

Mathématique

cleanwhiteroom

Book One

Prologue: Circuit

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

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

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

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

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

He prefers not to think of those things here.

He prefers not to think of them now.

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

An empire.

An Alliance.

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

Rush is unmistakable. He's wearing a brown jacket over a white collared shirt. His sunglasses are square-framed and expensive, much like the pair that Telford himself is

sporting. With the longish hair and the hint of a beard, the only way he could further conform to current standards in California professorial fashion would be to acquire a pair of Birkenstocks. It is only the contained energy of his movements that looks out of place—not only on this campus, but in the context of the state, the coast, and even, Telford thinks, the planet.

He likes him immediately.

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

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

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

Rush ignores the proffered hand.

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

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

"Cigarette?"

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

"Admirable," Telford says mildly.

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

"You don't mind if I—"

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

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

Rush glances at him.

Telford pulls out his lighter, unhurried.

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

The other man just doesn't know it yet.

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

Telford lights his cigarette.

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

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

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

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

"You don't even know me."

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

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

Telford tosses Rush the flashdrive.

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

Chapter Two

It was too fucking hot.

Nicholas Rush lay on his floor, eyes shut, feeling dissipated. He listened to some anonymous insect flutter against the glass of the window and tried not to move as sweat trickled down his temples and beaded back into his hair like tears or some other wet, salted thing—blood, or seawater, possibly—that could also be acted upon by gravity.

That was a moronic train of thought.

It was *interesting* though—the way separated things fell away and down, tears and blood and leaves and books that were dropped and rain and he was certain that of all the fundamental forces, gravity was his favorite because it was poorly defined and forgiving and it pulled things together. Electromagnetism was his least favorite because it was hard and ruthless and bright and it kept things from merging into the same spaces.

He was drunk. Drunk or dehydrated or tired. Frankly, he wasn't sure which and they were not mutually exclusive possibilities. Maybe he had heatstroke. He was fairly certain he'd feel worse if he had heatstroke. But perhaps not.

He heard the quiet chime of the elevator through the seams of his bolted door.

"No—angle it—the other way. No—the *other* other way."

"I don't remember couches being so heavy."

Rush suppressed an inappropriately venomous spike of hatred against couches as a concept, that unseen couch in particular, persons who designed couches, those who constructed them, those who sold them for a living, as well as anyone who was the *owner* of a couch—a set of which he was a member, if one included previous couch ownership, which one really should, because anything else was *lying*.

"Vala. Stop it. You are *not* helping."

He had suspected when he heard them that one of them was Dr. Jackson, but now he was certain.

"Vala, we are not carrying this couch while you are—*lounging* on it."

He was deeply suspicious of Jackson. He sincerely doubted that any human could actually be as nice and as intelligent as Daniel Jackson seemed, in practice, to be.

There was something wrong with the man. Perhaps he wasn't a human, which was, apparently, possible these days, given that this 'stargate' was a real, functional object and Rush wasn't hallucinating Dr. Jackson and his interstellar gateway in some kind of psychotic episode—but Rush was fairly certain that this was *not* the case, primarily because he was convinced that if he'd hallucinated Dr. Jackson he would have hallucinated some personality flaws for the man, just to make the entire scenario more realistic for himself.

"You brought me here under false pretenses," a woman's voice said, low and indistinct through the wood of the door. "You implied this 'moving' was a cultural rite of passage."

Rush smiled faintly.

"This *is* a cultural rite of passage."

"That's pretty weak, Jackson."

"In my experience, rites of passage generally involve less work and more *food*," 'Vala' replied.

"Your experience is atypical," Jackson said, sounding annoyed.

"The Linguistics Department bake-sale was a 'rite of passage', and *it* involved food," Vala pointed out.

"How is a *bake sale* a 'rite of passage'?" Jackson asked. "You need to stop taking Teal'c so seriously."

"The ritual preparation of food in the company of one's peer group for the greater good when undertaken for the first time very much counts as a 'rite of passage'," Vala replied with a prim twist to her voice.

"She's got you there," the other man said. "Come on. She's not that heavy,"

"But it's the principle of the thing," Jackson replied, sounding slightly strained.

Presumably they were moving the couch.

Rush didn't care. The set of reasons he didn't give a fuck was so vast he couldn't neither delineate nor map it.

Opening his eyes, he found himself knifed by photons—eye to brain, bilateral and remorseless and everything one imagined when one imagined a photosensitive headache. He shut his eyes again and wondered about the feasibility of scraping himself *off* his own floor. It was going to need to happen in the relative near term, because there was a zero percent probability that Jackson would leave this building

without at least knocking on his door, and there were certain standards that Rush had to maintain in order to continue sustainably.

Not killing himself via dehydration was on that list.

He wondered how long he had been on the floor.

He wondered if he had an air conditioner. One would think that he would have turned it on by now if he did indeed have one, but one might be wrong regarding such an assumption.

Turning over was more difficult than it should have been. His muscles felt uncooperative and too loose, as if they had determined where things were headed and just abandoned him to that press of gravity that dragged him down toward the molten core of the earth. If dead civilizations sank ever downward, buried under the detritus of the new, then maybe it could be the same with graves which explained why he didn't want to be cremated he just wanted to be buried, to be under this press always, to sink into the ground, to become one with the liquid core of the earth that spun and generated a magnetic field that protected the seas from solar radiation.

He buried his head in his arms, face down on the wooden floor.

How long did it take to move someone into an apartment?

What would Jackson do if he found him lying on the floor, unable to stand, overheating in a set of rooms that likely had some kind of cooling mechanism somewhere, if he had only bothered to look for it.

Fuck Jackson anyway. He was too fucking nice to too many people who clearly didn't appreciate it. Or deserve it.

Was that a character flaw?

He would have to think about that.

Probably not.

He forced himself up onto his elbows and then onto his knees, and yes there did seem to be something wrong with him, as the room looked somewhat askew, which was unusual and clearly a perceptive problem with an uninteresting etiology. He got to his feet, his hand on the warm paint of the wall. He walked unsteadily to the bathroom and turned on the shower, half sitting, half-collapsing under the cool water.

Objectively, this was not one of the finest moments in the life of Dr. Nicholas Rush.

He wished vaguely that he'd taken his clothes off, because that was the usual order of things when one took a shower, but from a teleological standpoint, whether the

clothes came off before, after, or *during* the showering was not really *terribly* important, because this whole sequence of events that he was undertaking was more about the perception that he'd done something other than lie on a hardwood floor and attack his cypher set in long-hand, short-hand, Ancient, and code for the three days since he'd last seen Jackson.

He felt a bit more alert now that his brain was not being autoclaved in his skull.

He wondered whether he'd made any material progress on the decryption. He hoped he hadn't wasted his time on matrices in this kind of heat—delirium and linear algebra did not mix well. Maybe he'd been coding. That wouldn't be *better* than the matrices but nor would it be worse. Unfortunately, there was something like a fifty percent chance that when he finished his showering he was going to find that he'd fucking reproduced a piano sonata on his wall or torn into an unopened box labeled with her name, looking for—

Fuck.

The only thing more pathetic than taking a shower in one's clothes was crying while one took a shower in one's clothes.

He was speaking hypothetically, of course, because he was not crying. Breathing irregularly, possibly, but not crying.

Everything was fine. He had a can of paint. If there was something on the wall that wasn't mathematics then he would just paint over it without looking. It was as simple as that.

He needed to divest himself of his clothing and so he unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it off. The rest of it came by waterlogged rote. He used soap. He shaved. Maybe that would convince Jackson to leave him the hell alone.

After a time that felt too long, possibly because it *was* too long, he dragged himself out of the shower, located clothes that were clean, and put them on in the room where he kept all the boxes.

He should have fucking burned everything, and he *would have*—he just didn't want to go fucking shopping for clothes.

That and—the idea of destroying anything that had been hers was—

The room seemed suddenly too warm and too small and too foreign. Too many of the boxes were covered with too much dust and unopened and he couldn't breathe; his heart was beating hard and merciless as if it were trying to destroy his lungs, as if it

were trying to *escape* and he picked up his shirt and flung himself out of the room, slamming the door behind him, unsteady but back, finally, in the central room with the ceiling-length windows and Jackson, *Jackson* was outside and he was talking to whomever it was that he knew and it was the most reassuring thing Rush had heard in days, and he *could not breathe*. He sank back to his knees and tried to breathe and it *was fine*, he knew objectively that he was breathing even though it didn't feel like there was any oxygen in the air.

"No you cannot use my credit card. You're getting paid now. You can get your own credit card."

"But Daniel. *Darling*," Vala said, "I can't get a credit card because I haven't decided yet what my *birthday* is going to be. This is a very important aspect of being a member of your society, and I don't want to choose incorrectly."

"There's no wrong choice," Jackson said, sounding perplexed.

"For instance, do you think I have an ability to let go of past situations in preparation for future needs? Would you say I am reserved, loyal, and secretive?"

"Secretive? No. Well. Maybe? Yes, actually. What does this have to do with anything?"

"She's trying to figure out her sign," the man who wasn't Jackson said.

"Your astrological sign?"

"Obviously," Vala said primly.

Their voices began to fade as they walked down the hallway.

"First of all—no. Just no. Astrology isn't real, and you aren't even from this planet. So even if it were real, the position of planets relative to constellations would be meaningless or at least uninterpretable from wherever you were born—"

He was fine.

He needed to drink water. Anyone would feel panicky in this level of heat. He needed to drink water and find the air conditioner.

He was certain it existed.

He stood up again, staring down the dim tide of tunnel vision until it resolved, wondering how long he'd been lying on that floor. Probably too long.

In the kitchen, he filled a glass with tap water and drank the entire thing. He refilled it and slid down the cabinetry to the floor, sipping tepid water from a subtly shaking

glass. It occurred to him, as he watched small vibrations distort the reflective surface of the water he held, that he might be dehydrated. He didn't seem to have the ability to stay standing for very long. He tried to determine when he'd last had anything to drink. Or eat.

He wasn't sure.

It didn't matter.

He was going to have to correct this ridiculous situation he'd gotten himself into in relatively short order, but he didn't see an obvious way to do that and he just could not breathe.

It was too fucking hot.

He finished the rest of his water and he did not feel better.

He stood up and opened the refrigerator. He shut it again immediately. That instinct had certainly been overly optimistic.

He refilled his glass, opened one of his cupboards, and dumped about ten grams worth of sugar into the water before sitting down again.

It seemed that he'd had a significant decline in function over the past several days.

That was fine.

When it was cooler outside, when the rotation of the earth had turned him away from the sun, he would get out of here and find some food. Until then, he would sit in his kitchen, drink sugar water, and not pass out. In a little while, when his breathing had normalized and he wasn't thinking of unpacked boxes he would look for his thermostat in a calm, rational, and systematic manner.

He shut his eyes, and he drank his revolting water. Maybe he should just eat the sugar.

But he was trying *not* to throw up.

And he was not going to fucking *eat sugar*. That was ridiculous.

He shut his eyes and tried to breathe steadily and not think of people or things or music but he was terrible at sustaining mental emptiness because it only revealed the true abyss-like nature of his own anxiety.

Du gleichst dem Geist den du begreifst.

He disliked infinite things but liked comparative infinities because really it was the lack of overlap that differentiated systems but there was no more isolated place than the

peripheral sliver of the Venn diagram—that lonely margin that did not merge with its paired set.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow he would work on the cryptography problem.

Today he would try not to cry about set theory or anthropomorphize graphical systems used to represent data.

He leaned his forehead against his knees and he tried to swallow more sugar water, but it was difficult.

It would get better.

Everyone said it would get better, and so it would.

Too bad that was a logical fucking fallacy—*argumentum ad populum*.

It was too hot.

He was going to find his air conditioner. Any minute now he was going to get off his floor and he was going to find it. He could tell by the cast of the light that it was late afternoon.

Someone knocked on his door.

There was a one hundred percent chance it was Jackson.

Rush stood up slowly and walked out of his kitchen, one hand trailing over the warm wall until he reached his door. The key thing was to be as brusque and unfriendly as possible.

That should not be difficult for him.

He opened the door.

"Hey," Jackson said, looking hot and tired and flustered. "Oh my *god*." The other man blinked abruptly.

"What?" Rush snapped.

"It's like a greenhouse in here. Isn't your air conditioning working? Why didn't you pull your shades down?"

He did not have a good answer to either of those questions, so instead he said, "if you have a point, Daniel, let me know. I'm quite busy."

"Mmm hmm," Jackson said, giving Rush a look that was somehow admonishing and concerned and also irritatingly uncertain.

He wondered if Jackson was just as suspicious of him as he was of Jackson.

"You should, er, *call* someone about your air conditioning."

"I'll consider it. Did you—" speaking seemed suddenly very difficult. "Want anything in particular?"

"Yeah, actually, I wanted to let you know—are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine." He was reaching the upper limit of his ability to stand, actually, but he knew from experience if he shut the door in Jackson's face, the man would just become more determined.

"Okay, well, I thought maybe you'd want to meet your new neighbor. We were—"

Jackson broke off at about the same point that Rush realized that passing out was inevitable. He gave in. Gravity was already pulling him down.

He woke up on a couch.

He did not own a couch.

It was also significantly cooler than he remembered it being when he had passed out. He had a fucking hand towel on his forehead.

He opened his eyes.

Someone that he did not recognize was staring at him with a confused sort of skepticism. The man had close-cropped dark hair and was sitting on a box.

After a brief interval of disorientation, It occurred to Rush that he was currently in the apartment of whomever had been the lucky recipient of Jackson's latest humanitarian impulse.

"Oh fuck," Rush said.

"Hi," the other man said.

"Hello," Rush said, trying to stop his heart from beating through sheer force of will.

"How do you feel?"

Like an overwrought, wretched, wasted, barren, toxic, wasteland of a human being, who was currently somewhat unclear as to why his shirt was half unbuttoned and his sleeves were rolled up.

"Sorry," he said in a tone that he was certain did not sound 'sorry' at all, "but who are you, exactly?"

"Colonel Everett Young."

Oh a *colonel*. Wonderful. His day kept getting better. Hopefully this one wasn't in charge of personnel. Or payroll. Did they put colonels in charge of payroll? He had no fucking idea, but it seemed like the kind of stupid, needless, pointless idea the Air Force would have.

"And how did I get here?"

"Jackson carried you in."

"Perfect," Rush said. "Thank you for that piece of information. Nice to meet you, and I apologize for the inconvenience. I'll just be going, shall I?" He forced himself into a seated position, but unfortunately for him and for his laconic neighbor, sitting was not something that was going to be sustainable, and he collapsed backward, shutting his eyes against the dynamic instability of the room or his mind or both.

"You are a mess there, hotshot."

Young sounded closer.

Opening his eyes was more difficult than the historic norm would indicate it should be.

The hand towel was replaced on his forehead.

Young was staring at him.

The use of the moniker 'hotshot' was clearly ironic and he *resented that*.

Fuck Young.

Fuck everyone.

"You want some water?" Young asked, sounding uncomfortable or worried or some other nebulous thing that Rush couldn't put a name to, nor did he care to try. It occurred to him that he had not introduced himself. Perhaps Jackson had done it for him while he was unconscious. That was the kind of thing it seemed like the man would be ridiculous enough to do.

"Yes, thank you."

"Coming right up."

Young got to his feet slowly, clearly favoring one leg or, perhaps, one entire side of his body. It was difficult to tell what was wrong with him, but something clearly was. Wrong with him. Which, he supposed, explained why Jackson was helping him move into his apartment.

Fucking Jackson—indirectly forcing some injured *colonel* to get him *drinking water*.

Where was Jackson anyway? It probably should have occurred to him to ask that earlier.

Young came back with a glass of water.

"Jackson went to get you Gatorade," Young said, as if he could sense Rush's train of thought. "And Mitchell went to get you a doctor, apparently."

"Mitchell?" Rush asked, trying not to choke on the water.

"Colonel Mitchell? Are you not with the program?"

"Are you speaking literally or metaphorically?"

There was a prolonged pause.

"Literally."

"I'm a consultant."

"Explains why I haven't seen you around, I guess."

"Mmm," Rush said, noncommittally, managing to set his glass of water on the floor without spilling it. Young's earlier statement about 'Mitchell' going to get a 'doctor' finally made its way into his consciousness and stuck there. "I don't need a doctor."

"I'm pretty sure you do, actually," Young said, in a tone that implied he thought Rush was an idiot.

Rush couldn't really argue that statement from any kind of position of strength, so instead he just made a disdainful circular hand gesture and shut his eyes again.

He thought of his apartment, hot and clean and barren, occupied for months, but never really occupied at all and it had never been this hot in San Francisco or Oxford or Glasgow; there were too few clouds here in this merciless place that was farther from the sea than he had ever been in his life.

"Hey."

Hopefully Jackson had not gone inside, had not seen the state of things. Probably he hadn't. Probably he'd been too busy fucking *carrying* Rush down the hall to have gone in.

He only vaguely remembered the fall, losing his grip on the wooden doorframe along with everything else as he'd—crossed an asymptote of some kind.

"Hey."

It had been days since he'd slept. Days since he'd eaten. The mathematics though—that he'd been doing the entire time, each chevron keyed to a different cryptographic method in a sweeping test of intellectual capacity set by a people, by a *culture* long dead. In a haze of insight he remembered that he'd clinched number four sometime—sometime yesterday or today, maybe that morning, early—it had been dark outside when he'd switched his Ancient equivalent of a block cypher to an Ancient equivalent of a stream cypher and his symmetric key algorithm had practically written itself, opening itself to him as it *should* because *nothing* could withstand his mind, not even himself and he'd collapsed there on his floor and when he'd woken up things had seemed much less clear than they did here in the cool, air-conditioned disarray of what was likely Colonel Young's apartment.

"What," he replied absently, half-remembering, half-reinventing his Ancient-variant stream cypher. It had been a long while since he'd given much thought to symmetric key cryptography. Quaint.

"Rush. Whoever you are. Stay awake."

"I'm awake," Rush replied half-heartedly.

From somewhere behind him came the sound of knuckles rapping against wood.

"Come," Young called.

"How is he?" Jackson asked.

"In and out," Young said shortly.

"Not true," Rush said, without opening his eyes. "Entirely in."

"I don't think 'entirely' means what you think it means," Jackson replied.

Someone sat down on the couch.

He opened his eyes to see a woman with long, dark hair perched precariously next to him.

"Hello gorgeous," she said, giving him a wink as she twisted off the top off a bottle of green Gatorade. "I hear this stuff cures nearly every terrestrial illness." She held up the bottle.

It wasn't often he had no idea what to say.

"Vala," she said, holding a hand out in his direction. "Vala Mal Doran."

"Nicholas Rush," he replied, taking her proffered hand. She shook it a bit more vigorously than seemed standard, but maybe that was just a perceptive problem on his part. She swapped her hand out for the open bottle of Gatorade.

He took a sip of revolting green liquid and hoped to god that he was not going to be sick.

"So," Jackson said. "Air conditioning."

Rush was not at all certain how he was supposed to respond to that statement, so he said nothing and raised his eyebrows at Jackson.

"As if you haven't done things just as ridiculous," Vala said, flicking her hair over her shoulder. "Colonel Carter was telling me—"

Was *everyone* a colonel these days?

"All right fine," Jackson said hastily.

There was another light rap on the frame of the open door.

"Oh great," Jackson said, looking relieved. "Dr. Lam."

Rush brought a hand to his face.

"Can you guys give us some space?" The woman's voice was low. Though she'd framed her words as a question, they were clearly more of a command.

"Sure thing," Mitchell said, and they filed out, or at least, it sounded like they did.

His hand was still over his face.

"Hi." Lam assumed Young's previous position on the box adjacent to the couch. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine," Rush said, finally looking at her. She was wearing a striped tank top and shorts that were eminently appropriate for the middle of July. They made her look a decade younger than he hoped she actually was.

"What happened?" Her eyes were dark and her expression was serious.

"Nothing," he said, waving a hand. "My apartment is quite hot."

"I'm going to need a more to go on than that."

He sighed. "I was talking to Jackson. I became somewhat lightheaded. I woke up here."

"Has anything like this happened to you before?"

"No."

"Have you been drinking enough water?"

"Possibly not."

"How much water have you had in the past day?"

"I have no idea."

"Estimate."

"Twenty-four ounces." He did not add that those twenty-four ounces had all been consumed within the past thirty minutes.

"When was the last time you ate?"

"Yesterday." That was an optimistic estimate.

"You realize it's nearly five o'clock, right?" Lam asked.

"I do now."

He just wanted to get rid of this woman.

She raised an eyebrow at him as if she knew exactly what he was thinking. She pulled a stethoscope out of her purse and he raised both eyebrows in return.

She made short work of taking his pulse and listening to his heart before making him sit up and doing the entire thing again.

"Well my friend," she said, "You're orthostatic, meaning you're dropping your pressure when you sit. I'm not even going to have you stand because I think that would not end well."

"Probably not," Rush agreed.

"You didn't see this," Lam said, pulling a small device out of her purse. It was small, and cylindrical, and evidently coupled to her mobile phone. She held it against his chest, and studied the screen in her palm.

"And what is it, exactly, that I didn't see?" Rush asked.

"What's your security clearance?" Lam asked, moving the device.

"Level one," Rush replied.

"Then you saw a prototype of the Tricorder X-prize winner five years before it debuted," Lam said, shooting him a subtly amused look.

Rush shot her an unimpressed look.

"Well," Dr. Lam said, slipping her undoubtedly extraterrestrial device back into her purse, "the good news is that you don't have any concerning cardiac problems, so you can stay here and drink Gatorade for a few hours to rehydrate or Dr. Jackson and I can take you in and I'll do it the efficient way with IV fluids."

"No thank you," Rush said. "Gatorade will be fine."

"Is there anyone I can call?" Lam asked. "Your spouse maybe?" She indicated his wedding ring with her eyes.

This was one of the many reasons why it was a good idea to remove one's wedding ring when one was no longer technically married—there wouldn't be moments like this that would reach out and grab one by the throat. Hypothetically.

He decided that he would lie back down.

"No, you can't call her," he said.

"Why not?"

"She's not here."

"Where is she?"

"York. The U.K."

While it was relatively normal behavior to not remove one's wedding ring, it was not normal behavior to imply that one's deceased wife was still alive and in York when actually that was where she had been buried. It was just this sort of pathological omission that had, historically, gotten him into trouble but it was so much easier this way for everyone concerned. But Lam seemed to know Jackson and Jackson in turn knew that—fuck. Fuck.

"And she's dead," he added.

There was a long silence.

"Well, I guess that would make it difficult to call her," Lam said.

"Yes. Yes it would."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No."

"Okay."

Thank god.

"So," she said, regrouping. "You're going to stay here and drink Gatorade until you feel better. You should also eat something. If you haven't recovered fully in four hours, someone's going to need to drive you in and we'll hook you up to an IV. Got it?"

Rush nodded.

Lam stood and walked into the adjacent room, where the other four were talking quietly.

