did. But, I *love* you."

"Yes," he says, not entirely certain whom he is addressing. "I know. Likewise."

He takes down his firewall and this time, instead of being pulled into Destiny, Destiny floods in.

There is no one to stop it.

He feels the ship like he feels his body and this is not new, but this time, *this time*, they merge not only in the CPU but in his mind as well. Destiny feels what he does. His heart beats wildly in his chest. The eroding architecture of his mind cracks under the strain, circuits triggering, firing, burning out, and fading like sparklers in the dark. Gloria. Everett. His brother, drowning, torture, the tangle of bed sheets and the strains of piano, of music in a white-walled room, in concert halls where he watched Gloria, the lights shining on her hair and on her violin as she played the first movement of—

*I'm sorry.*

His mind shatters to the sound of Mendelssohn's violin concerto in E minor.

When he opens his eyes, it is to the sound of the concerto coming through the speaker system.

He presses the tips of his fingers against his mouth.

This is not what he expected.

But he remembers now that it never is.

The strain of controlling both the ship and his own body with a combination of the CPU and the hardware of a human mind is nearly unmanageable. It is also not physiologically sustainable for long, not in his current condition.

That's fine.

He doesn't need long.

He doesn't *have* long.

He looks at the gate.

He is not human, but neither is he Ancient. He is certainly not a machine, but he is also dubious about whether he is truly alive.

He has become a thing difficult to classify.

A thing.

Colonel Young had been very clear on that point.

He is doing his best.

He no longer thinks in algorithms. Or perhaps it's that his algorithms do not feel like algorithms anymore.

He is new, and he is old.

In the back of his mind, an iterative, bit-rate reduction runs. His memories of Atlantis, of his daughter, of his first self-erasure, of millennia of empty, purposeless wandering, have already begun to compress down—hard and rapid. He watches them, folding and fading away, leaving more space for who he is now.

For Nicholas Rush.

He wonders how far it will get before he will have to stop it.

In many ways, it doesn't matter.

In many ways, it's the only thing that does.

He thinks of Colonel Young. He thinks of how to explain this to him. He doubts he will get the chance, and if he does, he wonders if the running of an iterative-bit rate reduction will make any difference to the other man.

Somehow, he doubts it.

Discrete intervals of time pass while he examines what he is. It takes him only tens of seconds to finish interrogating his own processes.

All over the ship, the lights flare and brighten into a warm, yellow glow.

Every door comes open.

He knows where he has to go.

The chair waits for him.

Mandy, Ginn, and Dr. Franklin need to be unlocked.

The edge of the multiverse approaches.

## Chapter Sixty Eight

When he came back to consciousness the first time, all the space that defined his mind, every pathway and trajectory made and taken by his thoughts was trafficked by nothing but agony.

There was no space for anything else.

When he came back to consciousness the second time, he was able to open his eyes. He was able to identify TJ, her head resting on her arms, slumped forward over the edge of his bed, a blanket over her shoulders. In some other part of the room, he could hear quiet clicks of plastic against cardboard.

"Check," Eli said quietly.

"Whatever," Chloe whispered. "I don't feel like playing anyway."

His mind felt like it had been torn apart.

In a way, it had been.

He shut his eyes.

The third time he woke, Greer was sitting next to him.

"Hey," Greer whispered.

"You knew," Young whispered, his voice dry and cracked.

"No," Greer said. "Not exactly. I—"

"Get out," Young hissed.

"I—"

"Get. *Out*."

"I'll send TJ in," Greer said.

"Don't bother."

On the fourth day after the crew returned from Destiny, Young woke up to find sunlight streaming into a small, white hospital room. Outside, he could see a parking lot. In the

distance, if he squinted, he could make out the jagged cut of the Rocky Mountains rising distantly behind the cars.

The preceding days tangled together in his mind. He didn't bother trying to untwist and order his thoughts.

"Everett."

Wray was sitting next to him.

"Camile," he said, looking back at her.

"Hi," she said, her voice wavering.

He sat forward, his fingers running through his hair, the heels of his hands pressing against his temples.

"Do you know where you are?" she asked, motionless, beside him. If his sudden movement had startled her, it didn't show.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I know."

Wray nodded, her lips pressed together, her eyes wet and shut.

For a few moments, neither of them spoke.

"They don't understand what happened to you," Wray whispered. "Or why we returned so abruptly. There's going to be an inquiry." She paused. "There are going to be several."

Young said nothing.

"I'll do what I can," Wray whispered, sitting forward. "I'll do *everything* I can to—"

"Why are you here, Camile?" Young asked. "Go home. Go be with your family."

"Everyone is here," she whispered. "Under quarantine for a few days while they check our blood work. They've blocked off an entire hospital wing for us—the medical facilities at the base weren't really—well. Everyone wanted to be out. Back in the real world. I guess General O'Neill pulled some strings."

"For how long?" Young asked.

"One more day," Wray whispered. "But they're talking about keeping you longer."

"Are they."

"You were unresponsive for two days. Far longer than whatever it was he drugged you with stayed in your system."

Young nodded, barely able to tolerate even a peripheral reference to Rush.

Wray edged forward in her chair, resting her forearms against his mattress. "No one has told them," she whispered, "that you and he were linked. I know. Greer and TJ know. Scott knows. The science team knows. But no one has said anything."

"Telford knows," Young whispered.

"He hasn't said anything either," Wray murmured.

"It will come out," Young said.

"Yes," Wray replied. "Eventually, I think it will."

They were silent for a moment.

Wray moved from the chair to sit next to him on the bed.

"Do you know?" she whispered, her voice choked and tight, one hand coming to rest on his shoulder. "What happened to him?"

"No." Young could barely speak the word. "Do you?"

"No," Wray said. "Eli is going through the data that we got through the open wormhole," she whispered.

"Ah," Young said.

"But we know that he was successful in getting Ginn and Mandy and Jeremy out of the memory banks," Wray said. "Ginn came through the gate. She's here. She's helping Eli go through the data."

"Good."

"The other two—they came through the gate as well, but—they didn't stay."

Young nodded.

"There's something else you should know," Wray said, her expression freezing and fracturing in an iterative betrayal of grief. "There's some kino footage—"

Young shook his head.

"At the end, Eli put all the kinos into search mode and they—I just—I wanted you to be aware. Someone might—" she pulled in a slow breath. "Mention it. Someone might—try to show you—"

"Yeah," Young said. "Thanks."

"Eli has the footage," Wray whispered. "If you ever want to—"

"Yeah," Young said. "Yeah, okay."

They were silent for a minute.

"Do you want to talk about—anything?" Wray asked.

"No," Young said.

Wray nodded. "Is there anything I can do?" she whispered.

"I could use some clothes," Young said.

"Yes," Wray murmured. "Of course. TJ brought some by for you. Early on." She slipped off the bed and bent down to gather up the fatigues that had been left at the base of his nightstand before carefully placing them on the mattress.

For the first time, Young noted that Wray was wearing fatigues as well.

"New cut," she said almost soundlessly, picking up the jacket, her hands neatly smoothing away creases the material. "But still black."

Wordlessly she held it out to him.

"Thanks," Young whispered.

"Dr. Mackenzie, from psychiatry, is going to come talk to you this afternoon," Wray said.

"To clear me for duty?" Young asked, hands at his temples, trying to massage away the ache in his head that wouldn't leave him.

"No," Wray said gently. "No, I don't think so."

Young nodded and swung his legs over the side of the bed. Wray took a step back.

"I'm not sure you should be getting up," she murmured.

He stood, unsteady for a moment, one hand clenched into the sheets of his bed, the other holding his hospital gown shut.

Wray put a hand on his arm.

As if she could help him.

He pulled away from her but she shadowed his steps as he made his way, barefoot, across the tile floor to the bathroom.

"I can—" she said.

"No thanks," he replied, closing the door.

He placed the clothing Wray had given him on the low counter in front of the mirror.



He held himself steady, gripping the edge of the sink, where the white of the porcelain met the tan of some poorly defined waterproof material that he was uninterested in putting a name to.

He looked at his reflection.

He looked away.

The fabric of the clothing was stiff and new under his fingers.

He found the socks. He pulled them on one at a time, bracing his hip against the wall to keep his balance. He unfolded and put on the underwear. The standard issue black cotton undershirt he pulled over his head and drew down.

He held himself steady, gripping the edge of the sink.

The pants he shook out in a slow unfurl before he stepped into them, the fabric scraping its way over his skin as he pulled them up and fastened them. They were looser than they should have been. He unfolded the jacket, slow and stepwise, before carefully pulling down on the zipper, separating metal teeth with a barely perceptible almost endless sequence of resistance and release. He put on the jacket.

He held himself steady, gripping the edge of the sink.

He reached over, flinching at the sharp sound of plastic-wrap deforming beneath his fingers.

He opened a small toothbrush, and he brushed his teeth.

He ran his fingers through his hair.

He was going to need to borrow a razor.

He gripped the edge of the sink and dropped his head forward, not bothering to fight the weight of the headache that pressed down upon him.

"Come on," he whispered, but whether he was talking to himself or someone else was not clear. Even to him.

There was a soft knock on the door and Young opened it.

"Do you need any help?" Wray asked.

"No," Young said. "I'm fine."

The morning and early afternoon passed in a blur of Wray giving way to Scott, who gave way to Dr. Mackenzie when he showed up around fourteen hundred hours.

"I was confidentially briefed by Colonel Carter," Mackenzie said, after he took a seat at Young's bedside.

"Oh yeah?" Young asked, trying to force his demeanor into something that approached normal.

Mackenzie nodded. "I also talked to Dr. McKay before coming to see you. They share an interesting theory."

"And what theory would that be?" Young asked politely.

"They believe that the two days you spent entirely unresponsive is explained because you either had some kind of mental interface with the ship that you left behind, or—"

"Nope," Young said.

"Or," Mackenzie finished, "that you had some kind of mental connection to the late Dr. Nicholas Rush."

Young tried to hold onto his neutral facial expression but knew that he wasn't *quite* managing it.

"You've been talking to me for what," Young asked, "less than thirty seconds? And already you've attempted force me into a choice between a false dichotomy out of pure rhetorical *laziness*. Which is something that—" he broke off, pressing a hand to his head and pulling it away again just as abruptly. "Whatever. Proceed. Continue."

He took a deep breath, trying to focus, trying to calm the *fuck* down, trying not to pull something forward that he was never, *never* going to be able to force back.

"Why don't you start by telling me about him?" Mackenzie said.

"Why don't *you* start by telling me the purpose of this session?" Young snapped.

Not good. He took another deep breath.

"The purpose of this session is to evaluate your ability to tolerate a full psych eval." Mackenzie said mildly. "You suffered a significant neurologic event. Your EEG patterns have deviated significantly from the baseline we have on file and—"

"Just give me the psych eval. I guarantee you I'll tolerate it just fine."

That was better. That was something he would say. That *he, himself* would say.

Mackenzie said nothing for several seconds. Then he said, "tell me about Dr. Rush."

"What do you want to know?" Young asked, looking out the window, past the parking lot, to the mountains.

"Anything."

"Well," Young said, trying to keep his tone even, "he was an arrogant, deceptive, untrustworthy son of a bitch."

Mackenzie said nothing.

Young said nothing.

"He was instrumental in the return of your crew to Earth," Mackenzie commented.

"Yeah," Young said. "I noticed that."

"I was briefed that you came through the gate last," Mackenzie said, "and that you were unconscious at the time."

"Yes," Young said, biting back an acidic comment. "I noticed that too."

"What happened on the ship?" Mackenzie asked. "What happened before you came through the gate?"

"He drugged me," Young said.

"Why would he do that?" Mackenzie asked.

"To force me to leave," Young said.

"To save your life?" Mackenzie asked.

"Yes," Young said.

"And how do you feel about that?" Mackenzie asked.

"Fine," Young said. "Good. Grateful."

Mackenzie looked at him.

Young looked away.

"Grateful," Mackenzie said, narrowing his eyes. "Really."

"Yeah," Young said.