Rush sipped his Gatorade and stared at the wall, reviewing and consolidating the things that were *important*, not what had just happened, but *other* things. Things that were beginning to become apparent to him. The first of which was that there was not just one cryptographic element buried in the internal circuitry of the stargate, there were actually multiple interlocking interweaving codes and he was not at all certain that *any* of the chevrons would lock until *all* of them were decoded. Perhaps the decoding would have to proceed in an ordinal fashion, at which point the chevrons would lock, predicated on sequence. He'd proven a computational hardness assumption, which, was fair fucking helpful going forward, and he had four of the chevrons, not necessarily the first four of the sequence, all keyed to different cryptographic elements, but there were five more, at *least* five more and he was certain one of them was going to be quantum in nature—probably it would be coupled to the crystalline matrix of the DHD because the flow of current through Ancient crystals created a perfect lattice in which to distribute and permute quantum keys. Maybe that would be the next one he tackled. It didn't sound particularly easy but he was running out of well-studied approaches to information security and he was fairly sure that Ancients were substantially more sophisticated in their cypher building than humans.

Possibly more sophisticated than *him*.

He sipped more Gatorade.

In any case, each chevron clearly had a unique key and furthermore a conceptually unique method of arriving at that key. There might even be a final cypher required to unlock the entire sequence, making for ten keys and ten conceptual problems to solve, which was really more aesthetically pleasing than nine. Ancients had used a base ten system, which also argued in support of that the idea that there would be ten systems of authentication. Now that he thought about it, he was certain it was what *they* had done because it was what *he* would have done.

It was too perfect to resist.

Lam walked back into the room, accompanied by Mitchell.

"I can walk, colonel, no need to give me a ride. It's only about fifteen minutes on foot."

"It's too hot to walk anywhere," Mitchell said. "I'm driving you."

Lam shrugged fluidly and paused, looking down at Rush.

"Four hours," she said.

"Yes yes." He waved her on.

"Nice meeting you," Mitchell said. "Feel better."

Rush nodded.

Mercifully, they left.

He finished his bottle of Gatorade and opened another one out of the collection that Vala had left on the floor. He wondered how many of these things he would have to drink before Jackson would let him go back to his apartment and look for his thermostat in peace. More than one, probably.

He felt miserable, his muscles uncooperative and shaky and traitorously seduced by the couch he was lying on.

He despised couches.

He'd slept on a hardwood floor for six weeks and he preferred that.

He did.

He sipped more Gatorade and tried to decide if he'd been sleeping or unconscious or just staring at the ceiling earlier in the day. It was not entirely clear to him, but it was evident that whatever the case had been, his current status would be best classified as exhausted.

He closed his eyes against his headache.

"Daniel. If I can pass these 'psychological evaluations' of yours, then I can assemble a bed."

They were clearly trying to be quiet, but he could still hear them.

"I'm still not sure why you're so hung up on this. No one fails psychological evaluations. They're just evaluations."

"Right. And that's why you attempted to entrap me by sending that little man to—"

"Yeah—look, I said I was sorry about that. And it was not my idea. As I explained. Also, I'm pretty sure that's part of the frame, not the headboard."

"I don't think so," Vala replied. "You clearly lack experience on the domestic front."

"What? Vala. I'm an archeologist. I've read entire books on comparative bed-frame construction."

"Well, that's evidently not sufficient."

Young said something, but it was too low for Rush to catch.

Ten keys. He had already cracked a symmetric key, an asymmetric key, and an interactive proof system. One of the chevrons had yielded to brute force attack. So where did that leave him? Quantum would be there—he knew it would, but that was the system with which he was least familiar, namely because hardware was a central component of the cryptography itself and he had no crystals to study; they weren't like circuit diagrams, these decoherent quantum states. They were about as conceptually elegant as the sea of Dirac, which was to say not conceptually elegant at all.

He peripherally registered the sound of asymmetric footfalls. The quiet scape of weighed-down cardboard over a dusty floor.

Infinite negative charge spreading out forever through the vacuum of space like a sub-perceptual fuck you to anyone with Newtonian instincts. Particles as holes in the sea and if he just lived at the speed of light then all of this would make sense and he could encrypt and decrypt without effort maybe even without thought which would be ideal.

"Hey," Young said quietly. "Hotshot. You awake?"

He felt someone pull the mostly empty bottle of Gatorade out of his inexplicably lax grip.

He tried to open his eyes, but it was too difficult.

Dirac. Decoupled from every kind of convention. He wished he could be that way and if he could he imagined everything would be less difficult, like following voltage drops stepwise-down to a superconducting sea. He contaminated everything he did with who he was, which was too much of everything and he fought that always but one day, one day, he would stop fighting it and he didn't know what would happen then.

He could not move and he could not open his eyes and the couch that he hated on principle was so painless that there was no place to make a stand against what was happening to him, which was that he was inexorably falling asleep in an air-conditioned apartment that was not his own.

With an effort that hovered on the edge of achievability he cracked his eyes open.

Young was sitting on a box, one leg stretched in front of him as if it were painful. His shoulders were hunched and he was staring at the floor.

He felt a quick flash of empathy, but he couldn't hold onto it.

He couldn't hold onto anything.

Chapter Three

It was nearly twenty hundred hours, but the sun still hovered tenuously above the horizon. The light, which had been pitiless all through the day, was finally starting to weaken into a reddish gold.

Everett Young considered his reflection in the glass of the window. It was pale and washed out; the dark shock of his hair seemed the only part of him with definition.

He suppressed a sigh.

"Seriously, Jackson. Get out of here."

It wasn't that Young didn't like SG-1.

He liked them.

He did.

He liked them, he *appreciated* them, and he was peripherally relieved whenever he found out that they had saved the world, or some alien race, or the galaxy, or the universe, which seemed to happen maybe about every three weeks or so. But sometimes—well. They could be a bit much with all the bantering and the earnest do-gooding and their high-energy approach to literally everything they encountered.

"I don't know," Jackson said dubiously.

Young turned around and spent a moment watching Vala watching Jackson watching Rush. The angle of the sun leant a surreal bronze cast to the entire apartment. Vala's hair was particularly spectacular.

"Just leave me Dr. Lam's number," Young said, trying to bury his desperation to get Jackson and Vala out of his apartment somewhere far from his vocal cords. He was fairly certain he was succeeding; after all, he didn't know Jackson very well and he'd met Vala just that morning. He was pretty tight with Mitchell—who might have been able to pin the specter of strain in his tone on exhaustion or exasperation—but Mitchell was no longer here.

"Daniel," Vala said, with a smile and an understated swish of her hair, "he'll be *fine*. Colonel Young seems very reliable."

Jackson ignored her. "The thing is," Jackson said, staring at the floor, drawing out his words, apparently talking to no one in particular, "he's got—kind of a strong personality."

"Oh?" Young said dryly, glancing at Rush. "I'd say the guy seems pretty low maintenance."

Jackson looked laterally at him. "Mmm," he said with a lifting cadence, as if he were about to correct a particularly glaring error. "No. No, 'low-maintenance' is not really a term I'd use."

"Well I think he seems *very nice*," Vala said emphatically, "and Colonel Young seems *quite capable*, and *therefore*," she paused with a lift of her eyebrows, "perhaps we should be going." Her voice dropped to a stage whisper.

"He can be—kind of a lot to handle sometimes," Jackson said, glancing between Vala and Young.

It wasn't clear to Young whether Jackson was more concerned about Rush or about him.

Young looked skeptically at the math-genius-consultant-guy who was currently passed out on his couch. Nothing about him seemed particularly noteworthy, other than the fiery cast the setting sun was giving his hair. Young looked at it for a moment, at which point it occurred to him that he should probably close his blinds, as it seemed the man had already gotten a little too much indirect sun exposure for his own good.

He narrowed the slats in the venetian blinds, dimming the room significantly.

"Jackson," Young said, trying a different, *less* tactful approach, "get out of here. Don't you guys have an oh four hundred departure tomorrow for some Ori solstice ritual?"

"You're not supposed to know about that," Jackson said.

"Blame Mitchell," Young replied, holding up his hands. "I will make sure your consultant rehydrates and can walk a straight line before he goes home."

Vala shot him a grateful look.

It took another three minutes to actually get Jackson out the door.

When they had gone, Young shut it behind them and leaned his forehead against the wood for a moment, listening to the sound of their voices coming through the door until the soft chime of the elevator cut them off and silence descended.

He stood for a moment—exhausted enough to sink to his knees, but knowing that if he gave in to *that* particular impulse he likely wouldn't make it back to standing.

That, and it would hurt like hell.

He turned and limped a few paces to sit down on the box he'd been using as a chair. He stretched his left leg out in front of him and reached around to place one hand on his lower back, as if that could do anything for tensed muscles, tight over healing bone. How he was going to unpack all of these boxes, he had no idea.

No one said he had to do it now.

He shut his eyes against the sight of his life compartmentalized and packed away, all his things separated from the things that were Emily's. He rubbed at the place where his wedding band had been. It was best not to wear it. Anything else would be—well.

It was just best not to.

He opened his eyes and looked at Rush.

Rush was wearing a wedding ring.

Somehow, that struck Young as odd. Marriage had always seemed to him to be something of a stabilizing influence. Even when it was going badly—even when they'd had their worst fights, Emily would never have let him work to the point of collapse.

She would have noticed.

She would have given a damn.

She would have stopped him.

If she'd been there.

Maybe that was the problem. Maybe Rush was traveling. Maybe this was a temporary thing and he was alone here while he was doing his consulting. It would explain more than just the ring and the collapsing. It was unusual for scientists to operate on purely a consulting basis for the SGC. Usually, if the Air Force wanted someone from academia, they'd make that extremely clear. To his knowledge, no scientist had *ever* turned down a crack at the stargate. Once he or she had been recruited, one of two things would happen. Either the person would be assigned to the labs or, if they were plucky enough and sturdy enough, they'd be assigned to a gate team.

Apparently? This guy worked from home.

That was unusual.

Traveling or not, the guy seemed more eccentric than most, given the fact that he'd managed to work himself to the point of collapse inside his own apartment. Behavior like that seemed extreme, even by SGC scientist standards. Coupled with Jackson's clear interest in the man, it made Young more than a little curious.

"Hey," he said quietly. "Rush."

Unsurprisingly, there was no response. The man had slept through three hours of unpacking and mostly full volume conversations.

"Rush," he said, shaking the man's shoulder. "Nicholas."

Rush's eyes opened with a hazy lethargy that made Young uneasy.

"Rush," he snapped, sharpening his tone. "Come on."

Rush shut his eyes again, his hand coming to his chest, his fingers twining into the front of his white dress shirt, his expression one of complete desolation. As if, maybe, he'd thought he was someplace else.

Young had no idea what to say.

"I do not sleep," Rush said, his voice unsteady, "on couches." He partially twisted but mostly fell onto the floor.

Young watched him organize himself into a vaguely cross-legged sitting position before leaning back against the foot of the sofa. Already, he looked better than he had a few hours ago.

"Well," Young said dryly, "good to know. Next time I'll let you have the bed."

"I don't sleep on those either," Rush said, shutting his eyes.

Young wondered if he were dizzy, or had a headache, or was just trying to forget wherever he'd thought he'd been when he'd woken up on the couch.

"Where do you sleep?"

"I try not to."

"And how's that going for you?" Young asked.

"Today? Not well."

"No kidding."

"What did you say your name was?" Rush asked him, like a guy who wasn't much interested in the answer to his own question.

"Everett Young."

"Right. The colonel. A colonel. One of many colonels." He seemed like he was trying to clear his head.

"You mix with a lot of colonels, do you?" Young asked wryly.

"They seemed to be overrepresented in your apartment this afternoon."

"There were just two of us," Young pointed out. "Jackson said you were a math guy. Aren't you supposed to be good with numbers?"

"Tell me, is it easy to become a colonel? It seems as if it must be."

"Yeah, you just have to fill out a form and pay the Air Force fifty bucks to sew the little birds onto your uniform."

Rush cracked an eyelid and looked up at him with an expression that Young had a difficult time categorizing. Something about Young's statement seemed to sharpen him up, and he sat forward, shaking his head as if to clear it.

"I promised Jackson that I'd make you drink at least two bottles of Gatorade before I let you go," Young said.

"I really hate that man," Rush said in an entirely unconvincing manner.

"You can't hate Jackson because no one hates Jackson," Young informed him.

"Oh I'm *aware*," Rush replied, pushing himself off the floor and moving onto the couch, putting himself on eye level with Young. "It's one of the great, unquestioned premises on which your organization is founded. But he can't be the genuine article. Think about it. A triple PhD intergalactic explorer spends the weekend helping you move into your apartment? Out of the ostensible goodness of his heart? It's nonsensical. Doesn't he have *better* things to do? Do you even *know him* very well?"

"He's friends with Mitchell," Young said, "and Mitchell is *my* friend, and therefore—"

"Are you always like this?" Rush asked.

"Like what?"

"You speak unnecessarily slowly. It takes you an atypically long time to explain simple concepts, and you've already committed one logical fallacy in the course of what I estimate to be approximately two minutes of conversation but I won't hold that against you because I've committed one as well."

Young stared at him. "At least I have more sense than to work to the point of passing out within the confines of my own apartment."

"A fair point," Rush said, his energy seeming to fade as abruptly as it had come. He picked up a bottle of Gatorade and twisted the top off in one smooth motion.

"So why did you?" Young asked, trying not to speak unnecessarily slowly.

"Pass out in my apartment?"

"Yes." Young rolled his eyes.

"What difference could it possibly make?"

"If you don't already know," Young said dryly, "I don't think anything that I say is gonna clear things up for you."

"I meant to you," Rush snapped. "What difference could it possibly make *to you*?"

Young sighed. This was not going well. "You know, Jackson said you were difficult."

"Did he. Well," Rush paused to finish off his third bottle of Gatorade, "I suppose it depends on your definition of 'difficult'."

It was becoming increasingly clear to Young that he was not about to win any kind of verbal sparring match with this guy and if he kept going he was just going to slowly feel like shit about himself, which was ridiculous, because however much of a math-jockey hotshot Rush was supposed to be, he obviously would survive no more than two seconds in any kind of resource-poor environment.

"I hope you like eggs," Young said, getting painfully to his feet, "because that's all I can make."

"What." Rush snapped off the word in such a way that it implied that he had understood Young's statement, but he could not actually believe that Young had made it.

"I told Jackson I'd give you dinner."

"I do not want dinner."

"I'm sure you don't," Young replied, trying to decide if he was irritated or amused. "Come on. Bring your Gatorade."

He watched Rush get slowly to his feet. He had the feeling that he'd be getting more of an argument if the guy was at the top of his game, physically speaking. Still, nothing was technically stopping the other man from walking out the door and going back to his own apartment, except, apparently, the threat of disappointing Daniel Jackson.

Jackson seemed like he would be a tough person to let down.

Or maybe this guy just didn't want to go back to his empty apartment with its broken air conditioning.

It could be a lot of different things.

Young limped slowly in the direction of his new kitchen, which Vala had volunteered to stock for him, apparently using Jackson's credit card. He wondered what the story was

with those two. They seemed like they were together, but sometimes it was hard to tell with SG-1 if they were *together* together or just—together.

The point was, he was going to have to pay Jackson back for anything he found in his unfamiliar kitchen. Presumably though, there would be eggs.

Upon rounding the doorframe he realized a potential flaw in his dinner strategy.

His kitchen was full of boxes labeled 'kitchen', none of which had yet been opened.

"How completely did you think through this plan of yours?" Rush asked, standing slightly behind Young with one hand on the wall.

"Are you always this much of a smartass?" Young replied, digging his fingers into the aching, tensed musculature of his lower back, feeling utterly unable to contemplate the thought of sorting through boxes to find a skillet, let alone actually doing so.

"I'm being atypically civil."

"How about we just get take out?" Young asked. "Or," he amended, rethinking, "delivery, actually. How about we just get delivery?"

"No," Rush said. "I don't think so. Why don't you hand me the ostentatiously masculine pocket knife that I'm certain you're carrying?"

Young gave him a skeptical tilt of the head.

Rush lifted his eyebrows.

Young pulled his knife out of his pants pocket and flipped it open.

Rush eyed the knife and then gave Young a look that seemed to be intended to convey something along the lines of 'oh-for-god's-sake'.

Young shrugged.

Rush took the knife and sliced through the tape of the nearest box, looking like he was much too tired to be unpacking Young's kitchen for him.

"Seriously. Delivery." Young crossed his arms, leaning against the door frame. "There are a lot of advantages."

"And what would those be?" Rush asked, pulling out a cast-iron skillet. "You own this?"

"No," Young replied, managing to feel like an idiot even though it was *Rush* who was asking the inappropriate question. "I found these boxes on the side of the road."

"Hmm," Rush said, his fingers grazing the rim of the skillet. "This is nice."

"You are an asshole," Young said conversationally.

"Or possibly—" Rush replied, pausing to place the skillet on the counter, "I'm just without tact. But I believe you were listing advantages?"

"Right. Delivery. Number one, we don't have to do anything, which is a plus since you're a mess and my back is killing me. Number two, whatever we order in is probably going to be better than my attempt at scrambled eggs. Number three, we don't have to *do* anything. I know that was number one, but I'm going to add it in again, because I think it bears repeating."

Rush shook his head and blinked once, like he was either dizzy, or just disoriented from the amount of irrelevance that was getting thrown his way. He pulled a knife wrapped in a hand towel out of the box.

"You don't pack knives with cast-iron skillets," he said. "That doesn't make any sense. Do you not have a knife block?"

"No. I'd imagine I don't. Furthermore, *I* didn't pack this," Young snapped.

"Who did?"

"My ex-wife."

Rush stopped unpacking, his hands freezing in midair before he picked up Young's switchblade and sliced into an adjacent box. After a short pause he said, "nice of her."

"Yes," Young said. "Yes it was."

Rush dropped from a crouch into a cross-legged position in the middle of Young's kitchen. He opened a third box with less verve than he had tackled the other two.

"Are you looking for something? Young asked.

"Yes," Rush replied. "What tipped you off?"

"I thought we were getting delivery."

"Yes," Rush said. "I'm certain you *did* think that. But, if I am going to eat something that is not purely utilitarian, I'll be damned if it's going to taste like shite."

Young sat down on a sturdy-looking, unopened box as Rush pulled out a bowl, two plates, and three forks from a box that contained dishes.

"So—you're making dinner?" Young asked.

"I'm making eggs."

"Do you even know how to use a stove?"

"Do *you*?" Rush asked pointedly. "I must say, nothing you've said, done, or implied inspires any kind of confidence in your culinary abilities."

"You know," Young said, closing one hand around the denim cuff of his jeans as he pulled his left leg forward in front of him, "for a supposed *math* genius, you're awfully —" he tried to think of a way to describe the fluid stream of arrogant, hypereducated, and vaguely insulting words that seemed to be constantly coming out of Rush's mouth. "Verbose. And less excited about bad puns than I'd been led to believe was normal for you guys."

"I *despise* puns. I find them to be an irrational waste of time," Rush said, vaguely amused.

"Uh huh."

Rush pushed himself to his feet and assembled the items he had collected from four opened boxes.

"Are you seriously going to make eggs?" Young asked. "Eggs that you think are going to somehow be better than pizza?"

Rush opened his refrigerator and began pulling out various items. "My only concern," he said, "is that you are not educated enough to appreciate the skill involved in making a truly exceptional omelette in the French tradition."

"You're a weird guy," Young offered.

Rush shot him a brief glare and began chopping spinach.

"Lam said you hadn't eaten in a while," Young said. "If you can make an omelette in the French tradition, or whatever, then why—"

"I was busy," Rush said shortly, "and uninterested."

"In what, eating?"

"Amongst other things."

Rush dumped the spinach in a bowl and moved on to chopping mushrooms in a practiced manner.

"But *now* you're interested. In eating."

"Not especially," Rush said, raising his eyebrows, but not looking at Young, "but it is, to some degree, required, and I am more interested in eating something that does *not* taste atrocious than I am in eating something that *does*."

"Fair enough," Young replied. "So, where are you from?"

"No," Rush said.

"No?"

"No."

"What do you mean, 'no'?"

"I mean that we are not getting to know one another because that would be a waste of time."

"But you're making me an omelette," Young pointed out.

"While true, your point is unrelated to mine."

"So," Young said. "You're from Scotland, probably. I'm from Wyoming."

"I see," Rush said dryly.

"You see," Young growled. "You don't even know anything about Wyoming."

"I'm certain I'm adequately informed on the subject of Wyoming."

"Name the capital then," Young said. "Name even one major city."

"As I said," Rush replied, "adequately informed."

"I can name *several* Scottish cities, you know," Young said.

"Can you really? Congratulations." Rush cracked eggs sequentially into a bowl.

"Edinburgh," Young said, drawing out the word.

"Generally, the use of the word 'several' denotes a set with more than one member," Rush said, leaning forward against the counter, bracing one elbow as he lifted the bowl and started beating the eggs with a fork.

"Are you feeling okay?" Young asked.

"Yes," Rush replied unconvincingly, "I'm just—extremely hungry."

"If you pass out in the middle of cooking I'm calling Dr. Lam and ordering food."

Rush shook his head. "Not necessary."

"So," Young said. "Are you from Edinburgh?"

"Hardly."

"Glasgow."

"Well it's not exactly rocket science, is it then?" Rush snapped. "It's the most populated city, so statistically—"

"You're just pissed because I guessed it and you can't name a single city in Wyoming."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm not the one who made me *guess* where he's *from*. If you want ridiculous, *that's* ridiculous."

"If it were up to me, we wouldn't even be talking right now."

"Right," Young said skeptically. Privately, Young he suspected that Rush was as reluctant to return to his own apartment as Young was to face the quiet hell of unpacking the pieces of his own previous life and reorganizing them inside an empty, soulless set of rooms.

Rush turned on his faucet and put a small amount of water into the eggs he had just beaten.

"Are you sure you want to put *water* in there?" Young asked, shifting on his box, trying to ease the ache in his lower back.

"Quite sure," Rush replied.

Young watched as his neighbor mixed everything together, put some butter into the cast-iron skillet, and studied the stove with an odd intensity for a moment before turning one of the dials. Young had to admit, the guy seemed like he knew what he was doing, but he had the feeling that Rush was the kind of person who *seemed* like he knew what he was doing whether he *actually* did or not.

"Where'd you learn to cook?" Young asked.

"The same place I learned everything else," Rush said, pouring half the egg mixture into the pan and shaking it vigorously.

"Don't you need a spatula or a fork or something?" Young asked.

"Not if you're really fucking excellent." Rush grabbed a plate one-handed and flipped the omelette onto it with a practiced flick of the wrist. He added a fork and handed it to Young without any kind of ceremony.

"Thanks," Young said.

Rush didn't acknowledge him, just turned back to the stove and dumped the rest of the egg mixture into the pan with a feverish, desperate intensity, as if he could not handle waiting even thirty additional seconds to eat.

Young took a bite of his eggs. "This is pretty great."

"I'm certain that's an understatement," Rush replied distractedly, watching his own omelette begin to solidify in the pan.

"Maybe," Young said. "How did you make it so—" he trailed off, not really sure what word he was looking for.

"So what?" Rush asked shortly, clearly unwilling to help him out.

"I don't know; I'm not really good with talking about food."

"Well, it doesn't matter," Rush said. "The answer to your question, no matter what adjective you choose, is 'technical skill'," he flipped his own omelette onto a plate and flicked off the stove.

He dropped immediately into a cross-legged position on the floor a few feet from Young and started eating with a voracious rapidity.

"When did you say the last time you ate was?" Young asked, watching him tear into the eggs.

"Why are you interested?" Rush asked.

"Why do you *care* why I'm interested?"

"Why do you—are you trying to make a rhetorical point?"

"Are *you*?"

"You are."

"Yes."

"Three days ago, plus or minus," Rush said.

"Three *days*?" Young asked, taken aback. "Why?"

"We already discussed this," Rush said. "I was busy."

Young shook his head.

The indirect light that had been streaming into the apartment through the closed blinds had mostly faded. The floor of the kitchen was especially dim. The walls were cast in a dull purplish red.

They were silent for a few moments while they finished the eggs.

"Cheyenne," Rush said abruptly. "Cheyenne is a city in Wyoming."

"Yup," Young replied. "Too bad I'm not from there."

"Fuck," Rush sighed.

Young snorted and shook his head. "You're not going to get it."

"How many cities are there in Wyoming? There can't be many."

"It took you, what, fifteen minutes to come up with *one*?"

"I wasn't exactly devoting my entire cognitive capacity to the task."

"Keep telling yourself that, hotshot."

"Look," Rush said. "I have to go."

"I think you should stay until they fix your air conditioner," Young said.

"I should be able to manage it," Rush said wryly.

"You're going to fix your own air conditioner?" Young asked skeptically. "You don't exactly seem like the handiest guy. No offense."

"You've made a terrifying number of assumptions in the last thirty seconds alone," Rush replied. "And they put you in charge of what? Guns? People with guns? Planes with guns? People in planes with guns? What is it that you do exactly? Whatever it is, you seem underqualified."

"Given that you passed out from dehydration in an apartment with running water, I think it's reasonable to assume that if you could have fixed your air conditioner you already would have done it."

"That was a problem with prioritizing, not with lack of mechanical skill. Plus, your premises are faulty."

"Meaning what?"

"I have to say, I'm infinitely relieved that you are my neighbor and not my co-worker," Rush said, cocking his head in a way that Young found *excessively* irritating.

"Yeah, likewise," Young said.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some things to take care of." Rush got to his feet, looking steadier than he'd been all day.

"I'm going to come by tomorrow," Young said, getting to his feet and limping after the other man, "and your air conditioner had better be working."

"I hate it when people 'come by'," Rush said.

"I'm sure you do."

"Don't come by."

"I'm doing it," Young said.

Rush sighed and opened the door to Young's apartment.

The brightness of the light in the hallway shocked both of them, but Rush seemed to take longer to recover, one hand coming to his forehead as if he had a headache. Probably he did.

"Feel free to make me dinner anytime," Young called after him.

Rush turned and gave him a dismissive wave before stopping to unlock an apartment that was only a few doors down. Young watched him make it inside before he turned back into the darkness of his own set of rooms.

He leaned against the closed door and shut his eyes, giving his hip a breather before making his way back to his kitchen. He opened the fridge and pulled out a bottle of beer that Vala had mercifully bought for him. It took him several minutes of laborious digging through the kitchen boxes that Rush had opened to find a bottle opener, but find one he did.

He lowered himself back down onto an unopened box and sipped his beer as the twilight faded down into night.

Chapter Four

Rush pressed the edge of his thumbnail into drying paint.

The cruelty of a limit was the same as its kindness—the paradox of the untouchable boundary, infinitely close, infinitely hard, but never reachable. Never crossable. It rested always at the throat.

He had stopped drinking coffee.

He listened to the monotony of his air conditioner as he tested the integrity of his latest attempt at restoring his room to its clean, white, undefaced state. He tried to decide whether he could bear the thought of listening to anything else.

Probably not.

That would be a mistake.

He had stopped drinking coffee and he had stopped smoking and he wished that he could consider those things victories, but the truth of it was that he'd held onto his vices the longest. They had been the last things he'd let go.

She would not have wanted this for him, this coffee-less, furniture-less, algorithmic haze of break and repaint. Break and repaint. And so that was his only regret—the idea that this would have, hypothetically, made her unhappy.

He shut his eyes and walled the thought away from himself. God but his mind was excruciatingly difficult to control when he was contemporaneously rested and hydrated and normoglycemic. He had forgotten. He would need to consistently shoot for one out of three or two out of three because zero out of three had not been workable for different reasons than three out of three were also not workable.

One could not disappoint the dead.

That was true.

That was axiom.

Right then.

He needed to buy food and to do that he needed his wallet and his keys.

He had no organizational system other than having the room in which all the boxes were, and then the rest of the place. His keys were on the floor. So was his wallet.

He picked them up and went out.

The street was quiet and the light was pale and already he could tell it was going to be another mercilessly hot, cloudless day.

Instead of purchasing groceries he drove to Cheyenne Mountain, navigating the twisting roads that led up to the isolated base with open windows and more speed than was necessary. A warm wind tore through his hair the entire way, keeping it out of his eyes until the point at which he had to stop and flash his ID in order to gain access to the base.

He signed in at the security station and took the elevator down beneath the press of rock and earth before stepping out into the concrete honeycomb of tunnels that surrounded the stargate.

As above, so below.

He had seen the gate only once.

He didn't *need* to see it—that elegant door without edges, the rim of a vortex that would tear through time and space—he knew its internal symmetries better than any of them, better than Carter and Jackson who, together, had opened it.

Because for years they had gone without seeing the lock.

He had seen the lock. As soon as he'd laid eyes on the systems that governed the dialing of the thing he'd known what it was, at its heart, beneath the decorative workarounds with which Colonel Carter had wreathed it.

To use all nine chevrons the gate had to be not just dialed but *opened*.

Locked things opened to him.

"Hi."

Rush refocused his attention to find there was an optimistic-looking woman standing in front of him, holding a clipboard.

"Hello," he replied.

"Can I help you?"

"Yes," he said, forcing his voice into the most polite cadence available to him. "I'm looking for Colonel Carter."

"Oh," she said sympathetically, "she's offworld today." She winced, as if this were some kind of tragedy that merited such a flinching.

"Fine," Rush replied, still maintaining his civil demeanor, though with an admittedly incremental increase in effort. "I need to take readings of current passing through DHD

control crystals in their native configurations while recording the resultant output for computational modeling. To whom would I speak about that?"

"Um, who did you say you were?" She looked—skeptical. Skeptical and nervous.

He subtly rotated his wrists, trying to subordinate his irritation. "My name is Dr. Nicholas Rush."

"Oh," she said, stepping forward. "Oh *wow*. Hi. Hi. I'm Lisa. Dr. Lisa Park." Her eyes were expectant and implied that she thought he should know her name.

"Right," he said, stepping back. "Fantastic. But would you mind—"

"I've been working with Dr. Volker?"

Clearly this was also supposed to mean something to him.

"We've been mapping the naquadria deposits using scans of the Icarus planet?"

So that was marginally more than marginally interesting. "Really. How's it coming along?"

"It's good," she said, smiling at him in a conspiratorially charming manner. "It's *really* good. In fact, it's looking so promising that they're flying in a gate and some personnel on the *Daedalus* to start setting up a preliminary base." She looked at him in clear expectation, but of what, he neither knew nor cared.

"How typically ill-advised," he snapped. "I sincerely doubt that any attempt at dialing the address in question will have even a remote chance of success unless—"

"Yeah, we know, we *know*," she said, flinging a hand out. "But I heard you've already unlocked three of the chevrons."

"Four," he corrected her.

She shifted her weight forward. "That is *amazing*. Do you know there's an entire team of mathematicians that—"

"I'm aware."

"You really got number four? Dale is going to freak out."

"Ah," he said noncommittally, uninterested in who 'Dale' might be. "Fascinating as I find that information—"

"Right. Of course," she said, toning down her exuberance self-consciously as she led him back out into the hall.

"So—are you going to go?"

"Go where?"

"To the planet. They're probably going to move operations over to the Icarus base once it's constructed."

"I've no idea," Rush said. "Probably not."

"Do you *want* to? Personally? I'd *love* to go. I've always wanted to be on a gate team, but—I don't know. I'd have to do some work to pass the physical requirements. I'm making an effort though—y'know, going to the gym, that kind of thing."

She paused.

He said nothing.

"So?" she asked.

He tried to remember what her question had been.

"Would you want to go?" she asked again. "To the planet? And then—through the gate?"

It was not a topic upon which he generally wasted thought—the location behind the lock that he had set himself against. Why would he—it was inaccessible to him unless he broke through the webbed cyphers of the gate and circumvented a limit that no human had been meant to circumvent. But he thought of it now, for a moment, with the gate so close and the naquadria planet so actualized and he knew that if there were any part of him that was left when he had finished this that the only *possible* ending for him would be to warp time and space to the point that the warp was indistinguishable from a tear as all the violence of cracking, cyphered systems blended into the fission and the fusion of a planet in the exothermic inevitability of an unlocking.

"What do you think?" he snapped. "I have, however, absolutely *no doubt* that I will be tethered here by bureaucracy or prudence or stupidity or a psychological evaluation or some other pointless, needless thing until I rot, Dr. Park. As will you, most likely. Fortunately for both of us, after devoting the majority of our mental energies to the goal of gating to this ninth chevron address for god knows how long, the question as to whether we will go through the stargate is not likely to even arise as solving this entire thing may be impossible, a potential outcome that I have always been quite candid about, a quality which has, if nothing else, revealed either the scope of the abyss that constitutes the SGCs budgetary planning or the hubristic zeitgeist of this organization as a whole—a trait that many of its members share, yourself included. Apparently."

The rhythm of her steps faltered and she looked at him in surprise for a few seconds before her expression closed into a polite neutrality.

He pressed two fingers to his forehead and looked away.

"So that's a 'yes,' then?" Park said quietly. "You'd like to go?"

"Yes," he whispered back.

They walked in silence until she turned off the main corridor and into one of the smaller labs, far from Carter's epicenter of brilliance in the middle of the floor.

The setup was a promising mess of Ancient and terrestrial technologies. There were crystalline arrays already connected to power sources that looked like they ought to be fairly straightforward to modify, which was fucking fantastic if one was only interested in the crystals from a materials science perspective but, as he *wasn't* a materials scientist, he wanted them in their native configuration. Like this—it would be akin to studying the steel of a torsion wrench when really what you needed was to use it to hold a pin in place.

"This is probably closest approximation available, in terms the setup that you're looking for," Park said. "This is a satellite of Dr. Perry's main lab space. Most of her work is on hyperdrives, but, apparently, the control matrix for the—"

"I don't care, actually," Rush replied, bracing his fingers against his forehead. "Look. Dr. Park. I need a DHD with its crystals *natively* configured."

"Well, I'm not positive? But I don't think we have one?"

"How can you not. Have. One."

"Well, Colonel Carter made a dialing program for our gate and—"

"I'm aware."

"I think Area 51 might—"

"Go," he snapped.

"I can't just leave you here—you're not trained on any of this equipment and—"

He turned away from her because he *had to* because if he lost his tenuous grip on his own control he wasn't certain what would happen but there was a nonzero possibility that he would end up in an environment where he just would *not do very well* because he still was not clear on what had occurred three days ago and he didn't *necessarily mind* destroying himself for this but certain environments would not be good for him and one of those environments was the infirmary of the SGC.

"Fine," he said. "Fine. I understand. That's perfectly reasonable."

She stepped back. "Why don't you—take a look at the computer systems," Park said, "and I'll send someone by to help you out. One of our engineers."

"Yes," Rush said, taking a deep breath. "Thank you. That would be perfectly adequate."

She gave him a dubious look and turned to leave the room.

He figured there was a fifty percent chance she was going to find an engineer and a fifty percent chance she was going to find security.

Rush stepped over to the crystal matrix, which was mounted as a grid and soldered in place. It looked fucking ridiculous, very much like it wouldn't work at all, but he sat down anyway and took a look at the desktop of the computer that had been inventively interfaced with the thing. He wondered if the current setup would be remotely suitable to his purposes. The simultaneous problem and appeal of quantum cryptography was that phenomena on the quantum level were altered when one smashed photons into things to observe their system states. If measuring the data disturbed the data, and he saw no reason why this would *not* be the case, then he was fairly certain that what was going to be called for was somehow marrying a zero knowledge protocol to breaking the key permutation in a manner that would allow him to obtain the key without disturbing the system that had created the key or destroying the key itself. He suspected that was going to be nontrivial to—

"Hello?"

"What," he snapped, pulling his fingers away from the space between his eyebrows.

"Who are you?"

"Um, Adam Brody is my name. I heard that you needed some help down here?"

Rush looked up to see an uncomfortable-looking man standing in the doorway. "Help? No. Monitoring? Yes, apparently. This is unfortunate for you, Dr. Brody, as I suspect that you have better things to be doing with your time. Tell me, doesn't this base have some sort of security staff to perform menial tasks, or are you just not very important?"

"I think it's probably the latter," Brody replied. "And it's Mr. Brody. Not Dr. Brody."

Rush looked up. The other man was looking at him from underneath his eyebrows, his shoulders hunched.

"Really," he said. "I was under the impression that one had to have an advanced degree of some kind to so much *as look* at this place, let alone work here."

"Nope," Brody said shortly.

"Obviously not."

"So—do you want help or do you just want me to just watch you? Because if so, I'm—gonna get a chair."

Rush shot him an exasperated look.

Brody looked uncertain.

"You should probably get a chair in either case," Rush snapped. "Because I plan to be here for quite some time."

He spent seven hours recording fluctuations in crystal quantum states—individually, in series, and in parallel—altering the resistance and conductance and the amperage of current.

Brody had turned out to be acceptably competent, so that was an unexpected plus.

The drive back from the base to his building was entirely too sun filled for his taste and he was entertaining a headache by the time he made his way back to his apartment with his solid state drive full of data.

He was aching to hear the click and slide of a USB cable meeting its port.

If he had to invent a new branch of mathematics or something equally time-consuming to solve this next cypher he was going to be extremely irritated. He really ought to discuss this with to someone and make sure he wasn't missing the Ancient equivalent of an entire field before he reinvented the thing. He'd already taught himself a dead, alien language. That wasn't even his area of expertise.

He was halfway through the process of scanning though the data and trying to decide if he was going to have to write his own source code or if he could crib the majority of it from one of Carter's programs on the SGC's secure server when it occurred to him that the *original* reason he'd left his apartment was to purchase *food*, which he had not done.

How disappointing.

He got to his feet, went to his kitchen, and summarily discarded out everything in his refrigerator that was not edible, which was, frankly, most of it. He took stock of his current resources, consisting of sugar, tea of dubious merit, one frozen dinner that he had overlooked because it was partially adherent to the underside of the ice machine, and a mostly full bottle of Scotch of questionable quality.

As he filled a glass of water from his faucet, it occurred to him that he should just purchase some kind of protein mix and be done with it. He downed the water and then went back out into the merciless blaze of the sun, this time with sunglasses in hand.

There was a man sitting in a car outside his building with the windows rolled down, smoking a cigarette.

This struck him as inappropriate somehow.

It was just so fucking hot.

And so fucking cliché.

These military personnel, honestly.

Shopping did not take long, even though he proceeded through it in a manner that could not really be called 'efficient'. He was not certain what his problem was, though he was positive that if he really applied himself to the question he would come up with multiple highly plausible answers, all of which would be upsetting and decrease his overall functionality even if they did improve his insight so he tried to think of nothing other than the comparative advantages of various items containing calories which was, in fact, the purpose of his trip.

When he got back to his apartment, the same person was still sitting there in his car with the windows rolled down.

Rush narrowed his eyes.

There was no reason to suspect that any of this had to do with him. No reason at all. Probably it had something to do with any one of the many other stargate personnel that lived in his building. He had enough problems without adding paranoia to his metaphorical list.

When he had returned to his apartment and deposited his protein mix and other associated items in his kitchen where they belonged, he dropped back down to the floor with a garnet colored bottle of Gatorade to resume the evaluation of the data he had collected.

Gatorade was not half bad, it turned out.

After only a few minutes, his email client chimed softly.

Dear Dr. Rush,

My name is Dr. Amanda Perry. I understand you were running some tests on the Ancient crystals located in my lab (room 2118D) on Level 21 earlier today. Could you please explain to me why you not only disrupted the array that we had constructed but why you

also altered the detector in such a way as to reduce the sensitivity to an almost meaningless level?

*Thank you,
Amanda Perry*

He narrowed his eyes, ignored a twinge of guilt, hit reply, and fired a short message back.

Dear Dr. Perry,

No I don't believe I can explain it to you. Apologies. It will not happen again.

*Sincerely,
Nicholas Rush*

He rested his chin on his closed fist, trying to decide if a zero-knowledge protocol was what the Ancients had had in mind when it came to a quantum cypher, or if it was just a particularly brilliant idea of his own that would end up going precisely nowhere.

Yes well.

ZKP or no ZKP, what he really needed was to create a code that would allow for a theoretical demonstration of the capacity to unlock while still preserving—

Someone knocked on his door.

—while still preserving the quantum state of the crystalline array rather than ruining it with something so gauche as observation. This would not only demonstrate the *capacity* to unlock, but also an *understanding* of the nature of quantum phenomenology which—

"Rush," Young called.

—which had a great deal of intellectual appeal. On the other hand, it was possible that his grasp of quantum mechanics was not as sophisticated as the Ancient grasp of quantum mechanics was. Scratch that. Such a thing was a virtual certainty. Nevertheless, he was going to try the zero knowledge protocol. Combing through collection of Ancient texts available in Dr. Jackson's database for anything on quantum mechanics that he might not know sounded like a an exercise in pure, crystalline excoriation.

"Rush. Open the damn door," his neighbor demanded, knocking at higher volume.

He got to his feet, crossed the room, and flung open the door.

"What." He broke off the word so viciously that Young actually flinched in surprise.

"Hi," Young said, holding up both hands.

Rush glared at him.

"Look," Young said. "I said I was going to drop by and—"

"And I said I hated it when people dropped by. Or weren't you listening?"

"I was," Young said dryly, "but I said I was going to do it anyway. Apparently, at that point, *you* were not listening."

"I disregard as much stupidity as I can."

"I think there are some flaws in that strategy there, hotshot."

Rush began closing the door in Young's face, but the other man stepped forward, inserting a booted foot against the wood and preventing Rush from completing his closure attempt unless he was willing to shove Young backwards out into the hall, which, clearly, Rush was *not* going to do because he didn't unbalance *injured* people, no matter how irritating he found them.

"Thinking critically, are we?" Rush asked. "What's the occasion?"

"You are *such* an asshole."

Rush smiled faintly. "Consider removing yourself from my doorway."

"Want to make me dinner?" Young asked.

"No," Rush said, "but I'll give you a can of Ensure if it will get you out of here."

"Tempting," Young said, his voice like the dry grind of stones, low and immediate, "but no thanks."

"I find myself lacking any kind of incentive to make you dinner."

"I have beer," Young said.

"I am uninterested in what is certainly going to be some kind of subpar American beer."

"If you make me dinner," Young said, "I'll tell you why General Landry called me today."

"I'm reassured to see that you view your security clearance with the degree of seriousness that it merits," Rush replied, "but I'm otherwise engaged."

"It was about you," Young said.

That was mildly interesting. His hesitation must have shown on his face because Young leaned forward slightly and said, "come on. You need to eat dinner anyway."

Drinking a glass of protein mix was going to take significantly less time than cooking dinner for some *bloody colonel* and then, probably, eating it with him. Additionally, he was not particularly inclined to set any sort of precedent regarding dinner and neighbors.

"Or can you only make omelettes?" Young asked. "Because, y'know, after all that talk about 'technical skill' I had the idea that you were some kind of—"

"Fuck off, *Young*," Rush said, stepping out into the hallway and shutting his door behind him, "and do not call me 'hotshot'."

"Not really a nickname kind of guy, are you?" Young asked, looking distinctly amused, no doubt over his perceived intrapersonal victory and his incipient dinner.

Fuck that, as it were.

"No." Rush snapped. "Not particularly."

"Blame Jackson," Young said.

"I do. Habitually, and for as much as I can."

Young shot him an amused glance.

Rush slowed slightly to accommodate the pained cadence of his neighbor's gait.

"Well," Young said, "*he* was the one who used the term. But I have to admit, it got me wondering—what's involved in being a math hotshot anyway? I mean, scientists—well, I can see the need for that kind of thing."

"Can you? Astounding."

"Shut up. You know what I'm talking about. Like, you go to a planet and you need to figure out why the sun is dying. Or you show up and the DHD is broken. Or, you know, you go through a stargate and there's a black hole on the other side and then you have problems with space-time. That kind of thing."

Rush looked at him in what he hoped was as much disdain as he was feeling while Young dug his keys out of his pocket.

"What? It's happened."

Rush shut his eyes and then opened them again as Young unlocked his door.

"And it's not like we have many pure theoreticians around. Everything is very practical. Very applied," Young continued. "Except for you."

"You understand that in order to have such a thing as 'applied' mathematics it needs to first have theoretical underpinnings, do you not?" Rush asked incredulously.

"Yes," Young replied. "Are you purposefully misunderstanding me? I'm asking what the hell it is that you *actually do*, because apparently it's pretty damn high profile."

"I decrypt things that have been encrypted," Rush said, as he stepped into Young's apartment.

The place was in a state of disarray. Boxes were half empty and items were strewn over surfaces, connoting an industriousness that he could not ever imagine applying to unpacking.

Perhaps that was why ninety percent of his previous life was still compartmentalized.

"That sounds pretty applied to me," Young said, as though he thought he had won some kind of rhetorical point. "Also, more useful than I'd really been expecting."

"It's only applied when one is successful. Until such a time it remains an academic exercise," Rush admitted, threading his way to Young's kitchen, which had not been organized.

But that was fine.

Organization was not required.

He opened Young's refrigerator and cocked his head, inventorying the contents. He was, in no way, inclined to make a meal that was even remotely labor intensive. Also, presumably, he was going to be eating this and, since he had not been doing a very consistent job in eating solid food lately, he also determined that making himself sick, while unpleasant, was also unacceptable from a productivity standpoint.

"So what are you decrypting, then?" Young asked.

"I believe I was quite clear on that point," Rush replied.

"Not clear enough," Young said.

"Things that are encrypted," Rush said shortly.

"Imagine that," Young said, leaning against the counter, favoring his left leg.

Rush began assembling items and ingredients on the counter in a manner that was more desultory than was typical for him, but a) this was not his kitchen, b) this kitchen was not well organized nor even fully unpacked c) he found himself understandably distracted by inane questions, and d) he was still not entirely clear on what he was going to make.

Pasta primavera seemed like a good choice, presuming Young had pasta.

And he did.

Rush pulled a cutting board out of a box and started chopping.

"Willamette," he said suddenly, looking up at Young.

"That's a river, hotshot, and it's not in Wyoming."

Fuck. Well, geography was not his strong suit but he would be damned if he were going to waste any more time thinking about the geography of Wyoming than he already had. He didn't fucking need an encyclopedic knowledge of the topography of the American west, nor, in fact, did he need to be making *dinner* for anyone.

He glared at Young.

"That's some pretty aggressive knife-work there," Young said mildly.

He made an effort chop more sedately.

"So?" he asked.

Young made an expansive hand gesture "Chop as aggressively as you want, if it makes you feel better."

"I am not chopping *aggressively*," Rush snapped. "I am chopping with exactly the requisite force but even if I had been chopping 'aggressively', it would, in no way, make me feel 'better'. Furthermore, my interrogative was not an invitation for you demonstrate your lack of insight into my psychological state. You said General Landry called you and furthermore you implied that this was somehow relevant to me. So. Specify."