"Things are going to go much better for you if you're honest."

"Why wouldn't I be grateful?" Young said. "After all, I'm alive, aren't I?"

Mackenzie looked at him evenly, saying nothing.

Young looked right back at him, waiting him out.

"Are you having any thoughts of hurting yourself?" Mackenzie asked, point blank.

"No," Young said.

"Why did you stay on the ship?" Mackenzie asked. "Why didn't you come back with the others? Why did he have to *force* you to leave?"

Young looked at him steadily. "You think I have some kind of death wish? I *stayed*," Young said, "because he was permanently locked to that ship, and we do not leave people behind."

"So you stayed for him," Mackenzie said.

"I stayed because it was the right thing to do," Young clarified carefully.

"I see."

For a moment, they were quiet.

"Did you have some kind of connection to him?" Mackenzie asked. "Did something happen to alter your mind?"

"Do you really think," Young asked, "that if that were the case, he would have been able to surprise me enough to take me down?"

"That's not an answer," Mackenzie said.

"Your question was vague," Young snapped.

Mackenzie gave him a tight smile. "Most of them are," he said. "That's the idea."

"So are you going to give me this psych eval or what?" Young asked.

"Not today," Mackenzie said.

"I want someone different," Young said. "Not you. Weren't you the one who mistook an alien influence for late-break psychosis and had Dr. Jackson *committed*?"

"There's a bit of a learning curve when it comes to the SGC," Mackenzie said neutrally.

"But, really it doesn't matter who administers the test. Based on our interaction today, I can already tell you the outcome. You're going to pass. But you shouldn't."

Young raised his eyebrows.

"I'm mandating weekly followup," Mackenzie said, "and you're not cleared for active duty, even after you pass the psych eval."

"You don't have the authority for that," Young snapped.

"Of course I do," Mackenzie said.

They held him for a week, and when they finally released him, it was Greer who drove him to the apartment that Wray had found and furnished for him. Greer, who didn't

talk, except for when it was necessary; Greer, who dropped him off and went to the supermarket and picked up ten days worth of frozen dinners and a six-pack of beer, and who came back and drank it with him. Greer who sat on his couch with him, in the dark, without turning on any lights as the sun set over the Rocky Mountains.

"So," Young said, finally, watching the red light that backlit the distant peaks fade into darkness. "What are you going to do?"

"SG-2," Greer said.

"No shit," Young said.

"Yeah," Greer said.

"How did that happen?"

Greer shrugged, the movement almost invisible in the growing dark.

"Don't give me that," Young said. "You need multiple recs for that kind of thing."

"I had three," Greer said.

"I didn't write one," Young murmured. "Though I would have, if you'd told me you wanted it."

"Yeah," Greer said. "I know. I—"

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Greer."

Greer sighed and took a sip of his second beer. "Telford put me up for it."

*"Telford."*

"Yeah," Greer said, his voice unsteady. "I didn't even know I was in the running—hell, I didn't even know there was a spot *available* until after they told me that I had it."

"Telford despises you," Young said.

"I know," Greer said again, his voice barely audible. "I saw him. Two days ago. I asked him why."

"What did he say?"

It wasn't really a question.

He already knew the answer.

"He did it," Greer said quietly, "because Rush asked him to."

Young shut his eyes. After a few moments he said, "he couldn't have possibly *specified* SG-2."

"No," Greer said. "I don't think he did. I think he just sort of generally asked Telford to help me out."

"And Telford got you SG-2?"

"Yeah," Greer said. "Telford went to Wray and got a rec from her."

"And who was the third?" Young asked.

"The third rec," Greer said, pausing, "was Rush."

"Right," Young said. "Of course it was. He really fucking planned everything out."

Greer said nothing.

Young said nothing.

"I don't know if you've heard this yet or not," Greer said quietly, "but he sent some things through the gate after—" Greer took another swallow of beer. "After you came through."

"What kind of things?" Young asked.

"Different kinds of things," Greer whispered, "all tied together with a bootlace and labeled. There was a letter about Chloe addressed to the head of UC Berkeley's math department. It was three pages long and it—it included some of her work." Greer paused. "He sent one of his little notebooks through, tagged for Eli, and I guess it just had some random stuff in it, that he thought Eli should know, or would like, or whatever. He ah—" Greer broke off again, drawing his hand across his mouth. "He um, wrote letters for everyone on the science team, describing things that they had done, so that, if they wanted to leave the SGC, or if they wanted to stay—they would—well, they would have something to take with them. I read the one he wrote for Lisa," Greer whispered. "It was really—" Greer trailed off into nothing.

"Yeah," Young said. "He liked her."

"Yeah," Greer said. "She—she didn't really know that."

"Anything else?" Young asked.

"A personal letter to Wray," Greer said, "and that was all."

"I see," Young said.

Greer said nothing.

The sun had dipped below the horizon. The waning moon began to rise.

"He—" Greer began.

"He *what*," Young half-snarled.

"He cared about you," Greer said. "I know he did."

"How could *you* possibly know that?" Young hissed. "When *I*, who was *fucking* linked to his *fucking* head, have *no idea* whether he gave a damn about me or not?"

"I know," Greer said. "I *know* he did."

They were quiet for a moment. The moon began its slow rise over the mountains.

"He should have let me stay," Young whispered.

"He wanted you to live," Greer whispered back.

"This is no kind of life."

"He could still come back."

Young released a shuddery breath. "You think so?"

"Yeah," Greer said. "I talked to that cultural sensitivity guy. Dr. Jackson. I asked him. He said he didn't really know, but that he thinks maybe time flows differently? Anyway, both times Jackson ascended, he didn't come back in any kind of predictable way. He said we shouldn't make too much of the fact we haven't heard anything. It's early days yet."

"Yeah?" Young asked.

"Yeah." Greer finished his beer and opened another. "Besides. How many times have we counted him out, and then he shows up with that whole smart-ass thing he has going?"

Young said nothing.

"So many times," Greer said.

Young said nothing.

Greer said nothing.

The moon lifted itself clear of the mountains.

"He told me he would try," Greer whispered.

Young said nothing.

Several minutes passed.

"He promised me," Greer said.

Young said nothing.

Two weeks later, hours after Mackenzie had finally cleared him for active duty, Young sat in General Landry's office at the SGC.

"—and *then*," Landry said, "not only does he proceed to tell the *entire* Tok'ra delegation that not only is the intel they provided us with somehow inconsistent with the laws of theoretical physics, he actually *hacks* into their security system in real time, *in the briefing*, to map out data transmission vs. location and thereby identifies their security leak." The general shook his head. "I didn't know whether to reprimand him or promote him right there. It worked like a god damn charm though—the Tok'ra ate it up. They actually made us an offer for him, if you can believe it. I refused."

"Sounds like Eli," Young said, raising his eyebrows.

"That boy is a treasure," Landry said. "You know I'm thinking of putting him on SG-4? A spot just opened up on the civilian side of things, and SG-4 is really one of the only Earth based teams that's *not* bogged down in this Ori business—be glad you're missing that—it is *not* a good time."

"Right," Young said, "about my reassignment—"

"Your reassignment," Landry said. "Yes, let me see." The other man made a show of flipping through Young's personnel file. "Pending the resolution of a complaint lodged against you by Colonel Telford for unjust and prolonged imprisonment, and the resolution of the two charges that *you* filed against *him*," Landry looked up, fixing Young with a sharp gaze, "you're going to be reassigned to Atlantis."

"Atlantis," Young repeated.

"Sheppard," Landry said, "is the only person willing to take you after this whole fiasco."

"Fiasco," Young repeated.

"Well, sure," Landry said, his gravelly voice not unfriendly, "you brought everyone home safe, and we acquired another Ancient database, not to mention transmission of data which, once analyzed, may actually turn out to hold the key to some basic understanding of the physics of ascension amongst other things but—you have to understand that you basically presided over the destruction of one of the most important discoveries that humankind has made since the stargate itself so—" Landry opened his hands. "Bureaucratically, you're not a popular guy right now."



"Right," Young said. "Atlantis."

"You'll be replacing Major Lorne as Sheppard's number two, pending resolution of the disputes between you and Colonel Telford." Landry handed over a file containing the details of Young's assignment. "We'll be in touch in terms of a start date," Landry said.

Young looked at him.

"Dismissed," Landry said.

Young tucked the file underneath one arm and stood, exiting Landry's office.

It was only after he'd passed the secretary's desk and gone several steps into the hall that he realized he'd forgotten to salute.

He had made his way to the elevator that led to the ground-level parking lot when he rounded a corner to find himself face to face with David Telford in the company of Colonel Carter, who was animatedly trying to explain something to him that seemed, from the few phrases Young picked up, like it had something to do with hyperdrive technology.

Telford stopped short as he came face to face with Young, surprise flitting briefly across his features.

They locked eyes.

Without hesitating, Young stepped in and punched him, once, hard across the mouth, knocking him back into Carter, who steadied him.

"What the *hell*?" Carter yelled.

Telford looked at Young, and said nothing, one hand coming to his mouth.

Young stepped in, his face inches from Telford's.

"And you want to know what?" Young said conversationally, "That wasn't even for him. That was for *her*. For *Gloria*."

Telford looked away.

Young turned on his heel, and continued on, toward the elevators.

"Colonel," Carter snapped. "Colonel *Young*."

"Let it go, Sam," he heard Telford say, his voice low. "Just—let it go."

Two weeks after he returned to Earth was the first time it happened.

He was prepping for his upcoming assignment, by reading mission reports alone in his apartment, the only light in the unfamiliar room provided by his desk lamp.

He found he preferred McKay's reports to anyone else's.

*"—at which point Colonel Sheppard engaged the locals in conversation while I first deciphered and then interfaced with the control panel in order to recover information left by the original architects of the city. In short order I discovered that the hardware was a fusion of Ancient and endogenous technology, likely the work of the fraction of the population that survived the first culling. Though my perusal of their database was necessarily limited, as I was trying to find a means of cutting power to the communications array, I did find the following items of note: 1) Identification of local anisotropy and acceptance of a modified form of the FLRW metric, in which the spatial component of the metric was not time dependent.*

Young stopped reading and frowned, searching absently through his stack of papers for the pen he knew was somewhere beneath them. After only a few seconds he pulled it out and flipped the file folder over. For a moment, he held the pen delicately between his teeth, then pulled it out and wrote the equation describing the FLRW metric.

$$-c^2 d(\tau^2) = -c^2 dt^2 + a(t)^2 d(\sigma^2)$$

He boxed it.

He looked at it.

He pulled out the two time-dependent terms and started to work with them, replacing variables, redefining the problem in terms of spatial curvature, redefining it for reduced-circumference polar coordinates, redefining it for hyperspherical coordinates —

He didn't stop until every piece of readily available paper was covered with the loose, effortless flow of math. He didn't stop until the sun began to lighten the windows, until the strange, all-consuming mental energy finally loosened its grip and left him, sitting exhausted at his desk, surrounded by the carnage of Einstein's field equations and the shreds of an incorrect model of physical cosmology.

Young pressed the heels of both hands against his eyes, trying to force away the headache that he suspected would never leave him.

He looked down at the mathematically-defaced file, wondering how he was going to explain this when he had to turn the classified document back in to Walter Harriman. Wondering if it even really mattered.

He capped his pen.

He shut his eyes, leaning his head against one hand.

"Nick," he said.

No one answered.

"Tell me about your dreams," Mackenzie said.

"They're normal," Young said.

"Normal," Mackenzie repeated, neutrally. "And what is 'normal' for you?"

"Oh," Young said, casually, "most of the time I don't remember them, or they're nonsensical. Occasionally I'll dream about a combat situation on Earth or on Destiny."

*Each night it is the same. He stands alone before the open gate. His hair, his eyes, his clothes are dark. The ship, ablaze with mounting power, waits for him and when he turns all cyphered locks unseal. The lights are on, the doors are open; the shields become a symphony of sound.*

"Any recurring dreams?" Mackenzie asked.