"Has anyone ever told you that you're a little bit hard to talk to?"

"No," Rush said. "You're the first."

"I think I sense some sarcasm there," Young said dryly. "Though it's difficult to tell. You being such a subtle guy and all."

Rush raised his eyebrows and shook his head fractionally, feeling the lift and angle, the slide and slice of the knife as a familiar rhythm. He should have been an empiricist with this talent of his for repetitive, mindless things—as if his motor pathways were just a bit more mechanized than what was typical, providing a platform for the layering in or the taking away of something that left him always unbalanced, or at least that was how it had seemed.

"You think you could recognize subtlety, do you?" Rush asked.

It's a gift. That's what she had said but she had only ever seen what he'd shown her—the cooking and the piano and the driving and the mechanical aptitude for everything

he'd ever done and touched but he had always wondered if it had pulled something away from him. He paid a price for it, certainly, and she must have known this too because otherwise, why would she have made him promise to keep working as if she had known it was the only thing that could—

"Oh right. And you're—" Young trailed off.

He realized he was no longer chopping the vegetables.

He started again.

"Are you okay?" Young asked.

"I can't help but note that you are *not*—discussing the—"

"Hey," Young said, giving him an odd look and speaking with an odd cadence, and holding his hands up in front of him and pushing away from the counter and fuck. *Fuck*, he must look upset.

"Fuck off," Rush snapped, but even to him it sounded like words glued together which was inconceivable because he still did not understand how anything could be broken that was already crushed into so much dust so he turned around to look for a god damned pot.

"Um," Young said, clearly trying to ascertain what had just happened. "I didn't—"

"I said fuck off," Rush repeated, shaking his hair out of his eyes. "What did Landry want?"

"He asked me to keep an eye on you."

"What."

He slammed the pot down on the counter with more than the requisite force.

"See, this is why I didn't want to tell you this until *after* dinner."

Rush gave him a pointed look then started for the door.

"Hey," Young said, managing to catch and hold the back of Rush's shirt as Rush edged past him. "It's not what you think. Probably."

"And what is it that you think I think?" he hissed, struggling with the impulse to tear out of Young's grip but—hesitating.

"You are," Young said, ignoring his question, "*the* number one Earth-based target on the Lucian Alliance abduct-and-interrogate list."

Rush relaxed slightly.

Young loosened his hold.

Rush snapped himself out of Young's grip.

"'Abduct-and-interrogate?' They literally call it that?"

"Yeah, they do."

"Pathetic," he said, shaking his hair back.

"Do you even *know* who they *are*?" Young asked, clearly incredulous. "The Lucian Alliance?"

"Some unimpressive band of humans peddling psychotropic corn?" Rush said dryly. "I believe I was briefed about them in a limited fashion and I don't remember anything being particularly noteworthy."

Young stared at him.

"Shouldn't *Jackson* be number one? Or Colonel Carter?" Rush asked, deciding that as his mental state was not, after all, being disparaged he would continue making dinner.

"Apparently? It's you," Young said pointedly.

"The SGC can't be overly concerned if they're assigning my neighbor, who is clearly far from peak physical condition, to be my security."

Young snorted. "I'm not your security, hotshot. I actually have my *own* job, believe it or not. Your security is down in the basement of this building monitoring the hallway, the elevators, and the entrances and exits to the building twenty-four seven."

"You would think they would keep me informed of such details," Rush said, trying to remember if they'd done any such thing. It was—somewhat likely that they *had* mentioned this at some point. Admittedly, Young's description of the state of his building's surveillance sounded vaguely familiar.

"They *did* tell you. You weren't interested. You are supposed to call for a security escort when you go anywhere other than the base and you dropped off the SGC's grid for about forty-five minutes today."

"I went shopping," Rush snapped, dumping a box of pasta into boiling water and scraping vegetables into a cast iron skillet.

"Well, good choice in the life-skills department, but you're supposed to let people know about this kind of thing."

"This is ridiculous. Why did Landry call *you*?"

Young shrugged. "Because Jackson is offworld and apparently Landry didn't make any kind of impression when he told you this the first time around."

"He certainly didn't imply the existence of any kind of ranked list," Rush said, absently opening drawers. "I'm certain I would have remembered such a thing."

Young reached down with evident difficulty and pulled a spatula out of a box near his feet. He handed it over.

Rush took the implement and used it to push his flawlessly chopped vegetables around the pan a few times before he went looking for herbs in Young's cabinets.

He found salt, but that was it.

"Nicholas," Young said.

Rush shot him skeptical look.

"Rush," Young amended with an eye roll that Rush was fairly certain was intended to be subtle but was falling short of any such mark. "This is a legitimate threat. You need to call for an escort if you're going to leave the building. You need to—"

"Yes yes. You need to buy some fucking basil, at a minimum."

Young crossed his arms. "Why do I *not* think you're taking this seriously?"

"I'm wasting my time cooking you dinner for the express purpose of hearing about it—what more do you want?" Rush replied.

"You're very fucking difficult," Young said.

"Well you're very fucking stolid," Rush shot back, "and your emerging kitchen organization is without any kind of conceptual underpinnings. What did you do, put things in drawers at random?"

"Do you even know who you're supposed to call when you go buy groceries?"

"I plan on calling General Landry, given that he's so interested."

"I would actually pay money to see that," Young said.

"How much?" Rush asked, as he speared a piece of zucchini with a fork and tasted it.

"Not enough. Look, you call the SGC dispatch number. Do you even know what it is?"

"I don't care for your tone, nor do I appreciate your brief interrogative style," Rush said, narrowing his eyes.

"I don't care for your tone nine times out of ten, but you don't see me complaining about it."

Rush shot him a pointed look.

"I'll put it in your cell for you," Young said.

"No one touches my phone, Young."

Rush turned off the stove, picked up a plate, flipped it over the top of the pot, and drained the water away from the pasta. He shook a bit of olive oil through the pasta and aliquoted it onto two plates before dumping the vegetables on top and shoving fifty percent of it in Young's direction.

"You know," Young said, "I have an assembled table. I also have beer, if you want one."

Rush looked at him, trying to decide whether he really wanted to eat dinner at a table in the typical fashion with his neighbor. The entire thing felt somehow too much like an entire subset of events that he would prefer to avoid entirely. He had mathematics to do with quantum keys that he had to pull out of systems blindly and flawlessly and he did not need to be distracted nor did he have any room in his mind for pity for some injured divorcee who was excruciatingly bored and coming to the emptiness of a quiet apartment straight from some kind of gun-filled past, nor did he think 'beer' was a good idea—for one thing it really would not pair very well with his precisely chopped and elegantly constructed fifteen-minute dinner, for another he had been drinking Gatorade today but he was not really at the top of his game physically and he didn't think intoxication would do him any favors—likely it would turn out badly, no matter how appealing it sounded at the outset, because it would only make everything more difficult to control seeing as already he couldn't eat and sleep and drink water contemporaneously. Yesterday there had been too much of all of that for which he blamed Jackson and also this displaced colonel.

"Or," Young said, again looking uncertain with his fucking plate of fucking vegetables, "we can just sit on the floor. It's not a big deal. No pressure."

"No pressure? Fuck off. I know you have a table because I saw it, and I will pass on the beer, thank you."

"You're welcome?"

Rush brushed past him, walking a few paces out into the kitchen to drop his plate on the table and throw himself into a chair. He leaned forward, elbows on the table, head in his hands, and tried to think of a way that he could eat his dinner when he could barely breathe.

Young put a fork down next to him, but said nothing.

"Thank you," Rush said.

"No problem."

Young ate in silence for a few minutes while Rush stared at his plate.

"So," Young said. "You seem kind of—stressed."

"You seem kind of crippled."

"You seem kind of transparent in your attempts to redirect."

"You seem more astute than one might initially assume."

"You seem like you're making a conscious effort to be as much of an asshole as possible."

"You seem like you must be desperate for company if I'm the best you can do."

They were quiet for a minute.

"This is pretty good," Young said.

"It requires substantially less skill than an omelette," Rush said, pushing his dinner around his plate, trying to think about a method by which he might eat it, but failing to come up with anything workable, at least in the short term. "I'm quite certain that even you could pull it off."

"So what's your story, hotshot?" Young asked finally, watching him not eat.

Rush looked back at him and wondered if it was always this easy for Young—whether he just asked people what their problems were and, if that was indeed a strategy he employed, how often it worked for him. He wondered if Young had a lot of uncomplicated friends, or if he was just unusually optimistic, or if possibly there was some kind of decoupling between his knowledge of past outcomes and his ability to predict future system states.

"Oh what," Young asked, uncomfortable under direct, unremitting scrutiny, "not subtle enough for you?"

"Hardly," Rush replied, looking away.

"Well," Young said, "I really didn't think I was going to get anything meaningful out of you, though I have to say I thought you'd say *something*."

"Sorry to disappoint."

"I'm not disappointed," Young said. "In fact, I consider it a victory that I've gone almost thirty seconds without getting directly insulted."

Rush smiled faintly. "Being obliquely insulted doesn't bother you?"

"Well I can't say I'm wild about it," Young said, taking a sip of his beer, "but it was more like disdain, anyway. You sure you don't want one of these?" He shook his beer.

"Quite sure," Rush said.

"Don't drink and derive, I guess," Young replied with a shrug.

Rush stared at him.

"Or so they say," Young said.

"That is the conventional wisdom, yes," Rush replied, managing to take a bite of his pasta.

"I read it on a shirt."

"And to whom did this shirt belong?"

"Some colonel," Young said. "I'm sure you wouldn't know him."

"I know an awful lot of colonels."

"Sheppard?" Young asked. "Spiky hair, closet nerd?"

Rush shook his head.

"He's not around much," Young said with downward glance and half a shrug.

Rush watched the other man shift uncomfortably in his chair, pulling his leg forward.

He decided that he would make some kind of communicative effort.

He took another bite of pasta.

"What?" Young asked defensively.

"What happened to you?" Rush asked, looking away abruptly.

"I got caught in the way of something more unyielding than I was," Young said wryly.

It was an unusually abstract way of describing a thing that was, by its nature, immediate. It suggested to him that whatever had happened to Young had been something outside the range of a typical injury in the field, if there was such a thing. It also implied that Young was not particularly inclined to discuss whatever had happened.

He could sympathize.

"Sounds painful," Rush replied, carefully neutral.

"Yup," Young said, "but it's getting better."

"I hear that's how these things generally proceed."

"I guess so," Young said, looking away—out the window and straight into the red disk of the setting sun.

He was certain if he tried any such thing he'd have a headache for days so he looked down at his plate and began to methodically work his way through his pasta.

"Give me your phone," Young said, after a few minutes.

"No."

"You don't have a phone," Young said. "Do you."

"Of course I have a phone. It's a requirement of the program."

"Where is it then?" Young asked pointedly.

"In my apartment."

"You need to keep it with you."

"I do," Rush said.

"All the time," Young emphasized.

"Yes yes."

"What if I were a Lucian Alliance operative?"

"Then I doubt you'd let me make a call. Also, I would feel like an idiot for cooking you dinner."

Young sighed. "I could abduct you right now."

"And a phone would help me how, exactly?"

"You could call the SGC."

"While you were abducting me."

"Well," Young said, making a passable effort at keeping his frustration under wraps, "it depends on how good of a job I was doing. We'd also be able to track you by your phone."

"Just give me the dispatch number," Rush said. "I'll put it in."

"Not a chance," Young replied, getting to his feet with what looked like significant difficulty. He looked at Rush's mostly clean plate. "Come on. We are finding your phone right now."

"God. If you're this overbearing as a neighbor," Rush said, "I'm glad I'm not a fucking soldier."

"Me too," Young said, "you'd be a nightmare."

They walked down the hall without speaking. He wasn't terribly keen on the idea of Young seeing the inside of his apartment but he wasn't terribly concerned either because thus far he'd managed to keep Jackson out and Jackson was much more difficult to manage than Young.

He unlocked the door with the ever-satisfying pushback of pins and tumblers.

"Wait here," Rush said shortly, stepping through and neatly shutting the door in Young's face before the other man could repeat his boot maneuver.

It didn't take him long to find his phone.

When he opened the door again he found Young leaning in the frame, with a put-upon expression.

Rush held out the phone.

Young glared at him and proceeded to swipe the thing out of his hand in clear irritation.

Rush glared back.

He watched Young enter not one but two numbers, one of which he apparently called briefly before hanging up.

"Now you have dispatch's number and my number," the other man said.

"Would you like me to call you if I'm being abducted?" Rush asked politely. "I'm certain that if I'm permitted to make one call, I'll be able to make two."

"Charge this thing," Young said, shaking his phone at him, "and then keep it in your pocket."

"Fine," Rush said.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Young said.

"I'm busy tomorrow."

"Uh huh. Doing what?"

"Mathematics."

"And you have something against eating and doing math in the same day?"

"In principle no, but—"

"Good," Young said, turning away. "See you tomorrow."

Tempted though he was to continue to argue the point, he doubted that it would gain him much other than a waste of another twenty minutes, so he simply rolled his eyes and shut his door.

Chapter Five

"Well," Young said, angling his head to trap his phone between his ear and his shoulder, "I wouldn't want to use the word 'crazy'—" he broke off as he tipped his hand to lever open his second beer of the evening.

"It's okay," Mitchell cut in good-naturedly from the other end of the line. "You can say crazy. I mean, *Jackson* used the term 'crazy' and Jackson is *the* nicest, most politically correct guy that one could—theoretically make up. *He is also* a little bit 'crazy' by his own admission so his feeling is that he knows the territory. He *owns* that territory. He's set up little colonies that pay Crazy Tax. He's built himself a summer home on Crazy Beach. My point is that if you tried to construct a nice human from the top down, you'd get Jackson. Er, probably. Anyway, what you've said so far makes me think that yeah, your neighbor is renting out an adjacent Beach House of the Brain. On a hurricane slammed shore, right next to Jackson's titanium, metaphorical vacation condo. You can tell me all the details. I won't judge."

"Um, 'if you tried to construct a human from the top down'?" Young echoed dubiously, closing his fridge.

"Dang it," Mitchell said. "Jackson and Carter are infecting my lexicon."

"You did not just say the phrase 'infecting my lexicon,' did you?" Young growled.

He took a sip of his beer and started to limp slowly out of his kitchen into his dimly lit living room. The overhead lighting in this place wasn't great and he hadn't had the time or the energy to start setting up any of his assorted lamps.

"Lexicon is, like, Jackson's second favorite word. Even Vala is saying it now."

"Uh huh."

"Can I confess something to you?"

Young made a face and took another sip of his beer. "Sure. Go ahead."

"I want to get team T-shirts that say 'SG-1 does it with a lexicon'. It's funny because it's true."

Young rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I can see Teal'c wearing that."

"For your information, Teal'c is pushing for team T-shirts."

"Sometimes I really can't tell if you're being serious or not," Young replied.

"SG-3 has one. It's pretty much what you'd expect from SG-3 though. Something along the lines of 'We fuck shit up.' It's not even witty. I checked with Jackson to make sure I wasn't missing a clever pun or something, but nope."

"What's with the T-shirt fad these days?"

"The medics started it. I'm surprised you didn't already know. Johansen was the instigator."

Young winced, staring at his ceiling. "Oh," he said, after a pause that seemed, even to him, too long.

"Yeah," Mitchell said with a determined casualness. "Anyway. We were talking about your neighbor. You were about to give me the off-the record version of your take on the guy."

Young wasted a skeptical look on his ceiling. "Well, he's definitely eccentric, but I think there's maybe an argument to be made something beyond just your run of the mill eccentric SGC science type."

"In what way?" Mitchell asked, his tone flattening out into something more serious.

"Something's definitely—*bothering* him. I ate dinner with him tonight and maybe two or three times he was on the verge of losing his shit and having some kind of emotional breakdown in my kitchen. He managed to rein it in every time, but—" he broke off with a shrug that Mitchell couldn't see.

"Hmm," Mitchell said. "Anything seem to trigger it?"

"Well, it definitely seemed like a 'triggered' thing, but if you can figure out any connection between chopping vegetables, kitchen tables, and General Landry, let me know."

"All those things came up during the course of your conversation?"

"Well, he made me dinner."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah."

"He can't be *that* weird if he's making you dinner."

"I never said he was 'weird.' I said he was interesting. Not the same thing." Young picked up his beer and limped over to the darkened window. He nudged the half open venetian blinds aside and looked down on the parking lot.

"No one ever makes *me* dinner."

"So ask Dr. Lam out already, and maybe *she'll* make you dinner."

"First of all," Mitchell said finally, "no way am I asking out General Landry's *daughter*. Second of all, she works ninety hours a week and identifying intergalactic plagues and trying to cure them. She doesn't have time for normal stuff. Third of all, if I ever asked her out, which I'm *not* going to do, *I* would cook dinner for *her*."

"Right. You haven't thought about this at all, I see."

"We were talking about your neighbor. The interesting one. The eccentric, angst-ridden mathematician who lives down the hall and who made you dinner."

"As I've been trying to tell you over the course of your constant interruptions," Young growled, letting the blinds fall shut, "this guy is noteworthy in that I got a personal phone call from General Landry today about the fact that he's now my neighbor."

He heard Mitchell whistle softly through his teeth. "That is some serious ish right there."

"Yup," Young said shortly. "Apparently, he's number one on the LA interrogation wish list."

"I heard that," Mitchell replied, "though how anyone ranks higher than Jackson, I just don't get."

"Hard to believe." He wondered who had been briefed on the rank order of this nebulous list. SG-1, apparently, had been given a heads-up.

"What would the LA want with some math genius?" Mitchell asked.

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"Landry didn't say?"

"No," Young replied, "he just tried to get me to read Rush the riot act about going anywhere other than the base without security. Turns out the SGC keeps tabs on this entire building; did you know that?"

"Yeah, Jackson mentioned it. Your building, Jackson's building, and the god-awful brick thing on the corner of Main and Crescent. Too many abductions over too many years, I guess."

"Anyway, they don't have any personnel permanently assigned to Rush because he so rarely goes anywhere other than the base. He's supposed to call if he's making other plans."

"And today he didn't call?"

"Nope," Young said. "He went shopping and didn't let anyone know. People were losing their shit, apparently, until he showed up on the camera in the building lobby after forty-five minutes with his groceries. Landry was not in a good mood. I think they might put someone on him twenty-four seven."

"I'm not sure how much good that's going to do," Mitchell said, dubiously. "If it were me, I'd be worried about, oh, y'know, the beaming technology that SG-11 saw the LA use about a week and a half ago? They must have gotten that from *us*, don't you think? I don't really see the Asgard giving it to them—" Mitchell trailed off.

"Yeah," Young agreed. "We've got a serious leak somewhere."

"And the thing that sucks," Mitchell said, an edge of anger distorting his otherwise casual tone, "is that it's probably someone pretty high up. With access to a lot of classified materials. Meaning—"

"We probably know him. Or her."

"Yeah," Mitchell said with a sigh. "I can see why Landry is freaking out about this. He can't keep Rush on the base because it's about as safe as a sieve at the moment, but he can't assign the guy a security detail that tracks his movements because having people file reports on his location would just be another piece of leakable info. Basically? Anything he does to keep official tabs on this guy is just going to backfire if the LA gain access to any kind of data about him, which they *will*, because they seem to be slowly creeping up on most everything they want."

"Plus," Young added, moving away from the window and leaning forward to idly shift the contents of the nearest box, "the man's not the most cooperative person I've ever met."

"Well at least the building has signal scramblers, right? So they won't be able to beam him straight out of his apartment. I think I remember Carter saying something about that. I got some put in at my place last week. That's how I know I'm moving up in the world."

Young snorted, gave up on the box, and dropped into an orphaned kitchen chair.

"Though, to be fair, I think it might have been Sam who insisted I get them—probably because if I get abducted, she's going to have to file all the compiled mission reports, which are a pain, as you know."

"Could they beam him out without a transponder?" Young asked.

"First of all, I bet he *has* a transponder," Mitchell replied, "but hopefully the LA won't be able to get it to transmit a signal without the correct query code. Which they really should *not* have, because if they have *his*, then they probably have *everyone's* and we are *screwed*."

"Oh, look at you with all your new tech knowledge."

"Sam and I hang, okay? We're buddies. I've probably got the equivalent of a master's degree in engineering at this point. But second of all, they definitely could beam him out without a transponder signal if they can get an accurate enough fix on his location. They've been doing that more and more recently. And, a lot of the time? It doesn't end well."

"You mean—"

"A local transport sweep in the absence of a signal lock," Mitchell said, his voice flattening, "Jackson's taken to calling it 'the slice'. It's messy. That's why *we* almost *never do it*."

"Ugh. You think they might try that on Rush?"

"Maybe, if they were sure they could get him in one piece."

Young grimaced.

"So, does Landry expect you to protect this guy, or what? Because, no offense, but you're not really in protecting-shape at the moment."

"Nah," Young said. "I'm just supposed to help out the security in the basement by convincing Rush to adhere to protocol and call dispatch if he wants to go anywhere."

"Isn't that an advertisement that he's gonna be, I don't know, *available* for abducting?"

"The point is to make sure he's covered by transport scramblers because the thing they're most worried about is a remote beam out. Plus, the LA can't be wired into our grid in real-time. They just can't. They don't have the Earth-based manpower for that."

"Unless they teamed up with the Trust."

"God damn it, Mitchell, I don't need this kind of—"

Young broke off as the power cut out and then returned with an interruption of illumination so brief he wondered if he had imagined it.

He didn't think so.

Young sat forward with a painful pull in his lower back. He looked up at the ceiling, already reaching for the weapon he wasn't wearing.

"Everett?" Mitchell said, uncertain after a few seconds of silence.

"Yeah, hey," Young replied, standing with difficulty. "The power just flickered."

"Huh," Mitchell said. "You uh—*concerned* about that at all?"

"Well," Young said, layering a reasonable tone atop the unreasonable, repetitive pain that came with limping toward his bedroom at a speed arguably too quick for his back and hip. "It's probably nothing. But there was a car here earlier in the day—some kind of non-SGU surveillance. It happens often enough for various reasons, but—" he trailed off.

"Yeah," Mitchell said, but there was an edginess to the other man's voice that echoed the restive feeling in Young's gunless hands. "You're right. It's probably nothing, but maybe you should call down to the security station in the basement to just—make sure they're answering."

Young opened the drawer of his nightstand and pulled out his sidearm.

"Yeah. Better safe than—"

The power cut out.

In abrupt and total darkness, the quiet hiss of cool air moving through ceiling vents faded slowly to silence.

"Everett?" Mitchell said, and though his voice was immediate, Young was acutely aware that he was fifteen minutes away by car.

"The power is down entirely," Young hissed, his eyes beginning to adjust to the minimal street-light that filtered in from behind half-closed window shades.

"I'll call it in," Mitchell snapped. "Go get him."

Young pocketed his phone and moved through the dark of his unfamiliar apartment, catching his painfully on the corner of a partially assembled bookshelf. He gritted his teeth and continued on, out into his living room where the light from the street filtered into the room at oblique angles. He threaded his way through half-unpacked boxes until he reached his door.

Silently, he opened it, trying the balance his instinct for speed with the practicality of a slower, more cautious approach.

If this was indeed an attempt by the LA to abduct his neighbor, Young was fairly certain it would proceed in one of two ways.