*He walks in solitude beneath the lights, down the hall that leads him to the chair. His gait and bearing painless, unafraid.*

"No," Young said casually. "No, not really."

*The AI is not with him, and Young is not sure what that means. He thinks he knows. It would have never, never left him there alone.*

"Sometimes," Mackenzie said, "I get the feeling that you're not making an effort."

"Really," Young said.

"I think that could be for a lot of reasons," Mackenzie said. "Far be it from me to pigeonhole you into a false dichotomy, but my feeling is it's because either you place no value on this kind of therapeutic intervention, or, you don't want to let go of what's bothering you."

Young raised his eyebrows. "What makes you say that?"

"You *will not talk about him*," Mackenzie said, "even though he altered you in such a profound way that your EEG has changed. That your MMPI score is different. I can't imagine that your dreams haven't been altered as well."

Young looked at him evenly across the broad oaken desk that separated them.

"A terrible thing happened to you," Mackenzie said quietly, "and I'm not even sure if you *recognize* that."

Young tried to hang onto his neutral facial expression, tried to take everything about the statement that unsettled him and turn it into an offensive.

"You asked me about *my* dreams, but what you really want to hear about are *his* dreams," Young said, with a smooth cadence that seemed to come from the emptiness at the back of his mind. "*His* dreams. That *I* have."

"Yes," Mackenzie said.

"All right," Young said. "Fine. I can do that."

He paused, and took a deep breath, hanging onto the veneer of calm that spread thinly over a seething darkness.

"He's in a tank. A tank of ionized water that's probably something like fifteen degrees centigrade. Why fucking *ionized* and why fucking cold you ask? Well, the reason for that is that the cold slows down metabolic processes which, in turn, decreases tissue damage and makes it difficult to *think*, which brings us to the question of why ionized water, the answer to which is that it's an excellent conductor and allows for the amplification of input and the amplification and dispersal of cognitive output in the form of electromagnetic waves so it's really the perfect containment vessel for prolonged, neurologically damaging, telepathically mediated *torture*. Which is what they do. For hours. For *days*. For so long he can barely understand who he is anymore, or what they're doing, the only thing he knows is that he has given them nothing they want, and he will continue to proceed in such a manner, allowing them full access to every element of his mind that is capable of emotionally damaging him but giving them *nothing* of Destiny, *none* of his tactically relevant knowledge. He resists increasingly complicated simulated scenarios designed to upset him, to confuse him, to convince him to give up the information he manages to protect from them, to *hide* from them by disrupting his own cognitive processes. He can't keep them out, you understand? He can only keep ahead of them. And he does. For *days*, like I said. And you know what happens? Over the course of those days? Despite the fact that his mind, the way he thinks, is fracturing apart and he's becoming *so*. *Fucking. Tired*. He still, *still* stays ahead of them, and not *just* ahead of them. He starts to pull away. He regains more and more control. He finds he can fight them. He finds he can control his own movements. And that's where the dream picks up. The point where he regains control."

Young stopped. He unclenched his fists.

"What does he do?" Mackenzie asked.

"He reaches up," Young said, "and he pulls the breathing apparatus off his face and he inhales the water. He presses his hands against the glass and he looks out at them and he tries to bury his panic and his fear of the water and the urge to struggle and instead, through the transmitter attached to his head, he broadcasts as much *spite* as he can throw at them. And they—he can *feel* that they're afraid of him. They are afraid of *him*, a delicate, ephemeral, *dying* thing that they *do not understand*."

"What happens then?"

Young sat back, looking out the window. "That's it. That's the dream. He passes out from lack of oxygen and presumably they get him out and are able to resuscitate him and then torture him some more."

Mackenzie said nothing.

Young said nothing.

"How many of the dreams that you have come from him?" Mackenzie asked finally.

"At least half," Young said.

"Ah," Mackenzie said. "Are they all like that?" he asked. "Like the one you just described?"

"No," Young said. "Some of them are worse."

"Ah," Mackenzie said delicately. "That must be difficult."

Young said nothing.

"I was granted access to the mission reports from Destiny," Mackenzie said.

Young raised his eyebrows.

"I read about the events that led to his capture by the Nakai," Mackenzie said. "Apparently, there was an accident when the two of you were on the planet together? You were separated?"

Young said nothing.

"You believed he hadn't survived?"

Young said nothing.

"But he had. And he was subsequently found by the Nakai, resulting in the torture that you described. Resulting in the implantation of a transmitter next to his heart."

Young said nothing.

"How do you feel about that?" Mackenzie asked.

"I'm done here."

Young left the room.

# Chapter Sixty Nine

## March

He stood on sun-drenched pavement, just outside the Cheyenne Mountain base. The ground near the road was covered with a few inches of icy snow, through which crocuses had just begun to open. He extended the toe of one boot, absently crushing the edge of ice that formed where snow met pavement. The sun was bright and cold and glared off the alabaster hillside. A brisk wind periodically snapped at the material of his jacket.

Young reached into his pocket, pulled out a pair of sunglasses, and put them on.

This was a bad idea.

He crossed his arms, trying to think of nothing, trying to think of ice, trying *not* to think of ice, trying to think of anything other than the emptiness in his mind and the restless energy in his hands.

"If you ascended," he whispered into the cold air, "now would be a good time to let me know."

The wind rushed in his ears.

"No one's around," Young murmured. "I'll never breathe a word of it. To anyone. I just want to know. You owe me that. At *least* that, you bastard."

He stood, silent, for nearly five minutes.

"Well," he said, pulling out a pack of cigarettes and lighting one with difficulty against the wind, "fuck you anyway, genius."

He smoked his cigarette.

Behind him, he heard the sound of someone clearing his throat. He spun to see the familiar silhouette of Dr. Jackson, dressed in black fatigues, backlit against the pale sky.

Young flinched.

"Hi," Jackson said. "I'm not sure if you remember me—we've only met a few times."

Young couldn't help the incredulous, humorless laugh.

"*Remember you?*" Young repeated.

"Yeah," Jackson said quietly. "I'm Daniel Jackson."

"I know who you are," Young said quietly. "*Everyone* knows who you are."

"Oh. Well. Good. That's good." Jackson looked like he had no idea what to do with his hands.

They were silent for a moment and the other man slipped on his own pair of sunglasses.

"What do you want?" Young growled.

"Nothing," Jackson said. "I don't want anything. I thought you might want to talk. That's all."

"Nope," Young said, flicking his cigarette onto the pavement and grinding it out with his boot.

"Yeah," Jackson said. "I can see that."

An awkward silence descended.

"I heard that you had some kind of connection to him," Jackson murmured. "That's what Jack said."

"Yeah," Young said, shoving his hands into his pockets. "I heard that you made first contact with the Ori. Good work there."

Jackson looked away. "Yeah," he said finally.

They stood there in silence for the span of three minutes.

"Well," Jackson said, "I guess I'll see you around." He turned and began to walk back toward the base.

"Hey," Young called after him, "Jackson."

The other man stopped and turned toward Young.

"How well did you know him?" Young asked.

"Well enough," Jackson said, his expression pained.

## April

"You'll like the Athosians," Sheppard said.

Young said nothing.



They were planetside on Young's second Atlantis-based mission, standing in the midst of an open field, next to the gate.

The air smelled like flowers.

"They're a really friendly people." Sheppard's tone and posture were relaxed, but his eyes were watchful.

The sky above them was a clear, pale blue.

"Yup. A little shy at first, maybe, but Teyla will warm them up for you," Sheppard said, after an empty pause.

"Great," Young said, his hand on his assault rifle, his eyes sweeping the dark tree line.

The silence stretched between them.

Sheppard had never been much of a talker.

"Just—ah, so you know," Sheppard said, with the air of someone pouring energy into a system at rest, "I feel—" he looked away. "I feel weird about this."

"Yeah," Young said, his eyes fixed on the trees. "I get that. I would too, if the situation was reversed."

"I read the mission reports from Destiny," Sheppard said.

"Oh yeah?" Young asked, trying to suppress an acute spike of distress out of pure habit.

But there was no need.

There was no one in his mind to shield from that kind of thing.

"Seems like," Sheppard said, pausing to step over a small stream that split the ground in front of them, "you did a pretty commendable job."

"Maybe," Young said. "Even in retrospect, I'm not sure about that."

"It's so easy," Sheppard said, "to look at these things from the outside and make judgments."

Young thought he might continue, but he didn't.

"Yeah," Young said, looking out across the tangled bracken covered intermittently with some kind of flowering shrub that looked like lilac.

Scratch that.

That looked like an alien equivalent of lilac.

"Yeah," Sheppard said.

"If there's anything that you—" Sheppard paused, running a restive hand through his hair, over the strap of his rifle, "you want to talk about—" he trailed off.

"I'm good," Young said.

"Okay," Sheppard said.

Tangled branches cracked beneath their boots.

Ahead of them, McKay broke the cover of the distant trees, advancing toward their position at a quick jog.

"Hmm," Sheppard said, watching him. After only a few seconds, he unclipped his radio and spoke into it.

"McKay," he said. "You're *running*. And where's Teyla?"

He got no response, other than the hiss of static.

"Was that an open channel?" Young asked, frowning. "I didn't pick that up."

"Yeah," Sheppard said. He stopped fidgeting. Everything about him except his tone of voice sharpened.

They broke from a walk into a run.

It took them less than a minute to close the distance between their position and McKay's, their feet cracking through brittle webs of undergrowth. Low branches scraped past their uniforms.

"McKay," Sheppard called when they were in earshot. "What's with the radios?"

"I don't *know*," McKay shouted back as the distance between them diminished. "But they were working when we *got here* and they're not *now*, which, frankly, I find disturbing in a kind of acute run-for-your-life sort of way, and on a *related note*, ground based sensors picked up a fleet that dropped into orbit three days ago and stayed for *twelve hours* before—"

"Where's Teyla?" Sheppard snapped.

"She went ahead to the settlement."

"*Alone?*" Sheppard ducked down behind one of the low, lilac-like hedges, dragging McKay down as well, one hand clenched on the other man's jacket.

Young scanned the horizon before dropping into a crouch.

The back of his neck prickled.

"And you wanted me to do what?" McKay hissed, "Tie her up to stop her? Go with her and leave you two standing in the *open* without cover? There could still be—"

"I *know* that, Rodney, I was just *asking*."

"Well I have to say, you were asking in a very accusatory manner and I—"

"What else?" Sheppard asked.

"Like I said. Three days ago, fleet drops out, stays for twelve hours, and then our sensor array gets destroyed or disabled, I don't know which, but the data cuts out."

"What about small ship to ground vessels?" Young asked. "That might indicate an assault or a culling."

"Um, hello, our computer system is out? Did I not make that clear? Assessment of ship-to-ground traffic requires pulse-doppler signal processing and I can't do FFTs in my *head*."

Sheppard rolled his eyes.

"You always were shit at Fourier transformations," Young said absently.

"*What* did you just say?" Rodney hissed. "Did *Nick* tell you that? He's *such* a *brat* about anything mathematical and it was just *one time* that—" McKay broke off. He looked down and then uncertainly back at Young. "Oh. Right. Well, the answer to your question is that I don't know. I couldn't tell about small, ship-to-ground vessels. I had only the raw data."

Young nodded.

"Let's move out," Sheppard said edgily.

They crept back toward the tree line, the way McKay had come.

In the distance, Young could hear the discharge of projectile-based weapons.

"That sounds like *Genii* tech," Sheppard murmured.

"If by that you mean it sounds like the second world war had an unfortunate meeting with naquadah based power cells, then yeah, I'd say I agree," McKay whispered.

Above the irregular sound of weapons fire, Young picked out the overtones of a single assault rifle.

"Is that—" McKay began.

"That's Teyla," Sheppard snapped. He turned to Young. "You've got our six."

Sheppard stood, breaking cover, a dark silhouette against the washed-out sky.

Young tried to ignore his seething anxiety and stood, turning to let his gaze sweep their six.

There was quick flash of movement—of darkness where light should have filtered through gaps between branches of alien lilac—

"Get *down*," he shouted.

The air burst into the hissing sibilance of close-range gunfire.

Young used all of his forward momentum to crash into McKay, tackling him to the ground behind the limited cover of a hedge exploding in small purple flowers.

"*Stay down*," he snarled at McKay, who was trying to do something that Young couldn't quite get a handle on.

Around them, shots hit the ground and broke into the webbed underbrush like they had never been.

Pain unfurled, spreading and tearing its way through his chest, through his leg, in a vicious, slow inflorescence.

"Oh shit," McKay whispered. "Oh *shit*."

McKay leaned over him, his hands pressing down hard against Young's chest. "It's going to be fine," McKay whispered. He turned his head away; his gaze directed over his shoulder.

"John," he hissed into the lilacs, trying not to give away their position his hands clamped down with a terrible pressure against Young's ribs. "*John*."

"Go," Young said.

"I'm going to do you a personal favor," McKay replied, and even though his tone was sardonic, his eyes were intent and sad and the same color as the sky. "I'm not going to tell anyone you said that. You just hang on, all right?"

Young said nothing.

## May

It was Memorial Day and flags, placed by the boy scouts, snapped in the breeze.

After Greer drove him to the SGC, Young made his way painfully down to the infirmary, still leaning on his cane. He limped through the doors to find the place deserted. He rounded a corner and made his way to the back, where he knew the offices were.

Only one door was open.

"Colonel," Dr. Lam said, looking up from her laptop as he appeared in her doorway. "So sorry we had to push this back to the holiday."

Young shook his head. "It's fine," he said. "I heard about Dr. Brightman. How is she?"

"She's going to survive," Lam said, her face held in careful neutrality. "It's not yet clear what her functional status is going to be."

Young nodded.

"Have a seat," Lam said.

Young sat.

"I read Dr. Keller's report. I looked at the notes from physical therapy. I'm not going to beat around the bush here, colonel," Lam said. "The Genii shell you took to the femur—for ninety-five percent of people, it's a career-ending injury."

"I see," Young said trying to summon the mental energy to feel anything, anything *at all* about her pronouncement.

Lam watched him for a moment. "You're taking this pretty well," she said.

"Yup," Young said.

"You're not going to tell me that you think you're in that five percent?"

"Nope," Young said.

"Well," Lam said after another pause. "That's a first."

They were quiet for a moment.

"Is there anything you want to ask me?" Lam said, her eyes intent and dark.

"No," Young said. "You were pretty clear. I'm sure they'll give me a desk job somewhere."

Lam shut his file. "I saw in the computer system that you've missed two appointments with Dr. Mackenzie since you've been back planetside."

"Yeah," Young said.

"Why is that?" Lam asked.

"I'm not a big fan," Young said.

"You realize that if you want to remain in good standing in the program, you need to not miss these kinds of appointments," Lam said, with a faint lift of one eyebrow.

"Oh, I'm aware of that," Young said. "Thank you."

"You're walking a fine line, colonel. They could discharge you for this kind of behavior."

He smiled briefly at her brusque manner. "Any chance I could swap the man for someone else?"

"Yes," Lam said. "There are two other counselors that have the required security—"

"What about you?" he asked.

"I'm not a psychiatrist," Lam said flatly.

"Well I don't need one," Young said.

Lam looked at him.

"He can't help me," Young said quietly.

"Why do you say that?" Lam asked.

"He's imprecise, methodologically sloppy, and lacking in intellectual rigor."

"And you require precision from your mental health provider, do you?" Lam said, with a faint smile.

"I require it from everyone," Young said.

Lam looked at him, her smile fading. "Then don't bullshit me, colonel. What's the real reason?"

"He is determined to fix something that is not, by its nature, fixable," Young said. "You seem like you're capable of grasping that."

Lam shut his file.

"Next Thursday," she said.

"All right then," Young said, and got painfully to his feet.

He made his way out through the gray-walled infirmary, past the empty beds, and into the deserted cement-lined hallway. It was early afternoon.

Outside, twenty-one levels up, most of the base personnel who had to work over the holiday, or who had nowhere else to go, were having a barbeque.

Jackson came around a corner, a stack of files in one hand, in the midst of academic enthusiasm as he chatted with a woman who had long, dark hair.

"It's a cultural celebration that originated after the civil war, primarily as a result of—"

"Daniel. *Darling*. If you're going to give me a twenty-five minute lecture, at least do it in reverse order." She made an intricate, animated little hand gesture.

"What?"

"Most interesting things *first*?"

"I resent that," Jackson said.

Privately, Young doubted that Jackson was capable of resenting *anything*.

"No you don't," the woman said.

They both noticed him at the same time, when only a few feet of empty corridor separated them.

The woman gave him a flashy smile and nod, but Jackson stopped.

"Colonel Young," he said. "Hi."

"Dr. Jackson," Young replied.

They were quiet for a few seconds.

"This is Vala," Jackson said.

"Vala Mal Doran," she said, stepping forward and extending her hand. "SG-1."

"He *knows*," Jackson said, rolling his eyes. "*Everyone* knows."

"It's very nice to meet you, colonel," Vala said, unperturbed. "Will you be attending this Memorial Day Barbeque that I've been hearing so much about?"

"No," Young said, smiling faintly at her. "I don't think so."

"I'll meet you up there," Jackson said to her quietly.

"Is this going to be one of those things where three hours later I find you in your office rather than at the party?" Vala asked, narrowing her eyes.

"I'll be right there," Jackson said. "Go."

Vala's eyes slid over to Young. "All right," she said quietly, and turned, heading toward the elevators, leaving him alone with Jackson in the empty hallway.

"How's the shoulder?" Jackson said, motioning to the sling that Young still wore.

"Better than the leg," Young replied.

"Yeah," Jackson said, fingering the edge of his files. "So ah, I've been meaning to talk with you. I was wondering if maybe we could meet later. Maybe you could—come by my apartment?"

"Look," Young said, "I know what you're trying to do, Jackson, and I appreciate it, but it's not needed. Or wanted. So thanks, but no thanks."

"You *don't* know, actually," Jackson said sharply.

"Whatever it is," Young said, "just tell me now."

"They're going to declare him dead," Jackson said. "Soon. It will be soon. They do it after ninety days."

"That's the cutoff, is it? For ascension? Or rather, for *failing* to ascend?"

"Yeah," Jackson's voice was quiet. "Bureaucracy rolls ever-onward, even here."

Young said nothing. He looked down at the concrete floor, cool and smooth and without flaws.

"It doesn't *mean* anything," Jackson whispered. "Not really. I've been declared dead—so many times. I don't even actually know how many. I try not to think about it."

Young nodded, clenching his jaw.

"But um, I—" Jackson broke off. "The thing that I wanted to tell you is that, I—" he toyed the edges of the files he held. "I'm his next of kin and executor of his will."

Young looked up, meeting Jackson's eyes.

"I know, it must seem strange to you but, actually, the way it happened is that—"

"It was David," Young guessed. "Originally, it was *David*."

"Yes," Jackson whispered. "Yes, they were close until right before he left for Icarus, but then," Jackson's voice faded almost to nothing, "but then they weren't, and I was the only person that he—well."

"Yeah," Young said.

"I tried to warn him. I tried to tell him not to go," Jackson said, his whisper twisting into a misery that Young recognized. "Not to use that device."

"I know," Young said. "I know you did."

"Anyway," Jackson said, making an obvious effort to regroup, "I'm going to sign it over to you. Everything."

"Don't do that," Young said. "I don't want it."



"It should be you," Jackson said. "It should be you who takes it."

Young sighed.

They were quiet for a moment.

"Why don't you come over tonight?" Jackson asked.

"I don't think so," Young said.

"We don't have to—" Jackson began and then broke off. "Vala will be around," he said, backtracking. "She keeps things light."

Young hesitated.

"Just for a beer," Jackson said quietly.

Young nodded.

"Great," Daniel said. "I'll swing by your place on my way out. Maybe around seven?"

"Yeah," Young said.

They parted ways and Young watched him go, expecting him to walk straight through the metal of the elevator doors. But instead, he just hit the button and waited.

Like anyone else.

## June

He stood on the low bridge, his forearms resting against the rough wood as he looked out over the water. Willow leaves floated on the surface of the slowly moving stream, forming a deceptive solidity that stretched away from them in a linear manner before vanishing in a bend behind the trees.

"Sam Carter told me about this place," Eli said. "It's nice, right?"

"Yeah," Young said.

"She says the scientists come here to think about stuff if they have to get out of the lab."

"Eli," Young said. "Cut it out."

"Yeah, okay, fine. I guess you would know what they call it."

"Breakdown bridge," Young said wryly.

"Hey. I wasn't going to say it."

"Eli," Young said again. "I'm not having a breakdown."

"Yeah," Eli said. "I know. *Obviously*. Otherwise, would I have brought you out here? No. I'm not *that* insensitive. I would have brought you to a *bar*."

"It's fifteen hundred hours," Young said, continuing to give him a hard time.

"Everyone knows you can start drinking at noon on Saturday," Eli said. "Everyone."

"How's SG-4?" Young asked.

"It is *sweet*," Eli said. "The other day? We found what we think is a *Furling* outpost. And I was all like 'that's cool,' but it was more like Daniel-style cool than Eli-style cool, right? I thought Daniel was actually going to cry from happiness over the radio when we reported back. But *then* we found a terminal and I hooked up a naquadah generator to it, which, by the way, I've never done before but Carter wrote a manual that pretty much everyone can follow, but did you know that if you *don't* follow it *exactly* you can actually blow yourself up? That's not really explicitly stated and so I think people maybe should know that, right? I mean, stick a warning label on the thing or something, right? But maybe it's just implied, because hey, it's *naquadah*. But *anyway* I'm getting sidetracked. So I hooked up the generator and the terminal powered up. It was amazing. First of all, they had really sophisticated solid-state technology so it's pretty much good as new. Unfortunately I can't read any of it, but Dr. J is like teaching himself Furling as we speak and it takes him basically twenty minutes to learn a new language so I'm going to start looking at it with him this afternoon."

Young exhaled shortly in something that was almost a laugh.

"I *know*," Eli said. "It's going to be epic. Ginn is going to come hang out when she finishes going through the latest LA secret-spy-stuff that she's doing. I can't even know about it, it's so secret, and my security clearance is *high*, let me tell you. But anyway. How's the leg? How's the shoulder?"

"Doing pretty well," Young said. "I'm driving again. Autonomy is always nice."

"Um, yeah," Eli said, glancing at him obliquely. "Good. Are you going back to Atlantis? I heard Sheppard is asking for you back. I heard that you saved McKay in a pretty intense, badass, hardcore way."

Young snorted. "I don't think so. I won't be passing the physical requirements with this leg."

"I heard that McKay was asking for you to be reassigned there as well," Eli said carefully. "In a consulting capacity. Like, as a *math slash Ancient* consultant."

"Yeah," Young said.

"I also heard, that even though you don't have the ATA gene, the ah—the city lit up for you. And that you could fly the shuttles and use all the tech. Without the gene therapy." The speed of Eli's speech had slowed. His voice was quieter.

"True," Young said, looking out at the water.

They were silent for a few minutes.

"It's not getting better," Eli said. "Is it."

It wasn't a question.

"No," Young said. "It's getting worse."

"Yeah. Why is that, do you think?"

Young looked down at the rough grain of the wood that made up the bridge.

"Remember when the four of us—he and I and you and Chloe—were in the shuttle from the seed ship?"

"Yeah," Eli whispered, just audible above the drone of concealed insects. "I remember."

"Well," Young said, "that was the first time that he really *combined* with the ship."

"As in like, *combined* combined?" Eli asked.

"Yeah." Young said. "And he knew, he *knew* what he was, I think, but he didn't understand how difficult it would be for me to separate him back into himself and the AI. He didn't understand how dangerous Destiny would be to a normal, human mind."

"You passed out," Eli said quietly, "trying to pull him out of the ship. I remember."

"Not exactly," Young whispered. "I tried to pull him out and I failed."