One. If they were technologically capable of beaming Rush out and they knew the location of his apartment, then they would currently be attempting to take down the building scramblers, each of which had its own independent power generator. If this was their plan, they'd be in the basement right now, quietly neutralizing building security.

Two. If they couldn't beam him out they would likely come for him directly through the front door. They wouldn't risk a search of the building, but they wouldn't need to if they'd previously accessed the security station logs in the basement.

Either way, his window of opportunity was narrow. *Speed over caution*, he decided.

The hallway was totally opaque, losing its depth in uniform darkness.

He left his door open; the weak light from the street would be enough to orient him.

Young moved forward, his sidearm at the ready, navigating by feel.

The emergency lights hadn't come on.

Which meant that someone had drained or disabled the backup generator.

His fingers grazed over one door. Then another. At the third, he paused, knocking softly.

"Rush," he called through the door.

No one answered.

He knocked louder.

Damn it.

"Rush, if you're in there, open the door or I *will* break it down." He made his voice low and forceful, trying to make it carry just enough for Rush to hear him.

He waited.

And waited.

Given the state of his back, it was extremely unlikely that he was going to be able to make good on his words. But what the hell *else* was he supposed to do?

He had stepped back several paces to give it a try, when Rush flung the door open.

"As if you could," Rush said conversationally, backlit by the moonlight and streetlight streaming in through his windows. "You'd be lucky to break down a cardboard box."

Young breathed a sigh of relief and stepped forward. "Thank god. Come on."

Rush considered him silently for a moment before speaking. "I don't think so."

"Now is not the time to argue," Young growled. "Or engage in some kind of academic debate regarding personal agency. Let's go."

"Why are you carrying a *gun*?" Rush countered.

"Because this situation is—can I justify myself to you *later*? You need to get out of your apartment right now."

"Find someone else to rescue from a power outage. I'm otherwise engaged." Rush's tone was dry, but as he spoke he shifted his weight subtly.

It occurred to Young that the other man was contemplating an action that would require a great deal of force. Instinctively, Young shifted his own weight, turning subtly, planting his center of gravity over his good leg.

"You want to see how far your superiority complex gets you with the Lucian Alliance?" Young whispered incredulously. "I said let's go."

"And I said: 'why do you have a gun'," Rush hissed with a viciousness that was almost distracting enough to hide the subtle, almost silent click of the spring latch beneath Rush's fingers.

The other man was going to try to shove him back and close the door. And if he did that—

"How do I know you're not the leak?" Rush snapped, unwisely confirming Young's supposition. "You move into this apartment and two days later—"

"Rush. You have to trust me. I programmed your phone. I—"

"Unconvincing." Rush cracked the word like a whip and stepped back.

Young drove forward with his good leg, managing to hit the door with enough momentum to knock the other man off balance. Rush lost ground but recovered quickly and slammed back into the door, nearly succeeding in knocking Young back in turn. Pain shot from his back down his injured leg in a searing current as he held his ground against Rush in this static, painful, *ridiculous* contest.

"This is," Young gasped, shoving on the door, "one of the stupidest things I've ever done."

"Which part?" Rush snarled, shoving back.

"Can you *please* just—"

"No," Rush snapped.

Young lost a few more inches.

God damn.

God *damn*.

He needed to get this thing *done*.

Young shifted his position and tried to get line-of-sight on an exterior wall. When he had it, he sighted along the barrel of the gun to a point just above the window.

He fired.

The noise was deafening, entirely unsubtle, loud enough to wake the whole building, but it had its intended effect. Rush flinched back reflexively, and the pressure he'd been putting on the door abruptly relaxed. It slammed open under Young's unopposed force. He reached forward, grabbed Rush by the upper arm, and yanked him into the hall.

"What is *wrong* with you?" the other man shouted.

Young ignored the question, shut the door to Rush's apartment, and tried the handle. With the spring-lock activated, it failed to turn. Hopefully, the man didn't have his keys on him.

"Sssh," Young hissed. "Not so loud."

His ears rang with the report of the shot as he dragged Rush back toward the sliver of light that was his open doorway. Well, he'd intended to drag Rush down the hallway. In actuality, it was more like he was using the man as a crutch. Rather than being grateful for this, Young felt vaguely affronted on the guy's behalf. *You really do not belong in this world of xenopolitical intrigue, do you?* He thought. *You definitely belong in front of a chalkboard. Don't help people who you think might be abducting you.* Of course, now was not really the time to be looking a gift horse in the mouth. With Rush helping him, they made it to his apartment in relatively short order. Once they were there, Young eased the door shut.

"I can't hear a fucking thing," Rush said, still too loudly, once it was closed. "What, *exactly*, are you—"

Young spun him around and clamped a hand over his mouth.

"Shut. Up." He spoke quietly, directly into Rush's ear.

Rush nodded.

Young let him go and the other man pulled away immediately, backing up unsteadily and making his way towards the window. Yes, Young thought. *That's an excellent idea. Go the window in the middle of your own potentially attempted kidnapping. Take a look*

around. *See if anyone's in the parking lot with a gun, or an anesthetic dart gun, or a poisoned dart gun, or a dart gun with a transport-trackable compound, or some a la carte combination of all three.* The man had no common sense. Not any.

With literally painful effort he managed to pull Rush back before he reached the window. He wished he had handcuffs, though he was pretty sure that if he cuffed Rush on his floor, while efficient, it would ruin any chance he had of convincing the other man to make him dinner ever again.

"Get down on the floor," he mouthed, pointing at a relatively clear space at the foot of his couch, "and stay there."

Rush shot him a disdainful look, but complied, dropping fluidly into a cross-legged position, apparently content to let Young have his way at present. The guy's attitude wasn't *ideal* for making it through a late-night abduction attempt unscathed, but Young would take what he could get.

His cellphone buzzed, and Young looked down to see a text message from Mitchell.

::World Series, 1985::

Young recognized the message for what it was—an attempt by Mitchell to ascertain whether Young had his phone.

::Royals vs. Cardinals:: he texted back.

He waited, his left shoulder braced against his door, his weight distributed over his right leg. After half a minute, his phone vibrated again.

::Cavalry's on the way. Ground based monitoring is picking up low atmospheric temperature fluctuations in your area, consistent w/ cloaked ship. Status?::

Rush could probably handle texting.

He passed his phone over to the other man with a warning look and then focused on the sounds in the hall. Rush took the phone, raised his eyebrows, and began a composing a reply that was, hopefully, short and utilitarian.

Young tried to hear anything over the ringing in his ears. *Was the Odyssey in Earth orbit*, he wondered. But it couldn't be. Otherwise, they would have beamed Rush out by now.

He glanced over at the mathematician, who was *still* texting something back to Mitchell. "Keep it short. He only needs to know where we are and that we're together."

Rush nodded.

Somewhere, someone was deciding whether or not to recall the *Odyssey* for this.

It was probably O'Neill.

In the hallway, just barely discernible over the monotone pitch that had been with him since he'd fired his shot, he heard the crash of a door being forced open.

Rush looked up at him, apparently able to hear the sound as well.

Young gave him a look that hopefully communicated the sentiment of I-told-you-so.

Rush rolled his eyes in a manner that was clearly unimpressed, then shifted forward, passing Young his phone.

Another text from Mitchell stood out, bright in the darkness.

::Advise—Col. Telford is going to be beamed into your apartment. Request confirm.::

::Confirmed:: Young texted back.

In the hallway outside he heard a shout of alarm and then the telltale chirp and buzz of Zat fire.

In the middle of the room a column of blue light appeared, bright enough to sear his retinas. He flinched, throwing a hand in front of his eyes. Rush did the same. When the light faded, he saw Telford's familiar outline, dark against the faint light that filtered through the window.

The other man edged gracefully around a few boxes and stepped forward, his sidearm out. He gave Rush a short nod. Even though it was past twenty-three hundred hours on a Friday night, the fact that Telford was in uniform did not surprise Young.

Telford clicked his radio subtly.

"What's the plan?" Young whispered.

"The plan," Telford replied, just as quietly, "is that we are going to try and fix this fucking leak tonight." The other man opened his bag and switched on a dim flashlight. Inside the bag were four rectangular devices.

"Scramblers?" Young mouthed his question.

"The travel edition," Telford whispered back. "We pulled these out of Cam's place." He shot a pointed look in Rush's direction. "Can he stay with you tonight?"

"Yeah," Young said. "Obviously. But why not just recall the *Odyssey* and beam him out of here?"

"The *Odyssey's* in orbit."

"Then why—"

"We think that's exactly what they want," Telford whispered, pulling a scrambler out of the bag. "Getting his transponder query code is one of their top priorities, and someone hacked into the *Odyssey's* incoming buffer."

"Fuck," Young hissed. "So does that mean—"

"Yes. It means they now have my query code and SG-3's query codes. But they don't know that we know that. Presumably."

Rush stood and moved toward them.

Telford frowned, motioning the mathematician down to the floor with one hand.

Rush ignored him, reached forward, and grabbed the scrambler out of Telford's hand. He examined it briefly and then clicked it on, with a pointed look. It lit up with a faint blue glow, illuminating the three of them in the darkness.

Telford directed a somewhat appreciative eyeroll at Rush, then activated a second and third device and handed them both to the mathematician. "Create a perimeter," he said, setting the fourth device himself, on the floor near the apartment door.

"Hey," Young said, grabbing Rush's shoulder as the man started to move away, "create a perimeter without *walking in front of any windows*."

Rush nodded in way that managed to convey irritated exasperation.

Young shot Telford a disapproving look. Telford shrugged back. "He's the Jackson type," Telford whispered. "Not the Carter type. You've got to find stuff for them to do or, all of a sudden, they've transported themselves to an alternate plane. Not that I'm bitter. About the interdimensional war that Jackson accidentally dragged us into. Why would anyone be bitter about that."

Young wasn't about to touch that comment with a ten foot pole. Maybe a ten foot pool cue, later, after about twelve beers, on a day when no one was in danger of being abducted. So, never.

They waited in silence for a few more seconds.

Telford's radio clicked twice and the power levels came back up.

They blinked in the sudden glow of Young's crappy overhead lighting.

"Telford to SG-3. Can someone give me a verbal confirmation that we're clear?"

"Sir, this is Reynolds—we disabled three individuals with Alliance insignia in Dr. Rush's apartment. The basement station is also clear. We're going to need additional manpower to secure the entire building."

"Radio it in," Telford said. He paused, looking up at the ceiling before continuing with, "did you recover Dr. Rush's computer?"

"Yes sir."

"Can I have that *back*, actually?" Rush asked pointedly.

"No," Telford said, "not until it's been cleared." He depressed a button on his radio. "I'm assuming temporary command of SG-3. Secure the prisoners and regroup at Rush's apartment."

"You thinking of trying to beam out to their ship?" Young asked. He couldn't conceal the misgiving in his tone.

"If we can get access we will. 'Strike when the grass is tall,' to quote an enemy aphorism," Telford said, giving Young a meaningful look. "Landry okayed it. We've got to fix this fucking leak. But until we do," he pulled a small pneumatic tube out of his bag and held it up, looking at Rush. "I have a present for you, straight from Colonel Carter."

"No, thank you," Rush said.

"'No thank you' is not an option," Telford replied.

"What does it do?" Young asked, trying to head off a civilian versus military power struggle before it had the chance to get off the ground.

"It encrypts the signal coming from his transponder so that even if they steal his query code and elicit a transport signal, they shouldn't be able to get a lock on said signal without the corresponding decryption key."

"I invented that," Rush said dryly.

"But Carter made it into an implantable chip," Telford replied, raising his eyebrows. "So she gets the credit. Give me your arm."

Rush eyed him dubiously. "I do not take," he broke the word off crisply and paused, "orders."

"Nick," Telford said, turning the man's name into a familiar, exasperated pull. "Stop giving me a hard time."

"Stop giving *you* a hard time?" Rush said, his pitch rising.

Young found the guy's incredulity pretty sympathetic when it wasn't sharpened into a verbal sword and going right for the throat. This had been a weird night, even by SGC standards, it probably looked like some kind of absurdist nightmare to a guy who, until pretty recently, had apparently been a math professor.

"The only reason you weren't abducted tonight is because your neighbor," Telford's voice hardened, "took some commendable initiative."

Young raised his eyebrows, and tried to sand down some conversational edges. "You guys know each other?"

"We do," Telford said, shortly.

"As I believe I mentioned," Rush murmured, his eyes flicking briefly to Young, "I know a large number of colonels."

"Unfortunately for us," Telford said, dryly. "Stop being difficult on principle, Nick. You want me to get Carter on the phone? She can give her opinion. You want to call Jackson? Take a vote?"

"Give it to me," Rush demanded. He did not extend his hand. This struck Young as notably savvy. *Maybe there's hope for you yet, hotshot.*

Telford offered the device to him without hesitation.

Rush snapped it out of his grip and turned it over in his fingers, scrutinizing it carefully.

Young glanced at Telford.

Telford watched Rush.

After a few seconds, the mathematician unbuttoned the sleeve of his shirt and pressed the device against his forearm, discharging it with a pneumatic hiss.

"Thank you," Telford said.

"Oh *no*, thank *you*," Rush replied, with discourteous levels of courtesy.

Telford rolled his eyes and started for the door.

"David," Young said quietly.

Telford paused, his hand on the doorknob, and looked back over his shoulder.

"Good luck," Young said.

"Thanks," Telford replied. His eyes flicked toward Rush and then back to Young. "Don't let him do anything stupid." He threw the door open and pulled it shut behind him with a quick twist of his wrist as he vanished into the hallway.

The room was silent for a moment.

Young turned to Rush. "Do a lot of stupid things, do you?" he asked, dry and mild.

Rush narrowed his eyes.

Young looked away, staring for a moment at the closed door, surrounded by the mess of his semi-unpacked belongings—half of which he never wanted to see again, half of which he had never really wanted to own in the first place—and thought about Telford, taking command of SG-3.

"Feeling a touch of nostalgia for our gun-wielding past, are we?" Rush said, copying Young's dry delivery but managing to file his tone into something with more of an edge.

"Would it kill you to be polite?" Young snapped. "I just saved you from probably hours, maybe days of torture courtesy of the Lucian Alliance, no thanks to *you*, by the way. I'm also letting you sleep on my couch. Again."

"I will not be sleeping."

"Whatever," Young growled, bringing a hand to rest over his lower back. "I'm taking a shower and then I'm going to bed. You can do whatever the hell you want, as long as you don't leave."

"I'm going to need your computer," Rush informed him.

"No."

"What do you mean 'no'."

"I'm pretty sure that by 'no,' I meant 'no.' My computer is the computer of a colonel with level five security clearance, whereas your computer is the computer of a civilian consultant with level one security clearance."

Rush looked down and away, a muscle in his cheek twitching subtly. "How trite. Can you at least—call someone to get me a computer?"

"No, I don't think so. I think that right now, on a Friday night at 11 PM in the middle of a power play by the Lucian Alliance, getting *you* a *computer* is pretty low down on everyone's priority list."

"What if I were dying."

"What?"

"What if I were dying. Right now. What if my heart stopped and I needed a fucking defibrillator?" Rush's eyes were dark. He took a step toward Young.

"Um—"

"I can see from your expression that you're confused about what's happening, so I'll tell you. I'm constructing an argument. Not an argument in the colloquial sense, but rather in a formal sense, meaning that it's based on premises, includes a method of reasoning, and it has a conclusion or a *fucking salient point*. I skipped defining a premise, because I thought it was obvious given the events of this evening, but I'll do it for you now. One," Rush snapped, holding up a finger, "I work nearly unceasingly on a problem of such magnitude and scope that it took ten years to even understand there was a problem in the first place. Two," he paused to take a breath and flexed his hand in a circular motion, coming up with a second finger, "this problem is of enough tactical import to move me to the top of the priority queue vis-à-vis 'minds from which the Lucian Alliance would like rip information'. And three, as are most problems of great tactical importance, this one is *time sensitive*."

Young crossed his arms, tightened his jaw, and leaned against the wall, giving Rush a skeptical look.

"Moving on," Rush said with an hysterical guilt on his rising pitch, "my argument is going to be inductive because the conclusion is not a logical consequence of my premises but is merely supported by them. As far as methodology goes, my choice," he said, punctuating the words with a fluid inward curl and stop of his fingers, "was an argument by analogy."

Young decided that this seemed like an awful lot of effort to go to just to make him feel stupid, or inadequate, or shortsighted. It occurred to him that maybe what was happening was that Rush was extremely upset. More upset than his demeanor had indicated.

"And hence," Rush said his voice cracking on the word, "the fucking defibrillator. The validity of my analogy is based on the utility provided to me, were I dying, by a defibrillator, which would be about as fucking high as one could really get in terms of utility. Were I dying, I'm fairly certain you would find a way to save my miserable fucking life without giving the Lucian Alliance a chance to abduct me, so I'm *therefore* certain—

Yup. This was Rush having some kind of meltdown.

"You want a glass of water or something?" Young asked, trying to be sensitive.

Rush plowed over him. "I'm certain that you can find a way to get me a fucking computer, which I *require* to do my work."

Maybe the guy was upset because he had nearly been abducted. Maybe he was upset because he'd been dragged out of his apartment at gunpoint in the middle of the night. Maybe it was the general stress of being an intergalactic abduction target. Maybe it was sleep deprivation. Maybe it was whatever seemed to be bothering Rush at baseline. Maybe the guy just wanted his damn computer.

"Rush," he said.

"And don't fucking say 'Rush' in that infinitely reasonable manner it's *infuriating* if you want to know—the idea that you could ever possibly understand the fucking existential horror of a hidden lock is ridiculous. Cryptography drives the ungrounded too far afield."

"I get that," Young murmured, threading his way painfully back towards his kitchen. "Come on. Let's drink some water."

"Turing poisoned himself. Gödel starved to death because he *thought* he was being poisoned. Systems that cannot demonstrate their own consistency, that are true but unprovable it's—they are—fucking *torture*; they just *exist* like that—in other systems you can drill down and down reducing things to approximations, biology falling to chemistry falling to physics falling to mathematics—"

Rush was actually holding onto the doorframe, not looking at Young.

Young filled a glass with water.

"They knew that. How could they not, being what they were? Who they were. The lock is mathematical and not layered on but built in. Integral. It—"

Young threw the water straight in his face.

Rush stopped talking. After a few seconds, he pressed his forehead against the doorframe.

Young handed him a hand towel.

Rush took it and dried off his face and neck. "That was unnecessary," he whispered, with a dignity that Young found both sympathetic and appealing.

"Sorry," Young said. "So, um, you just want the computer then? Anything else?"

"No," Rush whispered, not looking at him. "Just the computer. Make it a nice one."

"No defibrillators?"

"No," Rush said, smiling faintly.

"Just checking," Young replied.

Chapter Six

He was hearing a continuous tone.

This was not going to end well.

All through the long hours between dinner and the gunshot, even as he started to code, he'd been working on making a list. He'd known always, *always*, even before he'd separated the thing into its component parts that it would be reductive. Even if it contained inductive components, it would be splitable. Like the chevrons themselves were discrete things.

He was hearing a continuous tone.

Oh fuck.

Oh God.

He had been making a list.

A list that delineated eight items, but required ten.

"Do you want to sit down, hotshot?"

He needed to make an *effort*. He needed to focus on *Young*. The problem was that he was—

He was hearing a continuous tone.

"No," he said. "I'm fine."

He looked at Young. He focused on *Young* who looked exhausted and alone and wary and who was still holding a glass empty of water and who was leaning against the counter and it occurred to him then that it could not have been *easy* for him to have done any of the things that he had done that night and Rush didn't even know what was wrong with the man, but something was; something had *happened* to him.

"Are you all right?" Rush asked.

"Yeah," Young said, his casual delivery ruined by the way he couldn't keep his face controlled as he said it. "I'm good. Sorry about the water."

Rush nodded.

But he did not like the water.

He was hearing a continuous tone.

"You were kind of freaking out for a minute there, hotshot."

"I'm aware."

He needed to *do* something. He needed to focus on Young. He needed a computer, possibly. Possibly that would help him. Possibly. Four were complete. He would get number five. The quantum one. It would take him, maybe, a week, once he got his computer back. Or *a* computer. He could code from anywhere but—he wanted his computer. A computer would help him. Possibly. Possibly it would help.

He was hearing a continuous tone.

This was what had driven Schumann insane. A continuous tone. A symphonic torturous extrapolation from a single tone.

He could not breathe.

This was not going to end well.

He needed to focus on Young. On *Young*. Not other things.

"Hey," Young said, his hands moving and his hair short. "It's okay. I get it. You're not used to this kind of thing. It's fine. Everyone freaks out a little bit after they almost get abducted. Probably. I mean, *I* would. If I were a math professor, I would."

Young was being unquestionably too nice and too cautious. "There's nothing special about being a professor of mathematics," Rush replied. He pressed his forehead against the wood of the doorframe and tried not to think of the things that he could not think about.

He was hearing a continuous tone.

"Are your ears ringing?" Rush asked, finally closing in on something resembling salience.

"Yeah," Young said. "It's the gunshot at close quarters."

He nodded. That was a normal thing to do. That was good. That was preferred. He was standing here, not giving a hysterical, freeform lecture on argumentative theory. That was also preferred. His behavior, right now, was falling within normal parameters. Young thought he was afraid of being abducted which, while untrue, was also normal. He was just standing. Water in the face had interrupted his slow build toward whatever it was that the slow build was building toward.

He did not like the water.

"How long do you think it's going to last?" He was vibrating with the overtones of his own effort to hold himself together.

"Hard to say. Maybe a day at the most."

"A *day*."

It had been all right when he was doing something, when it was dark, and the adrenaline had been elevating his heart rate, when he had been listening for something else, but now—now—

"Yeah," Young said the word slowly, so *very* slowly, so unnecessarily slowly.

He was hearing a continuous tone.

He knew what had been on his wall. His wall that he had painted over. And he knew *why* it had been there. He had a list of eight. He needed a list of ten. He was hearing a continuous tone. He was hearing a *continuous* tone.

"Do you, by any chance—" Young paused and then proceeded. "*Need* anything from your apartment? I don't know—medication of some kind, as an example, maybe?"

"No. No—I just. I think I know—"

He couldn't breathe.

"Yeah, let's just, um, sit down and talk about this."

"That's not necessary."

"What do you think that you know?"

He wanted Young to help him. He wanted anyone to help him. He wished he were deaf. He wished he had always been deaf. One of two things was going to happen and he didn't know which. He could not stand the ringing; maybe if it had been some other pitch some other *note*—

"Whoa," Young said. "Hey. *Hey*."

This was going to be it. Him and this wooden doorframe and this clear tone and Gloria across the sea and under the ground and he would never never never never *never* be able to break a tonal cypher because that would be the ninth one. The ninth key. That was the one. The one that was like staring future dissolution in straight in the face. But the ninth ones were always like that and he was hearing a chord now, multiple chords. They would be linked to the *dialing*; linked to *function*. Was this what he had realized three days ago, what had happened to him then? He had written them on his wall—not a sonata, just parallel lines with interspersed notes and intervals never discordant.

Could *she* have helped him if he had realized this while she was still alive? Probably not but possibly. Possibly. And at least he would not have *this* problem, this inability to tolerate this ringing in his ears, this four hundred and forty hertz, this A, this note that he was hearing, anticipation sustained without mercy, the sound of tuning of instruments of aligning, the frequency of sound waves before it would begin. And he knew what it would be.