Eli was quiet.

"We needed him," Young said, "and he knew it. So, he did took the only option available to him. He moved in on my mind and used me to tear himself apart."

Eli said nothing, his eyes invisible behind his sunglasses, looking out over the water, utterly still.

"Interfacing with the ship like that was enough to—" Young broke off.

"Almost completely destroy your mind," Eli finished for him.

"He fixed it," Young said, "but when he did the fixing, he needed a template."

"Well," Eli said, "I guess we know where he got his template from."

"Yup," Young said, pushing his hair out of his eyes.

They were quiet for a moment.

"He thought he could come back," Eli said quietly. "It's the only explanation. He would never, *ever* leave you like this."

"I'm not so sure about that," Young replied.

"I am," Eli said. "I'm positive. He wouldn't do this to you. He wouldn't be able to."

"He was perfectly capable of exactly that," Young said. "When the alternative was letting me die. Was *watching* me die."

"He had to have planned for this. He had to have *known*. He orchestrated everything else so perfectly."

"I concur," Young snapped. "And what, then, is the obvious inference?"

Eli grimaced, looking away. "We don't know. We don't know anything for sure."

"Say it," Young demanded.

"That he failed," Eli whispered. "That he's dead." He swallowed. "That he's dead, and you—you're stuck like this."

"Yes," Young hissed.

"I don't believe it," Eli said. "I don't. I *won't*."

"By all means," Young replied, "persist in an irrational manner if it suits you."

Eli compressed his lips and gripped the railing of the bridge. "You've got to try to fight this," he said finally, his voice strained.

Young took a deep breath. "I know," he said finally. "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize," Eli whispered.

They watched the water carry along an endless, slow sweep of willow leaves.

July

The wedding had been at dusk, held outside on the back lawn of the late Senator Armstrong's private residence. Chloe's mother had spared no expense. There were flowers everywhere, exploding in waterfalls of pale pink and white. Chloe's dress was plain and elegant and made of something light and summery. She'd had flowers in her hair, but no veil.

He stood with her, inside, looking out at the guests, listening to the sound of the string quartet, trying to think of something to say to her.

Something that wasn't sad.

Something that was hopeful, something appropriate.

"Chloe." He began without knowing how he would finish.

She wrapped her hand around his elbow. "I'm glad you're here, colonel."

"Your father—"

She shook her head, teary eyed. "No," she said quietly, and pulled him in, wrapping her arms around him, lifting up on her toes in her strappy flat shoes. "Don't say anything. This is wonderful. Thank you for doing this. Thank you for coming. I know that this—that seeing everyone—that it's hard for you."

He hugged her back, trying not to crush any of the roses in her hair.

He lasted through the cocktail hour, the pictures, the dinner, the associated awkward conversations with the crew that all seemed to follow the same pattern—excitement to see him, followed by the slow creep of something uncomfortable, something awkward.

He didn't know what it was, exactly, that prevented him from reconnecting with everyone.

Finally, he retreated to the shadows at the back of the house.

He stood next to an old, stone wall that formed the base of the portico for the hillside estate. Roses grew along a trellis near the point where he leaned against the masonry, watching the guests mingle in the setting sun.

The entire crew of Destiny had been invited.

They looked different.

The four months that they had been back had softened their angles, brightened their hair, lightened their expressions.

Camile, especially, looked happy, and rarely strayed more than ten feet from the red-headed woman he assumed was Sharon.

Greer and Park had come together.

Eli kept pointing things out to Ginn, who seemed delighted with the entire concept of what was taking place.

General O'Neill came around the corner of the house, a beer in each hand. He stopped short upon seeing Young.

"Everett," O'Neill said quietly.

"Jack," he replied.

"Nice ceremony," O'Neill said mildly, coming to stand beside him, offering him one of the beers he was holding.

Young shook his head. "You go ahead. I'll see you later."

"Yeah, nice try. Take the beer. You look like you could use one."

Young reached out to take the offered bottle.

"So," O'Neill said, "shouldn't you be out there chatting people up? You did give away the bride, after all."

"True," Young said, his voice mild. "Ironically, I also almost had her shot eighteen months ago when, through no fault of her own, she became a security risk."

There was a brief silence.

O'Neill looked at him, his expression betraying nothing.

Young tasted his beer, decided it was terrible, checked the label, and confirmed his initial assessment.

"Well," O'Neill said, "it looks like she got over it."

"Yup."

"So," O'Neill said. "I heard you managed to ditch your psychiatrist for an infectious disease doctor. How's that working out for you?"

"Just fine," Young said.

"Oh yeah?" O'Neill asked, taking a sip of beer.

"Yeah," Young said.

"I heard from Carter that you're some kind of crack math genius now," O'Neill said. "Or computer genius. Whatever. Something about writing a code to improve the rate and safety of our dialing program?"

Young shrugged.

There was a brief silence.

"I was tempted to order you back to Mackenzie," O'Neill said.

"Why didn't you?" Young asked.

"Because," O'Neill said quietly, "this is not just a grief-thing, or a guilt-thing, or a bad-coping-mechanisms-thing, is it? This is something else. Maybe just something you need to learn to live with."

"Yeah," Young said.

They drank their beer in silence.

"Consider getting a haircut," O'Neill said finally. "It'll make things a little less obvious."

"Yeah," Young said. "I keep forgetting."

Out on the portico, he watched Chloe wrap her arms around Ginn and TJ in a three-way hug. The setting sun put red highlights in their hair, and reflected off the crystal embroidery on Chloe's dress.

"Write it on your hand, maybe," O'Neill suggested.

## August

He had not wanted to come here.

The Strategic Air Command of Travis Air Force base, however, had required an upper level briefing on the cloaked Lucian Alliance ship that had been shot down several hundred miles off the coast of California. That explained the two days he'd spent briefing and debriefing.

It did *not* explain the hour-long taxi ride from the base to the eastern side of San Francisco bay.

Even behind his sunglasses, his eyes hurt in the reflected light that came from white exteriors of houses and the pale cement of the sidewalks.

The air was hazy, blurred with heat.

In gardens, bees buzzed, the sound of their wings low and threatening amongst blooming asters.

He walked over the grass, perfectly maintained by means of automatic payments from an account that had never been closed.

He removed a loose brick to reveal a spare key.

It wasn't breaking and entering if you had a key.

Was it?

He opened the door and shut it behind him.

Dust glittered in the light that entered slant-wise through irregular cracks in the drawn shades. Beneath the patina of disuse he saw what it had been when it was lived in—clean and bright and professional. Impersonal, even.

A place *where* they had been, not *who* they had been.

He paused a moment, leaning in the doorway, thinking of Gloria.

She hadn't wanted to stay here. It was written all over the white, pictureless walls, the spare utilitarianism of each room, the pale, characterless furniture, as if by refusing to settle in, she could make the place temporary by force of will.

In the end, it had been.

As for Nick, well, he'd been erasing himself for his entire life.

"Sorry, sweetheart," he murmured to the empty music room.

He turned and walked across the hall.

The door to the study was shut.

He twisted the knob, and pushed it open.

The room was a disaster, a sort of contained, compartmentalized breakdown that matched his mind and that just *fit* the man so well, that even though he knew what he was going to see, his throat hurt with it.

On the desk, an array of pens—capless, cheap, expensive, colored, black—spread out over the papers that obscured the wood. Amongst the pens, the blade of a box cutter caught a shaft of light that evaded the shuttering of the windows.

Rush had never come back here. He had beamed away with the intent to return in twelve hours and—he'd never come back.



Young looked away.

He was here for a purpose.

There were some things he needed.

A notebook from 1998. It had some things in it that he'd been working on in his spare time, and there was no point reinventing the wheel, especially as most of the theoretically tricky calculations had been done. The room was a disorganized mess, but it only took him a few minutes to find the thing, buried beneath the pretentiously legitimate vinyl collection.

He remembered where he had left it.

A set of unlabeled CDs. They were original recordings that spanned a period of fifteen years, when Gloria was performing professionally, first with the London Symphony Orchestra and then with the San Francisco Symphony.

They were lucky to get her, the bastards.

On the way out, he snagged car keys, three empty notebooks and a fountain pen.

He'd always liked that pen.

Or rather, *Rush* had always liked it.

## September

He stood, leaning against the side of the white Prius.

There was no reason for him to be here. Not really. It was a stupid idea. And creepy. And just—well. Just a bad idea. He was supposed to be letting go, and this—

This was the opposite of letting go.

This was hanging on.

The air was crisp and clear and smelled familiar.

He pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and tapped it against his hand absently before delicately removing one and sticking it between his teeth. He shielded the lighter from the early morning breeze with one cupped hand as he lit the damned thing.

"Nick," someone called.

He turned.

"*Nick*. I can't believe—"

Whoever it was stopped short as he spun around. He took in a man about his own height, with a stack of papers tucked under his arm and a cup of coffee in one hand.

God, he *needed* some coffee. Absolutely fucking *required* it.

"Oh," the other man said, nearly losing his grip on his papers. "So sorry. I thought you were someone else. Same car, you know. And the cigarettes. I'm always forgetting my glasses—"

"I'm waiting for someone," he said, and somehow, around the cigarette, he was subtly drawing out vowels and dropping a 'g' and modifying suffixes and this was spiraling *out of control*, but what had he expected coming here?

He must be fucking out of his fucking mind.

"Yes, of course," the other man said, looking disappointed as he turned away.

Young knew how he felt.

After a few moments, a car turned down the road. Somehow, he could tell, just by the slow and precise parking job that it was Chloe. He watched her get out of the practical little red Honda Civic and open the back seat to pull out a shoulder bag.

Her hair was straight and pulled back and she was wearing square-framed glasses. She looked like she'd been here all her life. Right down to the birkenstocks. She lifted her coffee off the back of the car and tilted her chin up as she settled the bag over her shoulder.

That little quirk of the head was the only reason he knew that she was afraid.

Well.

That and the fact that she was twenty minutes early for class which was—simply not done. Not around here. But she'd figure that out soon enough.

She didn't look at him. She walked forward, toward the math building.

He decided abruptly, as he flicked his cigarette down onto the pavement, that if she didn't turn then he wouldn't say anything.

But she did turn.

She looked over once, and then again, her pace slowing, until she stopped entirely, one hand coming up to grip the strap of the shoulder bag that was settled across her chest.

Her face contained something that he recognized in his own eyes.

But then she smiled and she came forward.

"Hey kiddo," he said.

"Hi colonel," she replied, not entirely able to hide the shakiness of her smile from him.

"What are you doing here?"

"I was in the area," he lied. "I thought I'd stop by."

"You know what time set theory meets?"

"I ought to, I—" He broke off.

"Yeah," Chloe said. "I got ya." She wrapped both hands around her coffee, as if she were cold.

"I like the glasses," he said quietly.

"Yeah." She smiled again and it was steadier this time. "All that staring at screens on Destiny ruined my eyes. Anyway, Eli tells me that glasses are absolutely required if you want to be taken seriously in academia. That, and a working knowledge of the science of Star Trek, at least five words of Klingon, and the ability to quote large portions of something known as Dr. Horrible's Sing Along Blog."

Young looked away, suppressing a smile. "You'll do fine. And what does *Eli* know about academia anyway?"

She shrugged and they looked at each other for a moment.

Chloe's smile wavered.

He looked down.

"You look—tired," she said.

"It's just the traveling," he murmured. "I come out here every so often to take care of a few things."

"Yeah," Chloe said, pressing her lips together as she pulled in a long slow breath. "That makes sense." Her voice was raw.

"How are *you* doing?" Young asked, after a brief pause.

"Okay," she said.

"Yeah?" he asked, pushing his hair out of his eyes.

"Even now," she said, "I still have the dreams. Almost every night."

"I don't think they'll ever fade," Young said gently.

"I pound against the glass," she said, "as my mother watches me drown."

"Yes," he whispered. "I remember."

"But more often now," she said, giving him a watery smile, "I have the dream where he breaks through the glass. Where I fall as the water rushes out. Where he pulls me off the floor and takes me back. To Destiny."

Young looked up at the clear blue of the sky.

"I remember the set of his shoulders."

He was quiet.

"What about you?" she whispered. "What do you dream of?"

"I try not to, kiddo," he said.

They were quiet for a moment.

"There's a nice coffee shop around the corner," he said, regrouping. "A lot of the grad students seem to congregate there, doing god knows what." He gave her a half smile.

"Don't let them push you around," he said, "erode your confidence. Most of them are just fucking jealous assholes."

Her expression cracked, and she knelt to set her coffee down on the sidewalk. She straightened slowly and then stepped forward, throwing her arms around his neck, knocking him back against the car. She sobbed one time, her face buried in his shoulder.

His arms tightened around her.

They said nothing.

After a minute, Chloe pulled back and picked up her coffee cup.

"You call me if you want to talk about math," she whispered. "Or—anything else."

"Give me that," Young said, motioning at her coffee.

She handed it over, and he scribbled three sets of empty brackets onto it with a pen he pulled from his pocket before turning the cup around.

"This?" he said, pointing to the brackets. "A non-empty pure set. Starr always asks this on the first day. The jackass."

"A non-empty pure set," Chloe repeated, looking up at him. "Thanks. Are you going to be in town for a while?"

Young shook his head. "I've got to get back. Tell Matt I said hi."

She nodded, but didn't turn away.

"Get out of here," he said.

"Bye, colonel," she whispered.

He watched her until she had disappeared inside the math building. Then he drove his car out to the athletic fields and he sat on the hood, trying to think of games and touchdowns and the spin of the ball that was all gyroscopic stability and—fuck, tried to think of *anything but math* as he stared out at the open space of an empty football field and made a genuine effort to shove the personality of a dead man back into the recesses of his mind where it belonged.

## October

Young lit a cigarette and looked out over the sea.

This was McKay's fault.

Entirely.

He'd been doing okay. For months now he had been screening applications, interviewing the SGC recruits, and running the simulations at Cheyenne Mountain that separated out the best of them.

He hadn't done a math problem in weeks.

*Weeks.*

Well, eleven days, technically, before McKay showed up to do his goddamned '*congressional briefing*' and asked for his *input* on a singularity-based power source, like a fucking *insensitive asshole*.

Well. Fine. He'd fallen off the theoretical physics wagon, but it wasn't like it was the first time.

The thing that was becoming really obvious though, was that he really should *not* drink. Not anymore, *at all*, and, failing total abstinence, clearly not with *fucking Rodney*.

Clearly not with Rodney.

The bizarre fucking blend that was his *fucking* mind—

The state of his *thoughts* was such that when he drank, really bad ideas started to seem less bad.

Like this one.

This had been a bad idea.

As bad as they fucking came.

He took a deep breath and made a decisive effort to *calm down*. Everything was much better when he could just—stay calm.

Below him, the water broke along the 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 ground at his feet.

"You could have told me," Young snapped at the empty air. "I would have understood."

He hadn't really started thinking clearly until he had *already* flown to JFK and the transatlantic flight had taken off, changing velocity pressing him back and down into his seat as New York spread out below him like a carpet of light.

"It explains a lot, actually," he continued, conversationally, feeling calmer as he mentally achieved a marginal degree of separation between himself and the person he was addressing. "But I suppose that's part of why you never said anything. Not to me, not to Gloria, not to anyone."

He took a drag of his cigarette.

"I bet the AI knew, though. I'll bet it knew *everything*."

He exhaled, watching little birds circle over distant, dark rocks.

"I understand that too," he said.

He turned and he walked up and over the crest of the hill, following the path that Riley had taken in a place that had looked like this one, but that had been less sharp, less edged, and less acutely painful.

He walked to the back of the small church, winding his way between graves old and new until he found what he was looking for.

It was mostly overgrown.

He sat gingerly, stretching his aching, injured leg out in front of him. He ran a thumb over the flat gray stone, clearing the damp earth away from the engraved letters with his nail.

"Alexander," he murmured. "Not your fault, kiddo," he whispered, "but not his either."

He ripped back the overgrown, spiky grass, looking at the dates.

He'd had a sense of it already, of course, from the dreams and from—from *everything*, but—

"Fifteen," Young said, looking at the dates. "And he must have been, what? Twelve?" He looked at the stone and shook his head. "Thirteen," he whispered. "They way he remembers it—well. I thought he would have been older."

Young carefully brushed the loose earth away from the grave.

"Your brother hated water," Young said with some difficulty, "for the rest of his life."

He paused, listening to the cry of distant sea birds.

"But it might also interest you to know—" Young broke off, clenching his jaw. "He never believed what they said. He never believed in hell. And even if he had, he never would have believed, not even for a *second*, that *you* would ever end up there."

Young said nothing for a long time.

"He kept your secret," Young murmured. "And then, after you died, he kept you as one."

After a few minutes he pulled a carved chess piece out of his pocket and set it down with a soft click against the stone.

"I don't think I'll be back this way again, kid," he said quietly. "I'm trying to let go, if you know what I mean."

## November

McKay was back on Atlantis, but that was fine.

Young didn't care.

Young didn't want to talk to him anyway. He didn't want to talk to McKay about Yang-Mills existence and mass gap, he didn't want to talk to skype with Chloe to find out how set theory was going and he didn't want to talk to Carter about the implications of turbulence in the event horizon of unstable wormholes. Nope. He *also* didn't want to fucking go online and read the latest issue of the Annals of Mathematics and he most certainly did not want to look at the e-table of contents of Communications on Applied

Mathematics even though it was a Thursday and the new eTOCs came out on Thursdays. He didn't want to *fucking* look and he didn't want to *fucking* know.

Nope.

The material conditional. If math, then drinking.

Converse indicative conditional. If he did no math, then he did not drink.

Counterfactual conditional. If he had not done math, then he would not be drinking.

Was cause and effect really anything more than implied? If not, then it was no victory to skip the math and go straight to the drinking.

*If* causality does not exist, *then*—

Fuck it.

He went to O'Malley's.

It was already late when he left the base, freezing rain thrown into sparkling relief in the beams of his headlights and impacting his windshield in hard, icy drops.

When he got to the bar, it was quiet.

Most of the clientele tended to come from the base, and he'd heard rumors of some kind of presidential visit or Tok'ra conference, or Asgard something-or-other going on tomorrow.

Whatever.

He ordered a scotch.

Then he fucking changed his order to fucking *beer*.

A shitty *American* beer.

He drank his beer, and *then* he ordered a scotch.

He needed to do something about this. He needed a strategy. That was how he operated. It was who he was.

He ordered another scotch.

He sat at the bar, tracing patterns in the dark wood, trying to remember who he was.

Who *he* was.

He had nieces and nephews. An ex-wife who still cared about him enough to call him every other month, every second Sunday. He had interests. Interests that were not math. That were not science. He liked—fucking football. And guns.



Ugh.

Okay, maybe he had no great love for guns anymore.

But he liked football. And he liked hockey. And he liked the chain of command—sometimes. He liked the outdoors and he liked dogs. He liked American food.

All right, *some* American food.

He liked classic rock. And he did *not* like jazz. He felt one hundred percent neutral about classical music, so neutral about it, in fact that he preferred not to hear it. Ever.

And he did not currently have, nor had he *ever* had any strong feelings about *math* for fuck's sake.

He took out a cigarette and lit it up with practiced ease.

"You can't smoke in here," the bartender said sharply.

"I don't smoke *anyway*," Young snapped back.

Okay.

So he wasn't having a good night.

Fine.

Maybe he would just go with it.

Or maybe he'd fucking go home, and *really* get wrecked.

*Drunk.*

Whatever.

He was ready to leave, on his way back from the men's room, when he stumbled slightly, which was enough to drive home the fact that he needed to call a cab, but—

When he looked down and saw his hand against a familiar, dark ridge of wood he knew that this was not just a bad night.

It was a fucking terrible night.

He could no more walk away from the piano than he could shove any of the rest of it out of his head and the only hesitation of his hands above the keys was the hesitation that came at the peak of a ballistic trajectory where the remnants of an absent thrust meet gravity and for a perceptible interval change in position over time approaches zero.

He sat.

He looked at the keys.

And then, he began to play.

The Impromptu in G flat clawed its way out of his mind as if it lived there, a separate thing, waiting to emerge fully formed. Continuous fluttering arpeggios moved beneath the melody, blending and falling through entire dynamic ranges, his articulation practiced and familiar and sure and *god* the man had not just 'played piano' because this was not music.

This was the sound of his mind shredding into broken triads.

He finished the piece and stood, rocketing back from the keys, losing his balance.

He would have fallen, but someone grabbed his upper arm.

"Hey," Jackson said, his voice low and quiet and much, *much* too close.

Young shut his eyes, barely able to stand the sight of the other man, but unable to send him away.

"You look like you could use a ride home," Jackson said.

"Yeah," Young replied.

## December

Multicolored lights wound their way around the black metal of the porch railing in tightly spaced loops.

His breath condensed in the dark air.

Inside, he could hear Luke, mock-roaring as he wrestled with two of the nephews.

"What happened out there, Everett?" JD asked quietly. "Wherever it is that you were?"

"I can't talk about it."

"I know that, just—generally. Whatever it was, it's tearing you apart. It's changing you."

He smiled at that, and he *felt* it on his face—it was *Rush's* smile. Rush's fucking pained half-smile that he'd never really appreciated for what it was—this way that one could somehow feel so amused, so incredulous, and so fucking *hurt*.

"I left someone behind," Young said, angling his head up, leaning against the icy exterior of the house. "Not once, but twice. The first time, he came back. The second time, he didn't."

JD was quiet for a moment.

The night was utterly clear, and their little galaxy spread out above them, scattered in crisp relief over the darkness.

It seemed small to him.

"Sounds like you didn't have much choice about it," JD said guardedly.

Young shrugged, unable to speak.

"This guy," JD said, and god if he hadn't *always* been like this, ever since Young was a kid, coming right to the heart of everything. "What was he like?"

"Extremely complicated." Young could not resist reaching into his pocket and pulling out a pack of cigarettes.

"Since when do you smoke?" JD asked.

"As a habit? It's a relatively recent acquisition. Or—" he broke off with Rush's smile again and placed the cigarette delicately between his teeth. "Maybe not so recent. Depends on how you look at it." He fished for a lighter in his pocket.

"It's bad for you," JD said, ignoring the incomprehensibility of his statement and focusing on what he could understand, which, in the grand scheme of things, was not much.

That too, he recognized.

"The best things always are," Young replied.

"So—tell me about this guy. What happened?"

"He was a civilian," Young said. "I was supposed to bring him home, and I didn't."

"Everett."

Young sighed, still looking out at the galaxy. "Look, I can't tell you specifics, but you know the whole navy mentality, go-down-with-the-ship type of thing?"

"Yeah," JD said cautiously.

"It was that sort of scenario, and I was going to stay and go down with the hypothetical fucking ship."

"But instead it was him," JD murmured.

"Yeah," Young said shortly.

"And you can't live with that."

"In more ways than one," he said.

"Everett."

There was something sad in his brother's voice, and that was appropriate, Young thought, because in a lot of ways—in all the most important ways, JD's little brother was dead.

"Does this guy have a name?" JD asked.

"No," Young said.

"Okay. We'll call him—um, Steve. It seems like you and Steve—"

"Nick," Young whispered.

"Nick then," JD said quietly. "It seems like you and Nick had a relationship that was more complicated than just a military guy protecting a civilian contractor, or analyst, or whatever he was exactly."

"Yeah," Young said, feeling his brother slowly unravel him, letting him do it for what was probably the last time.

"So what was the deal, exactly?" JD murmured.

"He tried to frame me for murder." Young shrugged. "He failed. I then attacked him and left him to die. He came back. We worked out our differences. We slept together. He forced me to leave him behind."

Silence.

"Um, *holy shit*, Everett."

"Like I said. He was complicated."

JD just breathed evenly out into the night, a long, slow exhale. There were so many avenues of attack open to him, Young was curious to see what he would pick.