Of course he knew.

He was hearing a continuous tone.

He was hearing a continuous tone and his mind was trying to turn it.

To turn it.

To turn it to something else. Something he had not heard in a long time.

"Rush. *Rush*. What is wrong?"

One in E minor runs through my head, the beginning of which gives me no peace.

"I'm fine. I'm just—hearing a continuous tone." He felt the words vibrate but they had no sound.

No sound over what was happening in his mind. If he screamed would that cut through it or would that too have no sound? He thought he knew.

"Rush. Look at me. *Look* at me."

He was staring at Young because Young had a grip on his jaw.

"You're *fine*. It's over. It's *over*."

The threat was internal and it would never be over until he was.

"Of course it is. I know that. Do you think I don't *know* that?"

He was shouting but he could not hear himself. He was hearing a continuous tone. Could one be killed by a neuronal echo of a gunshot?

He was hearing a continuous tone.

A continuous tone.

A continuous one.

He tried to hold himself back and down with his hands that were digging into Young's shoulder and into the frame of the door as he tried to control his mind though sheer force of will; this must be what had happened before—he had realized it was tonal, the ninth was tonal, and he had panicked and he had lost three days.

"Rush, everything is fine. You're panicking. At least, I think you're panicking. You just need to talk to me, hotshot."

It was going to turn.

Young was looking at him.

It was going to turn.

He stopped breathing.

It faded down like a gathering, like the moments he had spent, waiting, in the dark for her to begin. One of the reasons he liked the Mendelssohn was that it had begun, always and unconventionally, with her.

"Breathe," Young said, immediate, audible, and very close to him.

He did not breathe.

It turned anyway.

The opening tore across his mind, all-consuming, solo violin turning viciously to E minor, rapidly descending, echoed, amplified by the orchestra that destroyed everything as it continued, his sense of self subsumed in ricochet arpeggios. He could not move, he could not think, his mind autoshredding through dynamic ranges as he reproduced an entire concerto at the expense of his own consciousness, bursting out of his mind as if it seethed there, as if *he* had been the one who had written it as if it could pull him down alive.

He was hearing a continuous tone.

"He said he was hearing a continuous tone."

"A continuous *tone*?"

"Yeah. A continuous tone. That's what he said."

He *was* hearing a continuous tone.

"And then what happened?"

"He hyperventilated to the point that he passed out."

"That's twice in two days. That we know of."

"Yup. I really—don't think he's okay."

"A continuous *tone*, though?"

"Yes. That's what he said. A continuous tone. Do you think that means anything?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Probably. Yes."

They were talking about him.

Of course they were.

He wondered what he had done.

It had been—the entire concerto. He wondered if it had proceeded in real time, or he had just perceived it that way.

He was still hearing the continuous tone. He wished that it would go away.

"I think it was the gunshot."

"What gunshot?"

"I fired my gun. Right next to him. He mentioned his ears were ringing."

"Well, that would be a continuous tone."

Daniel Jackson was in the other room talking to Colonel Young.

Rush was lying on the floor.

On the floor of Young's kitchen.

That was a good sign.

It probably meant that the elapsed time interval hadn't been long in relative terms.

He opened his eyes.

Vala Mal Doran was sitting on the floor of the kitchen next to him, her hair pulled over one shoulder. She was idly fingering the ends of dark strands. After a few seconds she looked over at him and blinked in surprise. After glancing toward the other room, she extended one leg and caught the edge of the open kitchen door with the toe of her boot. She flexed her foot, and the door shut silently.

"Hello gorgeous," she said quietly. "Shit day?"

"Yes," he whispered. He was curled on his side, his head on his arm, as if he had been *placed* that way.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Nothing good," he replied in a cracked whisper. "Is Daniel here?"

"Yes," she said. "Just Daniel. Daniel and Colonel Young and you and me."

He nodded.

She lay down on the floor next to him, the edge of her shoulder nearly touching his hand.

But not quite. Not quite touching.

She looked up at the ceiling, still fingering her hair.

"What are you doing?" he whispered.

"Just waiting," she murmured. "What are *you* doing?"

"I'm sure I don't know," he whispered.

She said nothing.

He said nothing.

"I was thinking of making cocktails," she said, turning her head to look over at him.

"What do you think?"

"Cocktails?" He felt like he was moving through something more viscous than air, some kind of potentially postictal, perhaps purely post-symphonic mental sludge.

"I read about them a few weeks ago, and I've been experimenting."

He was fairly certain that alcohol was not going to help him.

He was hearing a continuous tone.

"I have invented a fantastic cocktail, if I do say so myself. SG-1 loves it. And, between you and me, they can be a very critical bunch."

She stood, and somehow that made it easier for him to sit up and lean against the cabinets. He watched her fill two glasses with water. As far as mixed drinks went, he'd seen more auspicious beginnings.

"Fortunately for you, I did Colonel Young's shopping and therefore we have all the required ingredients." She put the glasses of water in the microwave and started it.

"Where are you from?" he managed to ask her.

"Why? Are you suspicious of my bartending credentials?" she asked, digging through the pantry, managing to sound hurt and coy and not answer his question.

"Yes," he said.

"I have read a great deal of literature on the subject," Vala replied primly. She put a box of chamomile tea on the counter. "In some of your most widely circulated publications."

"Meaning—" he said trying for a dry delivery, but not quite getting there.

"*Cosmopolitan* magazine, amongst others."

He tried to place it, but came up blank.

She pulled out a nearly empty bottle of Jack Daniels. "Yikes," she murmured.

He presumed that her response indicated that she had bought the bottle and that, in her estimation, Colonel Young had consumed an alarming amount of hard alcohol for one person in the span of time between purchasing and cocktail construction. He might be wrong about his assumption regarding her assumption, but he doubted it.

Vala set the bottle on the counter. She looked up and opened the microwave before the timer sounded. Gingerly, she pulled the glasses out and put a tea bag in each one.

"You really should not make tea in a *microwave*," he informed her.

"So Daniel insists. But do you see any other way to make it?"

"No."

"Well then."

"Fine."

"Yes. It *is* fine."

He was hearing a continuous tone.

"Do you think," he asked her, feeling somewhat breathless, "that you could open the window?"

"It's awfully hot out there, gorgeous."

"I know," he said.

She reached over to lever up the window.

"Thank you," he said, shutting his eyes.

"No problem."

He listened to her pour hot water from one glass to another and dig around in drawers, looking for something.

He opened his eyes again. "What are you looking for?"

"One of those adorable little sets of graded spoons?"

"Measuring spoons. To your left."

Her hand fell upon the correct drawer and she looked over at him with a subtle lift of her eyebrows.

He shrugged fractionally.

She poured a teaspoon of Jack Daniels into each of the glasses of tea.

"That," he said, looking up at her, "is not a cocktail. It's a poorly advised variant of a—"

"Excuse me," she said, turning on him with enough rapidity to flare her dark hair, "but does this look like a finished product to you?"

He made a circular hand gesture to indicate that she should proceed.

He waited for her to ask him what was wrong with him.

But she didn't.

He waited for the continuous tone to go away.

But it didn't.

He felt more able to tolerate it though, and he wondered how long that was going to last. He'd bought himself something of a reprieve after—whatever that had been, exactly. An all-consuming auditory hallucination. Of some kind. Possibly. He could pass a psych evaluation. He had passed two of them. He could pass one right now. That was the important thing.

He was hearing a continuous tone.

But he felt too drained, too exhausted to turn it into anything else.

So. A tonal cypher. That would be difficult for him. It would be upsetting. He should save that one until the end. It would be a delicate balance, staying on his own, uninterfered with, long enough to get the other four. Eight. He could get eight. He was certain that he could get eight of the ten.

But the ninth—

It would be the ninth that would destroy him.

The curse of the ninth, someone dead whispered.

The ninth.

The tenth would be last. It would only reveal itself at the end.

Perhaps—perhaps that was not his to solve.

He would find out.

Outside, he could hear cars and insects.

"Take a seat, gorgeous," Vala said, winking at him and slapping the counter as she turned to open one of the cupboards above the stove with another subtle flare of hair.

With less coordination than he was accustomed to, he boosted himself up onto the counter and watched her fish through boxes.

"What are you looking for?" he asked her.

Absently, he reached toward his pocket for his glasses, but he came up empty. He tried to remember if he'd been wearing them when he'd driven to the base that morning, but the entire experience seemed somehow—very far away and difficult to recall.

"Salt," she said.

"Salt."

"Yes, salt. It enhances flavor."

"True," he said, "but I think perhaps you should reconsider—"

"Oh hush, gorgeous. We can't list things I ought to reconsider; we'll be here all day."

He wasn't entirely certain how to respond to that, so he just watched her combine the tea and Jack Daniels mixture with ice, mint, and salt before she finally handed him a glass and boosted herself up on the counter next to him.

"Cheers," she said, touching her glass to his.

He tasted the lukewarm mixture.

It was uniformly awful.

"That's the stuff," she said with evident satisfaction, sipping her own drink.

He was fairly certain she was not from Earth.

"What do you think?" she asked him, with a subtle shake of her glass.

"Not bad," he lied.

"Can you believe they're *still* talking out there?" she asked. "They must find you terribly interesting."

He sighed and shut his eyes.

"So," she said. "Math. What is it good for, exactly? I mean, other than knowing how many cubits you would like your monument to measure?"

He looked over at her.

"What? Any day now the stargate program will go public and I am going to be a hero to humanity. I'm already planning my statue. I can't decide. Hair pulled back or down? Down is more romantic, but pulled back is more practical and sends the right sort of message about competency. Personally, I'm leaning toward down."

"Down is nice," he said.

"I'm glad you agree," she murmured, with a smile that seemed, to him, more than a little pained.

"Math is the final abstraction," he said. "The last, thin barrier between you and universal truth."

"Well," she said, and this time, there was no mistaking the wistfulness beneath her smile, "that sounds pretty good. Where do I sign up?"

He looked up at the smooth planes of the walls and the ceilings. "There are any number of available introductory texts."

"Are there any *magazines*?"

"Mmm, probably not the kind you're thinking of. They're quite specialized."

"Ah yes. 'Journals'. These are commonly 'fun reading' for Colonel Carter and Daniel. Personally, I enjoy high quality romance novels."

He took another sip of his atrocious cocktail. "I can't say I have much experience with those," he said.

"Daniel is constantly despairing over my terrible taste in Tau'ri fiction, but I cannot tell you how many Epic of Gilgamesh-style wall carvings I have read over the course of my life. Honestly, I get a bit tired of all the flooding and the divine wrath, you know?"

"I can extrapolate, I suppose."

The door to the kitchen opened a few inches.

"Vala," Jackson whispered.

"Yes," she said, giving the word a circumflected pitch.

The wave of gratitude generated by her profound capacity to redefine the borders of what constituted acceptable behavior with a single inflected word hit him like a slap.

Jackson opened the door a bit wider and peered around the edge.

"What on Earth are you doing creeping about like that?" Vala asked.

"Oh," Jackson said, sliding into kitchen, clearly surprised to see him not on the floor.
"Hey. Hey guys."

"Hey yourself. Are you done having secret conferences? If so, I will be happy to make you a 'Mal Doran'." Vala shook her glass in Jackson's general direction in what was likely intended to be a tempting manner.

"Um, no thanks. I'm good," Jackson said. "Can I talk to Nick for a minute?"

Rush shut his eyes in an exaggerated blink and listened to the quiet slide and tap of Vala's feet hitting the linoleum as she eased off the counter top. When he opened his eyes again, it was to a wave of black hair vanishing around the edge of the door.

Jackson boosted himself onto the counter in Vala's place.

"You don't have to drink that," Jackson murmured. "You can just—pour it down the sink. I'll never tell."

"I quite like it," Rush said, for no reason he could enumerate to himself.

He forced himself to drink another swallow.

"Oh. Well. Glad to hear it. She invented it—well, maybe six weeks back. It was a—bit of a tough time. For her. And we all—well. You get the idea. Why am I even telling you this?"

"I have no idea," Rush said dryly. "I'm entirely uninterested."

"Uh huh," Jackson said.

They were silent for a moment.

"So," Jackson said, looking fixedly at the stove across the room, "what happened?"

"Nothing," he replied. "I had a stressful evening."

Silence.

Silence.

Silence.

Jackson was going to wait him out.

Jackson was fucking merciless about this kind of thing.

Rush had no intention of being any less merciless.

Silence.

Silence.

Silence.

"Nick," Jackson said. "I'm just—going to say a few things, okay? Number one, no matter what you say—I'm not going to—" Jackson trailed off, seeming to lose his forward momentum.

"For a linguist you're unusually inarticulate."

"For a mathematician you're annoyingly sesquipedalian."

Rush smiled faintly.

"Come on. Just tell me what happened. I'm not going to tell the SGU psych department. Probably."

"I was—I *am* hearing a continuous tone."

"Because of the gunshot," Jackson said, his eyes flicking toward the open window.

"Yes," Rush whispered.

"Your wife," Jackson murmured, "was a violinist."

God, but he *hated* Jackson. People opened to Jackson. People caved like improperly set arches. There was nothing scientific about it; it was all intuitive bullshit and a steady gaze. Fucking fucking fucking Jackson.

"Yes."

"Colonel Telford told me that you're something of a musician yourself."

"No."

"No? He told me you play piano. Very well. Extremely well, actually."

"Not anymore."

"Ah."

They were silent.

"So you were hearing a continuous tone," Jackson prompted, "and then what happened?"

"I found it to be difficult to tolerate."

"Yup. I'm getting that. But you hyperventilated the point of unconsciousness *why*, exactly?"

Rush said nothing, feeling the enormity of what remained unsaid pressing down upon his mind. The immediacy of the concerto was difficult to get away from but he grasped for another way to express what had happened.

"I've been thinking about unlocking the ninth chevron address," Rush began, "Quite—intensively."

"I know," Jackson murmured.

"Did I tell you I got number four?"

"I heard," Jackson said. "Sam said that Dr. Perry said that Dr. Volker said that Dr. Park said that you'd said that you'd gotten it."

"Yes, it was a stream cypher."

"Mmm, yeah, I have no idea what that means, but good."

"There are six left," Rush murmured, trying to cling to his exhaustion, trying to twist it into a shield that could not be burned away by the tone.

That continuous, merciless tone.

"Wait, six? Why not five?"

"I think there are ten," Rush murmured. "Not nine."

"But there are nine chevrons."

"I think there are ten cyphers."

"Okay," Jackson said. "Keep going. Sorry."

"One is certainly, certainly quantum in nature. One is probably a cryptographic hash function," he paused, counting off on his fingers, "one an Ancient variant on the principle of elliptic curve cryptography, and one a mathematical puzzle—I don't know—it looks familiar to me, maybe some kind of computational representation of phase space."

"So that would bring us to eight."

"Yes," Rush whispered. "To eight. And I was—I am—hearing a continuous tone."

"Mmm hmm."

"And it occurred to me, or, rather, I *remembered* something that had recently occurred to me," he paused, taking a sip of his awful drink. "That I had an idea of what the ninth one—of what it might be. What it must be. What it *is*."

"What is it?" Jackson whispered.

"It's tonal," Rush said, his eyes closing. "It's tonal in nature."

"How do you know?"

"Their control crystals," Rush murmured. "They resonate at unique frequencies."

"Musical," Jackson whispered.

"Yes. One of them—one of the cyphers is probably—almost certainly—tonal. Based on crystal resonance frequencies."

They were quiet for a moment.

"Does that upset you?" Jackson asked.

"Why would it?" Rush whispered, his eyes closed, trying to hear the sound of tires over pavement, the sound of insects in the night, the sound of Jackson breathing slow and quiet, the sound of Vala through the closed door, speaking with Colonel Young.

"I can think of a few reasons," Jackson said quietly.

"Can you."

For a moment, neither of them said anything.

"Nick," Jackson said. "I know that—that Colonel Telford has been pushing you to solve this. Pushing you very hard."

Rush shook his head. "Not true," he said.

"Yes," Jackson said darkly. "True. But this can wait. If you need some personal time, or if you just—"

"And what the fuck," Rush snarled, "would I do with *personal time*?"

"I don't know," Jackson whispered, looking pained, "but you could—you could go to Atlantis. Think of it as—a cryptographic sabbatical."

"Their gates," Rush said, "do not contain the cyphers."

"I know," Jackson said. "That's kind of the point."

Rush said nothing.

"Colonel Young thinks that you had a panic attack in his kitchen."

"What do you think."

"I think you are one of the most intelligent individuals I have ever encountered. I think that your ability to compensate for disordered thinking is probably astronomically high. And so when you spend half an hour on the floor not responding to anything, I think

that it's probably something—more serious, or, possibly, different in nature than a panic attack triggered by a gun fired right next to your ear."

"So what are you going to do about it?" Rush snapped.

"Nothing," Jackson murmured. "Except to suggest that maybe you stay with me, instead of Colonel Young."

"No thanks."

"Somehow," Jackson said with a rueful smile, "I knew you were going to say that. You realize I'm trying to *help* you, right?"

Rush nodded and drank his terrible drink. "Thank you for your concern," Rush murmured. "But I'm fine."

"That is such bullshit."

"Did you just say 'bullshit'?" Rush asked.

"Yes. Yes I did. I'm trying to communicate with you in your native language."

"Embittered profanity doesn't suit you."

"I can inventively use profanity in more languages that you can."

"That's true. Probably by an order of magnitude," Rush looked over at Jackson.

"Nevertheless, I'd recommend you stick to your strengths."

"Nick—"

He shook his head.

"You don't have to solve it," Jackson said.

"Don't say that," Rush said, squeezing his eyes shut.

"You don't."

His eyes snapped open and his gaze bored into Jackson. "How can *you* say that to *me*?"

"With a sense of both futility and irony," Jackson said, looking away. "But someone needs to say it."

"Fine. Consider it said."

"I mean it though."

The worst part of it was that he certainly *did*. Jackson, who had lost his wife, who had lost his sanity, his life, who had died, who had come back from it all, every time, apparently un-fucking-touched. It was ridiculous.

"Do you."

"Yes. *God* yes. Stop listening to Telford."

Jackson was the kind of person that the universe tried unceasingly to tear down, to grind away, to destroy utterly on every scale and he knew that because *she* had been that way, trying to fix things and preserve what was worth fixing and preserving and meeting with failure everywhere except in a few places, but maybe nearly everyone's life was like that. Jackson just played through a greater dynamic range.

He was, it turned out, still hearing a continuous tone.

"I *like* Colonel Telford," he said pointedly.

Jackson looked away. "Yeah. I know, but I think—I think he's very focused on something that is very dangerous to you."

Rush looked over at him sharply, studying the line of his shoulders, the angle of his head. "You clearly know something. Something that I don't."

"Yes," Jackson said.

"What?" Rush snapped.

"I'm trying to get you enough security clearance so that I can tell you."

"How long is that going to take?"

"I don't know," Jackson murmured. "General Landry is a lot more—by the book than Jack ever was."

Rush sighed. "So what am I supposed to do with this—metadata you've just given me?"

Jackson smiled faintly. "Nothing. Just—take it easy, work on the quantum cypher if you want to, but seriously, definitely sleep. I don't think Colonel Young can really handle watching you work to the point that you nearly have a psychotic episode. He hasn't known you that long." Jackson paused, looking at the semi-organized kitchen.

"Maybe you can help him unpack his apartment."

Yes. Because he was so skilled in that area.

"Who am I?" Rush snapped. "You?"

"He was badly injured," Jackson said.

"Yes I can tell," Rush said, not bothering to hide his irritation. "What am I supposed to do about it?"

"One day," Jackson said, sliding down from the counter. "I'm going to catch you off guard and we are going to have a nice, normal conversation."

"Is that a threat?" Rush asked wryly, taking a sip of his terrible drink before sliding down to the floor himself.

"More like a goal," Jackson replied.

"Did Colonel Young ask you bring me a computer, by any chance?"

"He did," Jackson said. "I called Sam and read off the technical specs and she said it would be fine. It's Vala's. She just got it a few weeks ago, so hopefully it's not yet full of anything inappropriate. She's also not emotionally attached to it. Yet."

"Fantastic." Rush took another sip of his drink and followed Jackson back out of the kitchen.

They emerged to see Vala in the middle of setting up a floor lamp, while Colonel Young watched her from the couch with a confused, exhausted expression.

"And so then I said that if that was indeed the case, then really / should be the one who ended up with the ship, since, from a legal standpoint, I had been the injured party. It was one of my more clever heists, I think." She looked up at them. "Daniel, I was just telling Colonel Young—"

"Nope," Jackson said, holding up both hands. "If this is a description of some way that you unlawfully acquired something that didn't belong to you—"

"No, the point was—"

"Shhh. No. I said no."

"Don't you 'shhh' me. That is *inappropriate*."

"I—"

"No," Vala said primly. "I demand an apology."

"You want me to apologize to you for not wanting to hear about some example of your low ethical standards?" Jackson snapped.

There was an uncomfortable silence.

Vala looked back down at the lamp she was building. "That's me," she said, "lowering ethical standards wherever I go."

Rush hooked a hand over the back of his neck and pressed his fingers into the tense muscles there and narrowed his eyes in Jackson's direction.

Jackson said nothing but his completely frozen stance indicated that he was likely quite horrified at Vala's response.

Young rubbed his jaw.

In the silence, Rush realized he was still hearing a continuous tone.

After a few seconds, Vala finished screwing in the final piece of the lamp and looked up at them, her expression clear and untroubled. "You look much better, gorgeous," she said. "I see you liked my cocktail."

He looked down at his mostly empty glass.

"It's inventive," Rush replied.

"Inventive," Vala repeated. "I like that." She set the lampshade over the frame. "Normally, it has more alcohol in it."

"Are you, um, ready to go?" Jackson asked hesitantly.

Vala turned and plugged the lamp into the wall. She clicked it on and dragged it to the foot of the couch, the light gleaming intensely off her hair.

"Yes," she said. "I am. Enjoy my computer, gorgeous."

"Thank you," Rush said. "And, it's Nicholas, actually."

"I know. I prefer gorgeous."

He rolled his eyes and took a sip of his drink. It was starting to grow on him. Slightly.

It didn't take long for Daniel and Vala to gather up keys and imprudently large shoulder bags and be on their way.

When the door shut, he looked over to find Young watching him.

"Hey," Young said. "You doing okay?"

"Yes," he said. "I'm fine."

"It doesn't really carry much weight when you have a history of saying that and then hitting the deck in a dead faint less than three minutes later."

"I see your point."

"You know, I've worked with lots of scientists before," Young said.

"Have you? That's nice."

"There's this whole intellectual machismo about being able to drive yourselves to the point of physical collapse to solve some problem."

Rush gave him a faint smile and walked forward to sit on a box.

"Which is stupid," Young said, "by the way."

"Yes," Rush said. "Right then. Your flawless reasoning and your rhetorical mastery have convinced me. I'm turning over a new leaf."

"Look, I can tell you're being sarcastic, but it's past midnight, hotshot, and you just had some kind of a breakdown in my kitchen."

"While both of these things are true," Rush said, "neither prevents me from working."

"What about this continuous tone thing?"

"It's still there," Rush said, "thanks for inquiring."

Young sighed. "Fine. You want to be difficult, fine. Be difficult. It doesn't bother me."

"Clearly untrue," Rush pointed out.