"Is he dead?"

*God damn.*

"You've always been too fucking perceptive, JD. How the hell did you end up in this family anyway?"

"I question people for a living, Everett. You didn't answer me."

"I don't know. I think he is."

"Is the—not-knowing what's keeping you going?" JD asked.

"Yeah, but I'm not really on a sustainable trajectory here, as you've probably noticed."

"Grief is never a sustainable trajectory," JD said.

"You think this is grief?"

"That's what it looks like from here."

"Well, it's *not*," Young snapped at him. "The man was a fucking *landslide* of a human being and in the end—" Young broke off as his voice cracked and this was *not* happening to him, he was not having a breakdown on porch of his parents' house, he was *not*.

"And in the end," Young continued, "he stayed true to what he *was*—an untrustworthy bastard fucking *pragmatist*."

"Nick." JD said, like a question, like a reminder, like an admonishment—like he was using the *fucking vocative case*.

"Yeah," Young replied, his voice shattering into nothing against the word. "Nick."

## January

He was driving across the plains states just after New Year's when he decided he couldn't take it any more.

The land was flat, and white, and blanketed with snow.

The clouded sky was leaden and low to the ground.

He took the first available exit off the freeway and pulled into a gas station in the middle of nowhere. He filled up the tank of the white Prius and then asked for a key to the men's room, passing the aisles of packaged, processed food, the cheap magazines, the terrible coffee.

He went outside.

It was starting to snow—just a few dry, fragile little flakes that matched the sky and the land and the cement and the chipped, peeling paint of the wall of the gas station.

The door that he opened was gray.

Light filtered in from a vent that connected to the outside. He could just make out his face in the mirror in the dim light.

He didn't recognize himself.

"I'm sorry," he said to his reflection, "but I can't do this anymore."

He knelt down on the floor of the men's room, one hand on the sink.

He reached back into his mind, and with as much focus and intent as he was able to bring to bear he purposefully pulled everything he had of Rush forward.

Everything.

After an uncounted interval, he opened his eyes, rocketing to his feet only to steady himself against the sink.

He clenched his hands quickly once, and then relaxed them.

He felt a muscle in his cheek twitching.

His hands were shaking, his whole body was shaking.

He curled his fingers around the edges of the sink.

He looked up, flinging his hair back out of his face.

He kept forgetting to cut it.

*God, yes.*

This was better. It was *better*.

He laughed, once, brief and mirthless.

"I told you," he said to himself, and his voice—his voice was very subtly accented, the words rolling out in a manner that was unfamiliar but viscerally satisfying, as if he'd been saying everything incorrectly for *months*. "We'd never be done."

## February

"So," Lam said, reaching out to nudge a pawn forward with the edge of a short, polished nail. "Something's changed. I can't quite put my finger on it, but you seem different. Settled, maybe, more talkative, but—in an *anxious* way."

Young looked up sharply from the chessboard. "Settled but *anxious*," he said. "That's nonsensical."

"Case in point," Lam said, raising her eyebrows. "Also, I think you've lost weight."

"I doubt that," Young replied. "Personally, I think I've *improved*."

"I see," Lam said, as she watched him reposition his bishop. "In that case, why don't you tell me a little bit about him. About what he was like."

"No," Young said shortly.

"One thing," Lam said, her tone casual. "Just one."

Young looked at her over the frames of his glasses.

Lam raised her eyebrows in an overt challenge.

"He was arrogant," Young said, "and he was practical, and he had a hard edge. He was incompletely understood by nearly everyone who ever interacted with him. He was uncontainable."

"Uncontainable," Lam echoed. "I'm getting that."

"He was the kind of person," Young said, "that a starship could fall in love with."

"Destiny," Lam said. "*Destiny* was in love with him?"

"Yes," Young said, looking away. "It was."

## Chapter Seventy

The air was warm and smelled like spring.

Young perched on a metal rail, notebook in hand. He faced west, into the red haze of the setting sun. Around him, lines of stones spread out, irregular sentinels on a darkening hillside.

The ceremony had been that morning.

He had intended to go, but then he hadn't.

It didn't matter.

Rush wouldn't have given a damn—not about the formal bullshit anyway. Not about the improperly titled 'funeral' in which nothing was buried and not about the god damned *building* that someone had gotten named after him.

The funding of an entire research division meant to study the nature of the multiverse —*that* would have interested him.

As for the rest of the crew—well, they had wanted to see him, certainly, but not like this.

Not like he was now.

He pushed his hair back.

The sun was low and the ground was shadowed.

He ran a thumb over the open page of his pocket-sized notebook, tracing the indentations where a forceful script had imprinted the delicate paper as he looked out over the irregular array of stone, tinted to rose by the setting sun.

"This," Rush said conversationally, hovering in his peripheral vision as if he'd always been there, "is fair fucking depressing."

Young jerked, nearly losing his balance.

The small notebook dropped from his lap to hit the place where grass met flagstones.

He turned to look at the other man.

Rush was leaning against the rail, his forearms resting against the dark metal. The sleeves of his crisp, white shirt were pulled back nearly to his elbows. His hair was shorter than it had ever been on Destiny, and he was clean-shaven.

He looked up obliquely at Young.



Something in his gaze suggested uncertainty.

Young narrowed his eyes.

The back of his mind, the place from which everything seemed to come—the math, the anger, the anxiety, the pain of an unnatural emptiness—remained unchanged.

"So," Young said, recovering his equilibrium. "Fucking *finally*. Though I have to say, I expected you to be a bit more—" he broke off. "A bit more *accurate*."

Rush flinched, loosing his neutral expression. He looked down and away, out over the graves.

Young climbed off the rail with a pointed glare.

Rush straightened, facing him. "You seem to be taking this rather well," he said guardedly.

"Of course I am. Do you have *any idea* how long I've been waiting to have a psychotic break?" Young asked. "You're not even very convincing, but hopefully you'll improve with time."

Rush's eyes locked to his and he looked at Young with the full force of his attention that—even like this, even as an imperfect construct of his own fucked up mind—was nearly impossible to bear.

After a few seconds, Rush gave him his pained half-smile. "Yes well. You know me," he murmured. "Always seeking out the next, best iteration."

"It's fucking exhausting," Young growled.

"I know," Rush whispered. "I know it is."

They were quiet for a moment.

"In the interest of full disclosure," Rush said, "I'm not your psychotic break."

"Thank you," Young said, pulling out a pack of cigarettes, "for that unverifiable opinion."

"Everett," Rush whispered.

"What," Young snapped, pulling out his lighter, trying to conceal the shaking in his hands. "*What*. What do you fucking *want* from me? You're not even fucking *real*. He's dead."

"Not quite," Rush murmured.

"Shut up," Young hissed. "Just shut the *fuck* up, all right? I pulled everything forward partly because I couldn't stand to keep shoving it back, but *partly* on the off chance

that I could get 'you'," he paused, to give not-Rush a pointed look, "to actually fucking coalesce out of basically the *entire personality* he left behind, but I *know* what this is, and it's *not real*. So don't fuck with me any more than you already have, you jackass." He took a long, slow pull of his cigarette, trying to regain his fraying control. "I don't need this kind of shit from my irritatingly *un-self-aware* neural architecture."

Rush watched him for a moment, saying nothing. Then, in one fluid motion, he reached forward, snatched the cigarette out of Young's hand, dropped it on the ground and crushed it beneath his boot. He raised his eyebrows at Young, his expression caught between challenge and sympathy.

Young looked back at him, taking in the way the setting sun played across the lines of his shirt, the way it put red highlights into his hair.

"That's—" Young said, swallowing, "that's pretty good for an hallucination."

"It is, isn't it?" Rush said, his voice barely audible.

Slowly, Rush brought one hand up, palm open.

Young brought his own hand forward, pressing their palms together, interlacing their fingers.

The other man's skin was warm and solid under his own.

The sensation was nearly unbearable.

"I think," Rush breathed, "that perhaps it's time I helped you with this neural architecture problem you seem to be having."

Young said nothing, just continued to stare at their entwined fingers.

"Yes?" Rush said uncertainly.

"Yes," Young whispered back.

Nothing happened.

He tore his eyes away from their hands to look at Rush.

"Take down your block," Rush said gently. He took a half step forward, his feet soundless on the gray flagstones.

"I'm not blocking," Young whispered.

"You are," Rush said, his free hand coming around the back of Young's neck. "Your mind is a mess of shattered barriers that you've built and that I've destroyed." His thumb grazed the side of Young's temple. "In one way or another."

"It's not your fault," Young whispered into the quiet air.

"Of course it is," Rush murmured. "Try to think about—" he broke off, looking up at the darkening sky, his features lit up by the oblique light of the setting sun. "Think about letting me in."

They were inches apart, Rush applying a careful pressure to the back of Young's neck, his hand warm over rigid, tense musculature. Young let him move incrementally closer, his mind a wildly apprehensive swirl, wondering what he would find when his barriers came down, wondering which *one of them*, but knowing already—

Rush kissed him.

It was familiar and slow and careful and Young didn't have to think about *letting* him in, he was *pulling* him in, body and mind, hands and thoughts.

Rush's presence flowed without resistance down an agonizing gradient of differential mental pressure, sweeping through his mind in a laminar outpouring of mental energy that was bright and clear and controlled and complicated and as overwhelming as the man himself had ever been.

The flagstones were warm beneath his back.

Young opened his eyes to find his head in Rush's lap.

The scientist's fingers trailed absently through his hair.

"How do you feel?" Rush asked, looking down at him.

"Weird," Young murmured.

Rush smiled faintly. "Weird," he repeated with patient disdain. "That's not very informative."

"More like me," Young said. "Less like you."

"Good," Rush whispered, watching Young push himself up into a seated position on the flagstones.

"What the hell took you so long?" Young growled at him. "It's been a *year*, Rush. You could have *warned* me about—I don't know—*this* shit," he said, yanking on a piece of his too-long hair. "You could have told me what exactly you were planning."

"I *did* warn you," Rush said dryly.

"*When*?"

"I believe there was a rather dramatic mention of razing your consciousness to the ground?" Rush said, smiling faintly. "You never listen to me."

"Oh. Right. How could I forget something so clear and well explained?"

"As for what I was planning," Rush continued, "I had no idea as to whether I would succeed or not."

"Whatever happened to 'I'll try to let you *know*?' I thought you were *dead*."

"I ran into some trouble," Rush whispered, looking away. "On several levels."

"Of course you did," Young said. He edged closer to the scientist so that they were sitting shoulder to shoulder. "What kind of trouble?" he asked finally.

"There are certain hierarchies in place," Rush murmured, still not looking at Young, "into which I do not easily fit. Stringent requirements were imposed upon me for a time regarding interaction with this plane."

"So they wouldn't let you come back?"

"No," Rush replied.

"And you just *went along* with that?" Young asked.

"I did," Rush said, "but—"

"Well thanks a lot," Young growled. "You *knew* this would happen and you sent me through that gate *anyway* because you could not *handle*—"

"Shut up, won't you?" Rush murmured, leaning into his shoulder.

After a few seconds, Young wrapped an arm around him.

They were quiet for a moment.

"Nice fucking *haircut*, by the way," Rush said, his voice raw.

"I kept forgetting to cut it," Young murmured.

"I know how that goes."

"I'm sure you do."

Young shut his eyes.

The wind whistled softly over the graves.

In the back of his mind, he listened to the bright, incomprehensible, tonal swirl of Rush's thoughts.

"You haven't asked me," Rush whispered finally.

Young opened his eyes, looking up and out at the darkening sky, fighting the closing of his throat.

He thought of Gloria.

"That's because I don't need to, kiddo. I already know."

"Do you?" Rush asked.

"Yeah," Young said, his voice unsteady. "I don't blame you."

"This was the only way," Rush whispered. "The only way I could ascend. The only way I could come back."

"I know."

"He hated himself. But the AI—it—mitigated that to some degree."

"I know," Young said.

"Together, they made something that could continue. That could fix everything that could be fixed." Rush glanced at him obliquely.

"Yeah," Young whispered.

"I don't know if this makes any difference to you," Rush whispered, "But the AI—I compressed it as much as I could, before the end."

"An iterative bit-rate reduction," Young said. "Eli told me."

Rush nodded, watching the sun begin to dip below the horizon. "I'm mostly him," Rush whispered. "But not quite. Not exactly."

"Better?" Young asked faintly.

"Oh," Rush said, looking away, "I don't think so. It turns out there's not really a metric for this sort of thing."

"I guess not," Young murmured, one hand running up and down Rush's arm. "So," he continued after a moment. "What's the plan?"

"Well," Rush said as if the words were being dredged out of him. "You have a choice."

Young watched the wind ruffle the pages of the notebook that lay on the edge of the flagstones.

"You going to tell me what it is?" Young murmured. "Or make me guess?"

"Either," Rush said, with a half-smile, "you tell me to fuck off, and you go back to your life with your newly repaired neural architecture, or you and I—" he broke off. "You and I get the fuck out of here."

He did not look at Young.

"And by 'out of here,' you mean?"

"Off this plane," Rush said, his eyes fixed on the flagstones.

Young nodded, not trusting himself to speak, watching the red highlights in Rush's hair fade as the sun slipped below the horizon.

"It's all right," Rush whispered finally. "I understand. I thought you might feel that way."

"What?" Young asked, perplexed.

Rush shook his head. "I understand," he said.

"You're such an idiot," Young whispered. "Of course I'm coming with you. Do you have *any* idea—any idea *at all* how difficult it has been to—"

He could not continue.

"Yes," Rush breathed. "Yes, I know. But there are people here who care about you. Your family. The crew. And I am not what you—" he toyed with the cuff of his white-collared shirt. "I'm not precisely what you wanted."

Young pulled him in, pressing their foreheads together. "You're it, genius," he said, "in whatever form you take."

Rush said nothing, but relief echoed through their link, clear and harmonic and profound. It nearly overwhelmed his consciousness before Rush managed to pull it back and tamp it down.

"That's new," Young whispered.

"Sorry," Rush murmured.

They sat together, unspeaking in the gathering dark, until Young pulled back.

"Why didn't you descend?" he asked. "Like Ginn?"

"I couldn't," Rush whispered. "I can't. I can never go back."

"Why not?"

"Even with the AI compressed, the information and experiences that make up my consciousness require more space than a human mind can provide." He smiled ruefully. "As you are well aware."

Young nodded.

"I considered descending, but I doubted that I would be at all functional," Rush said. "I was convinced that such an outcome would be less acceptable to you than this one."

"You can't—break away from the AI, now that you've ascended?"

"No," Rush whispered, "and even if I could—I wouldn't."

"I guess not," Young said.

They were quiet for a moment.

"A *year*?" Young said. "Seriously?"

"I'm sorry," Rush said, "that it took me so long to convince them. They don't particularly like me."

"Nice to know that some things don't change," Young said dryly. "What did you do to piss them off?"

"I'm sure I have no idea," Rush said, with an air of artless innocence.

"And I'm pretty sure you *do*," Young said.

"They're not particularly fond of the fact that I am unclassifiable—neither Ancient, nor human, nor machine. They don't like the fact that I was able to facilitate the ascension of three humans before I myself ascended. They have rules about that sort of thing, which I was able to circumvent by doing it when I was still corporeal."

"Is that all?" Young asked.

"I'm also a *bit*," Rush said, sounding pleased with himself, "untethered from this D-brane."

"What does that mean?" Young asked, raising his eyebrows. "I thought you couldn't tear through."

"I didn't tear *through*," Rush murmured. "I didn't make any changes, but I did," he broke off, tilting his head in a conspiratorial manner, "tear this brane."

Young raised his eyebrows.

"Just a *bit*. It was an unintended consequence of the manner in which I ascended," Rush said, unable to completely hide his smile as he looked out over the darkening cemetery.

"Right. Unintended."

"Always so suspicious," Rush murmured, shaking his head with aggrieved amusement.

Around them, the small electric lights that illuminated the flagstone path flared to life in bright simultaneity.

"Did you do that?" Young asked.

"Hardly," Rush replied, rolling his eyes. "The lights are likely on a timer. Do me a favor and at least make an effort toward the application of valid inference and correct reasoning. I know you're capable of it."

"God, you're a lot of work," Young said, fighting the almost forgotten sensation of a genuine smile.

"I believe we can take that as a given," Rush said airily, his half-smile evening out into something that Young had only ever seen a few times. "There's no need to continuously state it."

"So how did you finally convince them to let you come back for me?" Young asked.

Rush's expression lost its amused cast and he looked away, back out into the darkness.

"Assistance of a human by an Ancient in the process of ascension is forbidden. There are certain parties who have managed to evade the established rules, but that was not possible for me, for a variety of reasons. So I consistently, persistently argued the same point for a fucking year. Ultimately, I was successful in convincing the council that decides these things."

"And what point were you arguing?" Young asked.

"That you and I," Rush whispered, his gaze so intent that it was nearly unbearable, "are not truly separate things."

"No," Young said, unable to look away. "I suppose we're not."

They were quiet for a moment, then Young spoke again. "So. Let's do this."

"It doesn't have to be now," Rush murmured. "You can—"

Young shook his head.

"Once you ascend," Rush said, "you won't be able to interact with this plane."

Young reached out, his fingers closing on the small notebook that he had been carrying with him.

"Is that my—" Rush trailed off.

"Yeah. It's one of the ones from 1998. You know you nearly had the Hodge conjecture entirely worked out?"

"Algebraic topology was a hobby of mine in the late nineties."

Young snorted. "I *know*."

"I suppose you would."



Young flipped to the front cover and wrote a brief message.

*"Eli,*

*It turns out you were right. Let everyone know, would you?"*

He signed his name.

Rush raised his eyebrows.

"What?" Young asked. "It's succinct."

"True," Rush said.

Young stood and then reached down to pull Rush to his feet.

"Aren't you supposed to be glowing or something?" Young asked.

"Not my style," Rush said.

"How are you even corporeal?" Young asked, stepping past the small lights to climb over the metal rail that he had been sitting on earlier.

"Partial intraconversion of mass and energy," Rush said, following Young over the metal rail. "Obviously."

"Oh yes. *Obviously*," Young echoed.

Beneath his feet the grass was springy and slightly damp.

They walked down the hill, between the rows of stones.

Young stopped in front of a marble headstone, reading the engraved words.

*We can only see a short distance ahead, but we can see plenty there that needs to be done.*

"Mmm," Rush said looking at it. "Adorably apt," he said, "though I find the presentation a bit ostentatious."

"Are you *critiquing* your own *tombstone*?" Young asked.

"Too soon?" Rush asked, raising his eyebrows.

Young shook his head. "You're a lot of—"

"Don't say it," Rush cut in, his voice low and amused.

"*Trouble*," Young finished pointedly. "But you're worth it."

"Yes rather," Rush said, shaking his hair back out of his eyes.

Young set his notebook, *Rush's* notebook, down gently on top of the smooth marble.

"How do you know he'll find it?" Rush asked.

"I'm supposed to be meeting up with the senior staff from Destiny later tonight," Young murmured, with a faint twinge of regret. "When I don't show—this is where he'll come."

He looked down at the stone for a long moment.

When looked up, it was to the acute and passionate darkness of Rush's eyes.

"I thought you didn't make it," Young whispered finally.

"I thought you *wouldn't* make it," Rush replied, "until I could come back for you."

Young nodded. "Come on genius, let's do this."

"What about your family? Tamara?" Rush paused. "Emily?"

"There are letters on file at the SGC," Young said.

"You're sure about this?" Rush whispered.

"Yeah," Young said, looking up at the few stars that were bright enough to outshine the ambient light of the nearby city. "I'm sure."

Rush extended his hand in the darkness.

Young took it.

Like a slow wave, Rush flooded into his mind, into every aspect of him, throwing all that he was into stark relief. The dig of blades into the ice, the rush forward and the pull back, the feel of his fingers against the cool, familiar planes of an assault rifle, Emily, his brothers, TJ, his daughter, the memory of math, of a mercy killing, of leaving a man to die, of a girl kissing his cheek in a cold hallway without light even as she turned into something she wasn't—

"Let it go," Rush whispered. His hair, his shirt, his skin, began to light up with a subtle glow. "Everything that's happened, everything you've done, is only a permutation of who you truly are."

Young looked at him.

"Circumstantially defined," Rush continued, "depending sensitively on initial conditions, your path deterministic but unpredictable within the confines of a system containing more variables than could ever be formally described." His voice was quiet and low, his outline subsuming into edgeless illumination.

Young let the images come faster and they passed before him without restraint, without remorse. TJ, her hair lit to blazing beneath fluorescent light. The icy darkness of the North Platte River. Daniel, Jackson curled into himself in the darkness of Destiny.

The fluctuations of an open gate. Rush, smoking a cigarette on a hill overlooking the sea.

"That's it exactly," Rush said.

He looked down at their hands to find his own already taking on a vaguely luminous cast.

A strange sensation crept along his arm in a painless, slow searing.

The feel of the ground under his feet, of the night air over his skin began to fade.

"Let go," Rush whispered, their thoughts interweaving.

Their boundaries began to blur and fade, lighting up the darkness, reflecting off the ordered stones.

He let go.

## Epilog: Dreams of the Multiverse

The grass was warm under his back.

It was not only the sensation of warmth, but the knowledge of heat transfer, the exchange of energy to matter and matter to energy and even now, even as what he had become—with his instinctive grasp of these shiftings and changings of phase—he would not say that he really understood the truth that lay beneath his subjective experience. What he *could* say was that he had some kind of grasp on the depth of unknowing that underpinned existence.

The sky above them was blue, but the light was soft.

Young smiled faintly, feeling the weight of Rush's head across his arm.

Rush liked it here, on this planet halfway across the universe from Earth, where there was no intelligent life. A planet that looked very much like everything the man had spent his entire life trying to leave behind.

He looked over at Rush.

The scientist had one arm curled beneath him, his fingers hooking over his shoulder, one hand on Young's chest.

"You asleep, kiddo?" Young asked, barely audible.

No answer.

Technically, sleeping wasn't necessary, and it wasn't something that Young found came naturally to him. It was easier to intraconvert away from any corporeal form whenever he felt the fatigue that came with friction, with entropy, with a utilization of resources.

He didn't sleep.

He didn't dream.

He didn't need to, and he didn't miss it—not really.

But Rush—Rush fell asleep almost every time they came to this abandoned, pristine planet that had more than a passing resemblance to the hills around the Firth of Clyde.

Maybe it was a consequence of what he was.

Maybe it was something that the AI had managed to preserve in him—this ability to let go of himself.

Maybe it was because he had always been so tired.

Young shifted over and he pulled Rush in, closing the distance between them down to nothing, opening the link that still connected their minds.

When he slept, Rush dreamed of the multiverse, always and without fail, his uncontrolled thoughts splitting endlessly with the quantum foam, flipping through permutations of his own fate, of Young's, of Chloe's. Of Daniel's and Eli's and Greer's and TJ's.

And this could not be normal—not even for someone who was half a star ship.

"Such a trouble maker," Young said, half propping himself on his elbow to look down at Rush. The blurred race of the scientist's thoughts slowed and sharpened, his hand closing habitually, reflexively into Young's shirt as he opened his eyes.

"Sorry," Young whispered, his fingers running through Rush's hair, guiding his head back down. "Go back to sleep, genius."

"Stop waking me up," Rush murmured into his shoulder.

"I *said* I was sorry," Young growled at him.

He could feel Rush flash a smile against his shoulder.

"Why do you sleep?" Young whispered into his hair.

"To make sure they're all right," Rush replied, the words nearly soundless.

"And are they?" Young asked, thinking of endlessly splitting but temporally bounded permutations of his crew—his family.

"Sometimes," Rush murmured.

He pulled Rush closer and listened to the surge and fade of the distant sea.

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