"I will be right back," Young said, getting to his feet. "Do not leave, pass out, or do any other thing that you shouldn't be doing. Just sit on that box for five minutes."

Young shifted gingerly on the couch.

Rush stood, stepped forward, and held out both hands.

Young looked at him skeptically for a moment, and then let Rush pull him slowly to his feet. "You are not a good listener," the other man said.

"Not in the classical sense," Rush replied, stepping back. "But I'm abnormally attentive. I believe you were planning on taking a shower before I—interfered?"

"True."

"Then do so. I'm perfectly fine." Rush took another sip of his drink and scanned the room for Vala's computer. He spotted it on a coffee table that had been pushed to one side.

"I'll think about it," Young said, limping in the direction of his bedroom. "It depends how you're doing when I'm done brushing my teeth."

Rush tried not to be insulted by that comment, but it was not easy.

He picked up the computer, plugged it in and sat on his box.

He opened the laptop.

He flexed his fingers.

The room was quiet.

He was hearing a continuous tone.

Chapter Seven

Young leaned against the wall, brushing his teeth, trying to work out whether there was a polite and ideally sensitive way to ask a person if they had a mental illness, possibly. Maybe something along the lines of: 'excuse me, but do you have any psychological problems I should be aware of, since you're currently staying in my apartment? I only ask so there aren't any misunderstandings, not because I'm *uncomfortable* with the idea; I'm just trying to avoid—er, well, look, long story, but apparently five or seven years back or so people used to have the problem of parasites in the brain that could cause all kinds of behavioral abnormalities? It's still a concern, actually—shit, you don't have the security clearance for this conversation, but the point was supposed to be that we take people's baselines into account and it might help me to know what's going on with you in case, in the future, there's some kind of question about alien influence? Also it might just result in a better time for both of us, because my apartment isn't very spacious and it's going to be a long weekend,' type of thing, but to be honest, he just—really couldn't picture that one going down very well. Not on the delivery side and not on the graceful response side.

It also wasn't very sensitive.

Sensitivity really wasn't his strong suit.

That was more Jackson's domain.

Young spit mint-flavored toothpaste into the sink, wincing slightly at the pull and twinge of protesting muscles in his lower back. He tried to focus on what the hell he was going to do about *Rush*, and not on the ever-present dull ache and slow burn that seemed to consume the left side of his body. He *also* did his best to avoid dwelling on the enticing idea of a long, hot shower, a beer, and slightly more than his recommended daily allowance of ibuprofen. It was tempting.

But it wasn't happening.

He had a bad feeling about his neighbor. The guy was trouble any way you sliced it—on a tactical level, a mental level, a personal level, a logistical level—there was something about him that set Young's nerves on edge. He'd seen plenty of people panic in the field under various kinds of stress and sure, there had been some commonalities between what had happened to Rush in his kitchen and the kind of the-world-is-not-the-world panic he'd seen offworld from greener members of gate teams

—but it hadn't been the *same*. The guy held up fine during an abduction attempt but then fell apart later because his ears were ringing? That just didn't sit right with him.

He'd tried to get some information out of Jackson, but it turned out that the archeologist was pretty damn savvy, in that he had managed to do a lot of *talking* without really giving much away in terms of useful intel. All Young had been able to pick up was that Rush had been working relentlessly on cracking some math problem—actually, make that a series of math problems—that had been *built into* the stargate as part of the hardware required for dialing a nine-chevron address. The guy was maybe forty percent of the way there.

Apparently, the Lucian Alliance was very interested in the nine-chevron address.

Apparently, that was why Rush was number one on their list.

He'd gotten the feeling that Jackson wasn't telling him everything. When Young had asked Jackson whether or not he thought Rush was okay to keep working, the man had hedged his answer like an experienced exterior landscaper. It made Young think that the party line answer to that question had better be a 'yes,' but Jackson's personal answer might trend more toward a 'no.'

He opened his medicine cabinet and located his prescription strength ibuprofen. He swallowed it quickly and then limped out of the bathroom and back into the living room.

He paused, bracing himself against a corner.

Every window in the room was open.

He could hear his air conditioner struggling as a warm breeze whispered through the slats in the blinds.

Rush was sitting on a box, his shoulders rigid, half-lit up by the light of a single lamp. Vala's computer was open on his lap, but he was not typing. He looked like he was listening to something.

This was exactly the kind of thing that gave Young that nebulous bad feeling.

A gust of wind lifted the blinds clear of the windowsill, fluttering the newspaper and styrofoam that had come from various boxes, flaring Rush's hair. The mathematician's eyes weren't tracking anything.

Absently, Young crossed his arms, wondering what the hell was going on in Rush's head. It didn't look like he was turning over a run-of-the-mill math problem or grinding away at five-digit multiplication. It looked, instead, like something unnerving.

"Hey," Young said quietly. "Hotshot."

No response.

He made an effort to focus on the faint ringing in his own ears, trying to get an idea of what it would be like if it were all-consuming. "I said hey," Young repeated, slightly louder.

Rush looked over at him, managing to convey disdain with no more than a fractional lift of his eyebrows.

"What are you doing?" Young asked, slow and casual, raising his own eyebrows.

"Thinking," Rush replied, evidently taking a page from Young's Civility Book and filing the edge off his usual snap. "A concept that is, evidently, so alien to you that you fail to recognize it when you see it."

"You didn't look like you were thinking, hotshot," Young said, not accepting Rush's tacit invitation to attend an insult-free-for-all. Not now, with the open windows, the ache in his back, and the tissue paper civility that stretched, barely, to cover everything that had happened.

Rush looked down at his computer. "How long do you think it will take them to clear my apartment?" he asked, his fingers hovering over his keyboard.

Young pushed away from the wall and limped over towards the couch. "At least a day," he said. "And seeing as it's the weekend—"

"That's relevant?"

"For a non-emergent situation, yeah, the fact that it's the weekend will slow things down," Young said, sitting down on the couch with as much care and with as controlled an expression as he could manage.

"I can't stay here for *days*."

"Rush. Don't be a pain in the ass about this. It's not that bad. I'm about a thousand times less conversational work than Jackson." Slowly, trying not to exacerbate his overworked back, he pulled his feet off the floor and stretched out on the couch.

"What are you doing?" Rush asked.

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

"Please go somewhere else."

"This is my apartment."

"I need to work."

"So work. I'm not stopping you."

Rush sighed. "If you're going to sleep here then do you mind if I—"

"I'm not going to sleep here," Young said. "I'm keeping you company."

"No."

"Yup."

Rush ran his fingers over the edge of Vala's laptop, as if he were contemplating slamming it shut.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

"Let me put it to you this way," Young said carefully. "I think you put the eccentric in Genius Eccentric at baseline and right now you're a little bit stressed after a night that even I'd rate as maybe a seven out of ten when it comes to things that are Exciting In A Bad Way. You're handling it pretty well, and everyone thinks that you're fine to be here, doing whatever math it is that you do, in my apartment. But I'm not—*one hundred percent* sure about that."

"You understand ratios as fractions of one hundred," Rush said coolly. "What a pleasant surprise for me."

"So you have a choice," Young said, ignoring the dig. "You can stay here and do your math, or you can go hang out with Dr. Lam until you're evaluated and cleared by the psych people. Because normally that would be what would happen. The SGC has a whole counseling subsection to facilitate civilians who have unfortunate run-ins with the more violent side of human/xenobiological relations. And you'd be going down that road if you were a little lower down on the LA's top ten list."

Young could see the sudden shift, the abrupt tensing of Rush's entire frame, the readjustment of his hands to the top corners of the laptop screen, and the incremental press downward. But the guy contained his impulse to leave with what was obviously a tremendous effort.

Young reflected that he probably should have kept his damn mouth shut and just let the insult war ride.

"Come on," he said, backtracking. "It's not that bad. I could be Jackson. *Jackson* is clearly the worst case scenario here. Getting in your head, buying you a dog, probably. Decorating your apartment for you. Who the hell knows. The guy is an unstoppable force of poorly adjusted kindness. The psych department is a middle of the road thing. I'm definitely your best option."

"True," Rush replied, not relaxing even a fraction.

Young could see his breathing becoming shallow. God damn it. He didn't have long to redirect Rush into something *less upsetting*. This was his own fault anyway. Mostly. "So," he said, giving the word all the drag he could scrape together. "You're decoding chevrons, or something, Jackson said?"

"Correct."

"What I don't get," Young said, trying to build a levy out of casualness, "is why there's a code at all. No other addresses need to be 'unlocked'."

Rush shot him a irked glance, said nothing, looked down at his computer, and started typing.

Young breathed out in one long, slow exhale, and wondered if he'd averted some kind of crisis, delayed it, or whether he'd been reading the guy all wrong in the first place. He was hard to get a handle on. That was for damn sure.

"I mean," Young continued, trying to gauge his neighbor's second-to-second mental state and likely continuing to do a piss-poor job of it, "the stargate specifies points in space—right? Kind of like GPS, but with gates instead of satellites?"

"Your language is so vague, that I really have no idea whether you have any kind of conceptual understanding as for how the gate network functions or not," Rush said, not looking up from his computer.

So this was actually going pretty well.

"It's like the thing—with the lines," Young said, gesturing loosely with one hand, "defined by communicating DHDs that intersect at a destination point in space, and then you specify a point of origin and then there's some calculation that takes place regarding space-time warping between origin and destination."

"The thing with the lines. Yes. Fantastic work. You say you're a colonel? It's a good thing you specified, otherwise I might have mistaken you for an astrophysicist." Rush actually seemed *amused*. Young counted this a success.

"Well, I keep a low profile," Young said. "I'm not really into ruining people's self-esteem as," he waved a hand in Rush's direction, "you know. A personal hobby."

Rush smiled faintly.

"Come on," Young said, "give me some details. Is this address you're unlocking—does it specify a point in space?"

Rush looked up at him sharply, abruptly on edge again, his gaze so intense that it was nearly impossible to meet. "What else would it represent?" he snapped.

"Um—" Young said, taken aback by the fervidity of his response. "I have no idea."

Rush looked back down at his computer. "No one does," he said.

"What do *you* think?"

"I don't really care one way or another," Rush said, his voice affectedly casual. "I try not to think about it too intensively."

Bullshit, Young decided. He gave Rush a skeptical look. "Seriously?"

"Why should I care?" Rush murmured. "Wherever it is, *I'm* not going."

Probably not, no, Young internally agreed. "So you think it's a place."

"If it's not a place, then no one is going."

"Um, yeah, true enough, I guess. Unless it was a *time*."

Rush rolled his eyes. "You're going to incorporeally travel to a pure temporal dimension? Have a good time."

Young watched Rush's eyes scan back and forth rapidly between two items on the screen in front of him. "Um, your point, I guess, is that even if it were a different *time*, there would still need to be a—*place* component."

"Spacetime," Rush said. "Is probably not able to be separately parsed people such as ourselves."

"Okay, well, if it *is* a place then *someone* is going to go," Young said. "Don't you—care what they discover?"

"Of course I do," Rush said absently, clearly not paying very much attention to him.

"You must care," Young said. "You must care a *lot* actually. Otherwise, why would you be doing this?"

"Why do people fucking climb Mount Everest?"

"Because they have no common sense?"

Rush shot him another faintly amused look; one that Young was fairly certain had started out as a glare.

"You know why."

"So you're killing yourself unlock this cypher set just because you're some hot shit mathematical mountaineer and it's there?"

"That's correct," Rush murmured.

"That seems—like a bad plan."

"Keep talking to me. I'm genuinely enjoying this."

"People lose their limbs when they climb Mount Everest."

"Logical fallacy," Rush replied absently.

"God damn but you're a pain in the ass. How is anything I just said a logical fallacy?"

"You constructed a false analogy," Rush said. "Would you mind terribly just shutting up?"

"A false analogy? Are you kidding me? *You* were the one who originally compared some math problem to Mount Everest."

"I was speaking metaphorically, not actually making an argument about the advisability of certain courses of action, which is what *you* extended my metaphor to become. Inappropriately, I might add."

"You know what? I give up. Whatever your point is, I'll let you have it, but just paraphrase it for me so that I even know what it was."

"Stay out of my affairs."

"You're the one who keeps passing out and needing to stay in my apartment."

"I thought you were going to cede my point."

"Well I *was*, but then it was stupid."

Rush said nothing, but there was no mistaking it this time; the man was distinctly amused.

Young tried to suppress a yawn. Lying down on his couch had been a bad idea. "So what are you doing right now?" he asked, trying to sound more energetic than he felt.

"Writing a program," Rush murmured.

"For what?"

"A zero knowledge protocol."

"I have no idea what that is."

"The fact that it means *nothing* to you leaves me totally unsurprised."

"Was that a pun?"

"No. I find puns to be a sine of intellectual immaturity."

Young narrowed his eyes. "Right."

The blinds tapped irregularly against the windowsill as another warm breeze gusted through the room. He listened to the burst and fade of Rush's fingers against the keys of Vala's computer. He needed to stay awake.

"Just out of curiosity, do you have something against sleeping?" He asked, somewhat sluggishly.

"Very much so."

"Why?"

"Why not?"

Young sighed. "What's a zero knowledge protocol?"

"I'm sure you would find it uninteresting."

"Try me."

Young shifted his left hip on purpose, the sudden shock of pain serving to keep him awake. He grimaced, shutting his eyes, clenching his jaw until the worst of it passed.

When he opened his eyes again, Rush was watching him. "A zero knowledge protocol," the man said, his tone unusually smooth, "is a method by which one system can test the ability of a second system to break a code without knowing the mechanism by which the second system has broken the code."

"Hmm," Young said. "That sounds *very* interesting, actually."

Rush raised his eyebrows in such a manner that suggested he was both skeptical of Young's professed interest and at least somewhat wise to the underlying distraction game. "Consider the following scenario. You and I are standing at the entrance to a cave that takes the shape of a loop. There is a rock wall in front of us, and passage to our left and to our right. If we were to take the right-hand passage, which we'll call route A, we would walk the perimeter of a circle until we emerged again at our starting point."

"Route A? Are you serious? This seems awfully complicated for after midnight on a Friday."

"This is not even remotely complicated."

"All right. Fine. I got you. Kind of like walking around the rim of a bicycle tire, if the inside of the tire was a cave."

"Yes yes. The right hand passage is Route A, and the left hand passage is Route B. If you start down Route A and you don't turn around, you return to the entrance via Route B, and vice versa. If, however you were to enter the loop via Route A and turn around, retracing your steps, you would then return to the entrance via Route A."

"I get it," Young said, folding his arms over his chest and looking at Rush through half-lidded eyes.

"Good, because that was four times as much exposition as I usually give. Consider yourself lucky."

Young raised his eyebrows lazily. "Oh I *do*."

"Now," Rush said, leaning forward marginally, "we introduce a locked door halfway through the passage. So if you enter by Route A, you cannot leave by Route B unless you know how to unlock the door. If you can't unlock the door, you must turn around and return by Route A."

"Why is there a locked door?"

"Because it's a fucking cryptography problem, Young. For fuck's sake."

"Okay okay, fair enough," Young said raising both hands.

"So let us assume," Rush said, recovering his equilibrium, "that I claim to have an elegantly constructed algorithm that will open the locked door."

"Oh it's *elegantly* constructed, is it? Nice work," Young said, stifling another yawn.

"Let us *also* assume that you are possessed of some critical faculties. You would like to pay me for use of my algorithm, but you are disinclined to do so unless you know that it works. I however, am certainly not going to tell you how it works. So you need a method of verification to ensure that I'm not cheating you."

"I would not trust you *at all*, by the way," Young said.

"How prudent of you," Rush replied dryly.

"So I just tell you to make the loop, right?" Young asked. "If you can open the door, you go in Route A and come out Route B, and then I pay you."

"No," Rush said.

"Well why the hell not?" Young asked.

"You can't see what route I pick when I enter."

"Why not?"

"Because you've got your back to the entrance."

"God damn it. Why can't I just tell you what path to take?"

"Suffice it to say that in an actual system, you're the authenticating party. You have no control over the manner in which I reach the 'door'. In a real system, from your point of view—I'm simply there."

Young shut his eyes. "Okay. Whatever, hotshot. So you're at the door. Then what?"

"Then you turn around and you call out the name of whichever route you would prefer me to appear by. Since I'm choosing my entry path into the cave at random, roughly fifty percent of the time I will be required to open the door to appear by the route that you specify. If I consistently appear then you know I can open the door, but you don't know how I did it.

"So I give you some cash for your fancy algorithm," Young murmured.

"Yes. That would be ideal."

"Huh," Young said, listening to the quiet tap of the venetian blinds against the windowsill. "So—" he began, lazily trying to think of something to keep himself awake.

"The advantage, of course, to applying a zero knowledge protocol to a cypher that's running on a crystal quantum computer, which I imagine at least *one* of the cyphers makes use of," Rush said, saving Young the trouble of doing any further conversational work, "is that one gets around the problem of observing the system state, and thereby destroying the key it contains. Rather than obtaining an actual key, such a protocol would invite the gate itself to query the very algorithm that is trying to unlock it."

Any second now he was going to shift his weight and really wake himself up again.

He was just so damn tired.

"It's not going to work," Young murmured.

"Really," Rush said dryly. "Do you have a degree in quantum mechanics that you've thus far failed to disclose?"

"No," Young said, "I know what you're doing. You're trying to get me to *fall asleep* by talking about cyphers and it's not going to work."

"Personally, I find nothing more conducive to unrelenting insomnia than a discussion of cyphers. And why would I want you to fall asleep? You're so fucking *helpful*."

"What time is it?" Young asked.

"Half past one in the morning," Rush said quietly.

He needed to stay awake. *Awake*. "So how do you make your zero knowledge thing?" He was fairly certain the words were mostly unintelligible.

"Writing the source code is probably going to take a few days," Rush said in an absent undertone. "Part of the invitation to interrogate can come from the failsafe Colonel Carter constructed that couples the closure of the iris to the detected stability of the nascent event horizon, but the rest of it—the rest of it will have to be fashioned from the ground up, as it were."

The air felt raw and warm over his skin. He realized his eyes had been closed for several minutes.

"If this doesn't work," Rush continued, "I may have to reconsider my assumptions regarding the crystalline matrix in the DHD."

His bones felt as if they were made of lead.

"The thing is," Rush said into the quiet of the room, "I may not have to get the quantum key. I think any attempt to do so might reset the key itself. I think it may be—*given* to me once I demonstrate that I understand I *can't get it*."

Rush sounded fine.

Nothing was going to happen if he took a twenty-minute power nap.

"I think it *wants* me to have it," Rush whispered.

He let sleep drag him down.

Young awoke to the sound of a blender.

Sunlight was streaming into the room through the half-open slats in the venetian blinds, lighting up the dust in the air. By the look of the light, he had the feeling it was going to be another scorcher of a day, but he couldn't tell for certain because, at some point during the night, Rush had clearly liberated his air conditioner from the burden of cooling an apartment with open windows by shutting said windows.

That was a good sign, probably.

He could smell coffee.

That was an even better sign.

He carefully eased into a sitting position, trying to avoid a sharp twinge of pain from either his back or his leg, but inevitably getting both for his efforts. He was going to have to pay for last night's excitement, that much was clear. He reached around to

carefully touch his lower back, finding a mess of confused, contracted muscle. Now was *not* the time to think of metal screwed into bone. He forced himself to stand slowly, easing his weight onto his injured side. It was worse in the morning. It always was.

It would get better.

He limped slowly toward the kitchen, pausing briefly to eye Vala's computer, now sitting on his table. The laptop was open and running some kind of program, apparently all by itself. *Creepy*, Young decided. He made his way to the kitchen and leaned against the frame of the open door, raising his eyebrows.

The entire space had been reorganized and completely unpacked.

Rush was standing in the middle of what looked to be a somewhat elaborate work in process.

"Hey," Young said, crossing his arms.

"This?" Rush said, not looking at him, but holding up a metal can of instant coffee. "Unacceptable."

"I notice you made some anyway."

"I wasn't happy about it."

"I'll just bet you weren't."

Young crossed his arms and gave the other man a critical look. He very much had the appearance of someone who was well rested and in full command of their critical faculties, though Young doubted that either was the case. He watched Rush make him coffee with precise, economical movements. "I notice you reorganized my kitchen," Young said.

"I don't think the prefix 're' applies, but you're welcome in any case."

Young shook his head slightly. "Did you sleep at all?"

"I despise being asked that question."

"Yeah, probably because the answer gives away how weird you are."

"Disparaging the person making your breakfast is ill-advised," Rush snapped, handing him a cup of instant coffee.

"I'm not—*disparaging* you. I'm just commenting. What are you making?" Young asked.

"Crepes," Rush replied shortly.

"Nice," Young said.

For a brief moment, Young was left leaning in the doorway with the awkward feeling he had, on occasion, experienced mornings after the occasional, drunken one-night stand. Except, this time, there had been neither drinking nor sex. Just math. Math that he hadn't even *participated* in. Only watched. Really, the only commonality was that someone he didn't know very well was currently making him an elaborate breakfast. Probably this was going to end up being a better breakfast than any post-sex breakfast he'd ever been presented with. He could live with this. It wasn't awkward. It was strange.

"Fort Douglas," Rush said, with the air of someone just realizing something.

It took Young a short span of time to puzzle that one out.

"First of all," Young said, sipping his coffee, "strangely enough, Fort Douglas is a *fort*, not a town. Second of all, it's in Utah, not Wyoming."

"Utah? Fuck," Rush said, entirely disgusted. He flicked a drop of water into the cast iron skillet with a satisfying hiss.

"I'm surprised you managed to come up with that one."

"I'm well-read to the point that defies believability."

"But yet—" Young said, drawing out the word, "not very good at geography. You're living in Colorado, you realize. A state that shares a border with Wyoming. You really should be able to name more than one city in The Equality State."

"I'm not, actually."

"You're not what?"

"Living in Colorado."

"You definitely are."

"I'm *staying* here. Temporarily. I do not *live* here."

"Well, where *do* you live?"

"Nowhere."

That was more than a little bit sad.

Young said nothing for a moment as he watched Rush pour a thin batter from the blender and into the skillet, before gingerly easing himself up onto the free space on the counter next to the sink. The other man gave him a brief lift of the eyebrows but said nothing.

"Colorado is nice," Young said through clenched teeth, trying to ignore the intensification of the ache in his hip and back. "Maybe you should—" he broke off to grimace and then reset his jaw, "switch your affiliation from 'nowhere' to Colorado Springs."

"Oh certainly. Colorado is *very* nice if you enjoy suburban sprawl and you prefer not to be confronted by evidence of human cultural achievement."

"Um, I'm not entirely sure what you mean by that last part there, hotshot, but I'm going to just let it slide, seeing as you're making me crepes."

"You have some sort of affection for Colorado Springs? Rush asked, expertly flipping the crepe before abandoning the pan to open the fridge. He sorted through various jars of whatever Vala had bought until he finally settled on something that he forcefully shoved into Young's hands. "This may taste like shit. I don't know. I can't be held responsible."

Young looked down at the completely inoffensive jar of jam he was now holding. "I'm sure it's fine," he said.

Rush flipped the crepe onto a plate and handed it to him along with a fork.

"So," Young said, spooning apricot jam onto his crepe, "what is it that you have against furniture?"

"Nothing."

"You don't like tables, you don't like beds, you don't like couches. What's the story with that?"

"You're the one sitting on the counter," Rush pointed out.

"I'm not going to sit at the table with only your creepy, automated zero knowledge protocol for company," Young said. "That would be weird."

"Yes, I can imagine that would be difficult for you with this need you seem to have for constant conversation. Also, that's not my ZKP."

Young shrugged and bit into the crepe. "Oh my god," he said. "This is really god damn good."

"Obviously," Rush said dryly. "I'm sure the jam is sub par. But it can't be helped."

"Where did you learn to cook like this?"

"Via a constant application of both theory and empiricism."

"Meaning you read cookbooks and then you practiced?"

"That *is* the typical way in which skillsets are acquired," Rush said, shooting him an appreciatively disdainful look.

"I'm just surprised that you pulled yourself away from the math long enough to learn how to make this stuff. It doesn't seem like your style."

"You've known me for what," Rush snapped, "two days?"

"Yeah," Young said, "true, but I've worked with a lot of guys like you—"

He stopped himself before he said anything potentially offensive.

"Oh yes?" Rush asked, the question a deceptively mild invitation to continue.

"Smart, passionate about what you do, full of this—" he waved a hand as he took a sip of coffee, "science machismo regarding who can go longest without sleep—that kind of thing."

Rush handed him another crepe. "Science machismo."

"Not that it's *bad*," Young said. "When the goa'uld launch asteroids at the earth and Carter sends them to hyperspace just as they reach the atmosphere—I am *fully* on board with science machismo."

Rush turned to look at him. "Hyperspace?"

Young nodded.

"That's *excessively* clever. I wonder if I would have thought of that. Probably not. I don't tend to think about hyperspace."

"How high is your security clearance, by the way? Forget that goa'uld asteroid thing."

"Not high," Rush said darkly, rolling up a crepe and taking a bite, "apparently."

Young shrugged. "Don't take it too hard—it's probably because they don't want you to be able to give up much information to the Lucian Alliance if they do succeed in kidnapping you."

"Thank you. Infinitely reassuring, I'm sure," Rush said, watching the batter of the next crepe solidify in the pan.

Young winced. "Yeah. Sorry. But they're not going to kidnap you." *Hopefully*, he added silently.

"Brilliant." Rush grabbed his plate, flipped a crepe out of the pan, and shoved it back at him. "All I have to do is stay within a seven meter radius of a transport scrambling device for the rest of my life."

There wasn't really much Young could say in the face of that observation.

"How's your, um, continuous tone doing?"

Rush didn't look at him. "It's faded. For the most part."

"Can I ask you a question?"

"I'd be interested to learn what the fuck you think you've been doing for the past fifteen minutes, if not asking questions."

Young raised his eyebrows, but plowed ahead. "Why do you think it bothered you so much?"

"The continuous tone?"

"Yeah. The continuous tone."

"I have no idea," Rush said, stirring the batter with pathological focus.

"Bullshit," Young suggested conversationally.

"I detest music," Rush said, "and a continuous tone is close enough."

"You detest music?"

"Yes."

"All music?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"There is no 'why' to it. It's simply a fact."

"But, no one detests *all* music."

"I do."

"No you don't. You can't."

"I find it intolerable."

"How do you live? In the world? The world that's full of music."

"I don't wish to discuss it."

"But—"

"What did I *just* say?" Rush snarled at him.

"All right," Young said, holding up both hands. "All right."

Rush was backed against the opposite counter, the fingers of one hand curling about a metal drawer handle, his gaze fixed on a point on the floor, his breathing too fast for a guy making crepes on a Saturday morning.

What the hell had he been thinking? He supposed he *hadn't* been thinking.

"I get it," he said, feeling like he actually did *not* get it, even a little bit. "It's probably really distracting—with needing to focus on the math."

"Yes," Rush agreed breathlessly, before turning back to the crepes.

He didn't say anything further, and Young didn't push him.

Chapter Eight

It occurred to Rush that at some point in the last ten hours, likely the point at which he'd had a panic attack masquerading as a violin concerto in E Minor, Young had decided he was not mentally stable. Unfortunately, this was *also* a conclusion that Jackson seemed to have independently reached some time ago. He found this irritating. He found this irritating and at least somewhat hypocritical, given that Jackson had apparently been institutionalized in the past and frequently disclosed this as a *talking point* in conversations with Rush that seemed to be designed to demonstrate the depths of his pancultural, hands-on understanding regarding the fundamental ins and outs of the human condition, where 'human' was actually a stand-in term to indicate any species with sentience.

Yes well.

Fuck that.

Especially fuck it, because it had been a *mistake*. Jackson's so-called brush with psychosis. A mistake made by some poorly acclimated and overly self-assured individual in the SGC psych department. Jackson hadn't been unstable—not then, not *ever*. The man was a metric for sanity and such a fucking *rock* of well-adjusted sensitivity that he could sit in a god-forsaken coffee shop and tell you that he could conceptualize how you felt because it reminded him of that time that he'd destroyed a civilization, watched his wife abducted and physically and cognitively enslaved, watched her murdered in front of him, hallucinated about it for three days, nearly destroyed another civilization, saved a third civilization and then been *blamed* for destroying it as he was dying a horrible, horrifying, protracted death that took the form of a high-velocity skid along the unyielding asphalt of the electromagnetic spectrum; where flesh met ionizing radiation in an bloody, disintegrating smear.

Daniel Jackson, triple Ph.D.

Putting things into perspective.

For everyone.

Thank you, Dr. Jackson.

He tried to see the crepe that he was staring at.

What did they want from him anyway, this fucking *fraternitas sanitas* that razed civilizations to the ground with a wink and a smile and obligatorily cheeky commentary?

Young had not said anything for approximately forty-five seconds.

That was a long interval in Colonel-Young-time; he estimated it would be something like eight to twelve minutes in Nicholas-Rush-time, depending on the day.

He should say something.

He had a headache.

He wished he were not making crepes.

Neither of these things seemed like particularly good topics of conversation.

"Does it bother you," he began, watching the matrix of the batter begin to solidify, "that your organization has obliterated the indigenous cultures of people on countless worlds?"

"Um," Young said, with the air of a man who is acutely uncomfortable, "maybe that's something you can discuss with Jackson."

"Why," Rush snapped. "I want to know what *you* think about it." He realized he had two fingers rather aggressively pointed at Young. He pulled them back as he returned to contemplating his forming crepe. "I can infer what Dr. Jackson's thoughts are likely to be on this particular topic."

"I think it's a complicated question," Young said.

"Yes well." Again with the hand—a broad sweep pulled back. He was doing his best. His *best*.

"I think people have put a fair amount of thought into it," Young continued. "Not so much in the early days, when it was a bit dicey whether the Earth would avoid getting blasted back into the Bronze Age by the goa'uld, but lately people have been thinking a lot about it. The IOA has an entire division on like—I don't know. Culture Destruction. I don't think they call it that though. It's not really my area."

"Surely you jest," Rush said.

Crepe to plate, batter to pan.

He hated mornings. The light was irradiating and merciless like it must have been near to the source, the white-hot, radioactive, uncaring *source*. And what would it have been like to touch it? And he could not think of Jackson, of Daniel Jackson, throwing

away all that he was or, maybe, all that he *had been*. It must have been a kind of death, it must have been—they *all* must have been kinds of deaths. Some people had one and, apparently, some had many; variegated and splitting with the quantum foam or linear temporal unravelings and ravelings, back and forth along the same line through time. But in that moment, that fatal moment, when Jackson had reached out to touch the thing that would kill him, he would not have known that there would be anything but the high energy, high frequency waves, that would tear through him, that already had, that already were—

Electromagnetism.

It was his least favorite.

He stared at the dark metal of the cast iron skillet against the white of the perfectly maintained stove and wondered what, exactly, had possessed him to make crepes. But as there was, indeed, a crepe in front of him, he flipped it.

"You okay?" Young asked guardedly.

Rush tried to imagine what he must look like to Young. He suspected it was an approximation of an emotionally labile, barely functional, unpleasant, culinary savant of some kind. "Why wouldn't I be?" Rush asked, mildly. There was really no way for Young to answer such a question in a noninflammatory manner, but Rush was interested to see what the man would come up with.

"You stopped eating crepes about five minutes ago."

Simple, direct, to the point, and emphasizing a surrogate rather than a primary endpoint with a sharp sort of spectrographic tact like the bottom of the atomic orbital hierarchy. It was a good answer and didn't give him a rational out. That was fine, he'd take an irrational out. "I despise crepes."

"Okay," Young replied carefully.

He must look fairly unbalanced if Young was going to let that one slide. He found this discouraging.

"I mean, I guess I could see it," Young continued. "They're a little bit girly."

Rush braced his hands on the warm corners of the stove and half turned, angling his head down slightly as he fixed Young with an unblinking, steady look.

Young shifted uncomfortably. "Except for the part where they require tons of technical skill."

Rush did not move.

"Which is not to say that girls—or *women*, are not technically skilled, or rather, actually, it's not like technical skill makes something masculine. Colonel *Carter* is—" Young trailed off.

Rush continued to stare at him.

"Look, both crepes and technical skill are gender neutral," Young said. "Crepes are kind of artistic? And you seem like a guy who appreciates practicality. Maybe."

Rush raised his eyebrows.

"Crepes are artsy, technical skill is not gender affiliated, and I *appreciate breakfast*."

Rush untethered his left hand from the stove and snatched Young's plate in order to flip another crepe onto it with a hint of a smile.

"Let's just pretend the last thirty seconds never happened," Young said.

"I'm amenable to that." He poured the last of the batter into the cast iron pan and wondered how long he was going to have to stay, scrutinized, in this apartment.

"So what's the plan?"

He wasn't entirely sure what Young was referring to, but it really didn't matter, there was a final common pathway to his answer. "I have no plan."

"No kidding."

"What's *your* plan?"

"Well, that depends," Young said.

He shut his eyes and tried to pretend that the glacial speed of Young's sentences didn't irritate him.

"On what?" he asked, with as much pleasantness as he could manufacture on short notice.

"Well, I don't want to bother you while you're making your ZKP. Or whatever it is that's going on out there." Young tipped his head toward the kitchen doorway, presumably indicating Vala's laptop, which was, he assumed, still open on Young's table, automatically building a spreadsheet of the quantum state data that he'd recorded in Dr. Perry's lab.

"It's just data compilation," Rush murmured, his eyes flicking toward the open doorway.

"Hopefully it's done by now."

"Is it going to bother you if I keep unpacking?"

"No," Rush said. "It's your apartment."

"Are you planning to sleep?" Young asked. "Ever?"

"Possibly," Rush said. "If so, would that need to be incorporated into 'the plan'?"

Young sighed and then shifted his weight to gingerly slide forward off the counter. "I was just curious."

Rush started washing dishes.

"You're not from Earth," Young said. "Are you." It clearly wasn't a question.

Rush looked over at him. "Pardon?"

Young handed him the mixing bowl and Rush was too astonished to do anything but take it. "Jackson sort of hinted at it," Young said. "But don't worry. My security clearance is pretty much as high as anyone's."

"Jackson—" he broke off, shaking his head. "Jackson said what?"

"Well, he's pretty cagey actually. He didn't really *say* anything, he just *implied*. Combined with—" Young waved a hand, "everything, it just sort of makes sense."

"Everything? What 'everything'."

"Not sleeping, not knowing about air conditioning, being the top of the LA list, being pissed about the SGC destroying cultures, making our best math guys look like idiots, hating music, liking Vala's cocktail. That thing smelled terrible, by the way. No one from this planet would be able to drink that thing with a straight face."

Rush stared at Young, the water from the sink running cool and laminar over his hands.

Young smirked at him.

"Shut up," Rush said.

"I had you," Young replied.

"No you didn't."

"Oh I absolutely did."

"In no way."

"Admit it."

"I don't think so," Rush replied.

"It was really obvious, in case you were wondering."

"I very much doubt that."

Young picked up a kitchen towel and began running it over the clean dishes. In relatively short order, they were finished erasing the evidence of the needlessly elaborate breakfast that he had unadvisedly constructed while his dataset built itself. Once the kitchen was back to its baseline state, Young vanished in the direction of the bathroom, presumably to catch up on his deferred shower.

Rush sat down in front of Vala's computer. His VBA program was about ten minutes away from completion.

He drummed his fingers on the table in an irritated staccato and logged into his secure email client. In addition to the typical flurry of institutional rubbish, there was an email from Dr. Perry.

Dear Dr. Rush,

It took approximately four hours for my technicians to realign the crystal array you reconfigured and another hour to figure out what you had done to our detection equipment as, apparently, your time is too valuable to waste on delineating the rationale behind your destructive experimental setup. I'm sure you will be relieved to know that we have recalibrated the array and that there have been no lasting setbacks to our analysis of Ancient control crystals. Next time you feel the need to dismantle someone's array, don't pick mine. I also advise asking for permission from the section chief prior to any use of xenotech. All this said...I have to ask you—were you intentionally collecting quantum superposition data? If so, we should talk.

Sincerely,

Amanda Perry

Rush sighed and squinted up at the ceiling. He hit reply.

Dr. Perry—Apologies for any inconvenience. I was in a bit of a hurry. With regards to superposition data—I was intentionally collecting it. Why do you ask?

He hit send. Again he drummed his fingers on the table. He checked the progress of his VBA program and then got up, grabbed a pair of scissors and sliced open one of Young's unopened boxes labeled: "Dining Room." He raised his eyebrows at the solid wall of tablecloth that greeted him, then shrugged and laid it out stepwise over the kitchen table. He had just pulled out a serving platter of dubious aesthetic quality and even more dubious functionality when he heard the quiet chime of his email client.

Dr. Perry was evidently an early riser.

He set the platter down next to Vala's laptop and slid into his seat, opening the message.

I ask because it was hard to ignore the $2n$ output you were getting for your n input. Do you realize you essentially rebuilt a marginally functional hyperdrive control element? Is that what you were trying to do?

He hit reply.

No. I was trying to approximate a DHD and, unsurprisingly, I ended up with a poor man's version of a quantum computer.

He watched his email client, his fingers tapping a complicated pattern on the metal platter. He didn't have to wait long.

Ah. For a DHD the internal geometry is REQUISITE and our array lacks the appropriate symmetry. Look, if you have a few minutes we can chat about this live on the SGC's secure server.

There was a link in the email. He clicked it, and then impatiently entered the necessary information and passwords.

MandyPerry: Hi.

NicholasRush: Hello. Internal geometry is requisite?

MandyPerry: Yes.

NicholasRush: Are you typing anything? This seems to be taking a long time.

NicholasRush: Hello?

MandyPerry: Think about it. All DHDs are fundamentally similar in design—they have to be. They must store and permute not only their own location information but also the location information of the six other DHDs they communicate with via subspace.

They also don't have—god you're impatient.

NicholasRush: They don't have WHAT.

NicholasRush: I'm not impatient.

NicholasRush: Any time now.

MandyPerry: They don't have an unlimited buffer and they don't have the same constellation panels either. This means that one has the problem of essentially taking an identical and limited set of crystals in an identical configuration and imbuing each one with location information that shifts in real time. The only way to efficiently store and use that kind of data is by changing the quantum state of Ancient crystals in a

manner that's location based.

NicholasRush: Hmm.

MandyPerry: Now who's being slow?

NicholasRush: By "constellation panels," you mean the depressible parts on the surface of the DHD? How many are there?

MandyPerry: You don't get out much do you?

MandyPerry: 38.

NicholasRush: $(2^5)+6$

MandyPerry: Yes...how is that significant?

NicholasRush: I don't know that it is, necessarily, but there's something teleologically appealing about it, considering the intersecting three lines composed of six points used to define the destination target.

MandyPerry: Do you look for patterns in the digits of pi?

Rush rolled his eyes.

NicholasRush: I fail to see what you are insinuating.

MandyPerry: Oh I think you do. I get the significance of "plus six," but what's so special about 2^5 ? Do you think it's connected to the cyphers within the circuitry of the gate?

NicholasRush: Possibly. It makes me wonder if the central control crystal of a DHD could actually function as a 32-qubit quantum computer, if properly interrogated. That would be excellent for my purposes. There are seven crystals within the DHD, correct?

NicholasRush: Hello?

NicholasRush: You had better be typing something substantive.

MandyPerry: Correct. As for your supposition about the quantum computational capacities of the DHD central control crystal—this is not a new theory, but no one has been able to interface with it and demonstrate that it has that capacity. The main reason for this is that we don't use a functional DHD here (Earth), and if you try to turn

the control crystal on an offworld gate into your own personal quantum computer, the concern is that you may screw it up to the point that you can't gate back from wherever you are. About six months ago I demonstrated that local drive control elements of Ancient hyperdrives could, when isolated from the mechanics of the drives themselves, be forced to function as a quantum computer by using a large crystalline array to solve Shor's algorithm.

NicholasRush: Excuse me but you did WHAT.

MandyPerry: I had the feeling that might be relevant to your current interests.

NicholasRush: That's spectacular.

MandyPerry: I know. You should come by my lab. I'm going in this afternoon. Want to meet up around lunchtime?

NicholasRush: You'll have to give me a rain check I'm afraid.

MandyPerry: Shor's Algorithm with a crystal quantum computer...how can you say no?!?!?

NicholasRush: Apparently, the Lucian Alliance is trying to abduct me today.

MandyPerry: I see. That sounds like enough to ruin your weekend.

NicholasRush: Yes it is.

NicholasRush: Thank you for noticing.

MandyPerry: How does Monday look for you?

NicholasRush: More favorable than today.

MandyPerry: Where's your office?

NicholasRush: I work offsite.

NicholasRush: Hello?

MandyPerry: Sorry. Offsite? How do you run experiments?

NicholasRush: As a general rule, I inconsiderately make use of someone else's lab.

MandyPerry: Get right out of town.

NicholasRush: You said geometry was requisite, but I see no reason why *circular* geometry would be requisite.

MandyPerry: I never said circularity was required. In fact, we know it's not. Atlantis DHDs use a triangular array. Geometric regularity is required to assign location-based data. At least, that's the theory. Do you think the geometry of the array is significant in some way?

NicholasRush: I'm not certain. It occurs to me that it may be an aesthetic conceit.

MandyPerry: You're such a math guy.

NicholasRush: What is that supposed to mean.

NicholasRush: I SAID what is that supposed to mean.

MandyPerry: A chemist wakes up to find his bed on fire. He goes and gets a bucket of water to put it out.

NicholasRush: You are an odd person.

MandyPerry: A physicist wakes up to find his bed on fire. He calculates exactly how much water is required to put out the fire, given the rate of fire spread and the transit time between bed and faucet, and then he puts out the fire.

NicholasRush: I see where this is going and I don't like it, I'll have you know.

MandyPerry: A mathematician wakes up to find his bed on fire. He goes to the faucet, turns it on, sticks his finger under the water and says 'a solution exists.' Then he goes back to sleep. In his bed. That is still on fire.

NicholasRush: Hilarious.

MandyPerry: I do my best.

"I said *Rush*."

Rush half turned to find Young standing in the doorframe, his arms crossed and his hair wet.

"What?" he snapped.

"I have a tablecloth?"

Rush looked at the tablecloth-covered table.

"Yes. That does seem to be the case."

"Were you *unpacking* for me?" Young sounded a bit incredulous but also a bit—touched.

"I unpacked exactly two items," Rush replied.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

MandyPerry: I don't mean to give you a hard time.

MandyPerry: Seriously. I'm sorry about that. Math is great.

MandyPerry: I love math.

MandyPerry: Hello?

NicholasRush: Sorry. I was distracted. Look, I take your point about the intellectual laziness of pattern recognition, but it has its place.

MandyPerry: Absolutely. Especially in cryptography, I would think.

NicholasRush: Now you're obviously trying to placate me.

MandyPerry: Is it working?

NicholasRush: No. Look, my data has long since finished assembling itself into a spreadsheet. I should go.

MandyPerry: You'd get better data from a real DHD.

NicholasRush: I'm aware.

MandyPerry: Talk to Sam Carter. There might be a planet relatively close by with real DHD you can break.

NicholasRush: I sincerely doubt that I would BREAK it.

MandyPerry: Well, if it were me, I'd want a ship with hyperdrive capability standing by just in case.

NicholasRush: Yes yes. I'll email you if, at some point in the future, I'm cleared to leave my apartment.

MandyPerry: Keep me posted. It was nice "meeting" you.

NicholasRush: Likewise.

He signed out of the secure server and scanned over his newly compiled spreadsheet to make sure it was complete and appropriately organized. He rested one elbow on the table and curled a fist underneath his chin, visualizing the computational model he was going to build—its parameters, its initial conditions—while he listened absently to the sound of a blade running through tape, and the methodical, slow unpacking that proceeded with the pained scrape of asymmetrical steps over a dusty floor.

Around the time that he had finished building his invariant data into his source code, the phone rang.

He flinched.

"Hello?"

He took a deep breath and shut his eyes, trying to detune his nerves into something a bit easier to live with.

"Oh," Young said almost immediately, "hey. Hey Emily." Young slurred a three syllable name into something more like two and a half.

His ex-wife then.

Possibly.

"Yeah, no, I'm sorry. I—"

Rush raised a disdainful eyebrow at his source code, saved the nascent model, and then shut Vala's laptop. He walked down the hall to the bathroom, deciding that it was a particularly propitious moment to take a shower.

"I didn't forget. If you'll just let me—"

Yes. It was an inarguably good time for a shower.

He shut the bathroom door and turned on the water. He looked at himself in the mirror and found that his hair was in a notable state of post-coding disarray. He kept forgetting to cut it. Shoes, socks, pants, boxes, and two shirts hit the white tile of the floor in a cairn of efficient divesting. He stepped into the shower, steadying himself, one hand on the opposite wall, trying to think of nothing but what he was *doing*, the only thoughts allowed to intrude were those of code, of differential equations, of qubits and superposition.

Exhaustion was his best, most efficient weapon in the fight against his own mind.

*Zwei Seelen wohnen, ach, in meiner Brust,
Die eine will sich von der andern trennen.*

His fingers passed through his hair in a raking, irregular weave before he tipped his head back and washed away surfactant that smelled vaguely of pine or some other poorly defined, commercially masculine option.

He would have to achieve entanglement between his query program and the DHD. There was no question about that. It would probably be necessary every time, as there was probably not a single key—rather each key was likely uniquely generated and then transmitted via entanglement every time one needed to dial.

So. One—achieve entanglement with the DHD. Two—run his ZKP to demonstrate entanglement to the DHD. Three—obtain the key and unlock the chevron. But how to achieve quantum entanglement?

He absently rubbed the nearly new bar of soap over his chest.

How did one write code that would run on a crystal?

Maybe Dr. Perry would know.

Likely it wasn't substantially different from writing classical code. At least, not *conceptually*.

He shut off the shower and pulled a clean towel off the wall-mounted shelf.

As for obtaining the key itself—if it wasn't simply *granted* to him—several rounds of weak-measurement attack might work. Man-in-the-middle appealed to him more but it was, by its nature, more deceptive. He had the feeling that the gate wouldn't *appreciate* that very much.

He pulled on his boxers and his jeans and then vigorously toweled off his hair.

Maybe Dr. Perry had a point. He was supposed to be cryptography expert, not a fucking numerologist. It wasn't like the gate had *feelings*, and it wasn't like he couldn't attempt both approaches. Any approach. Presumably. If he ever obtained clearance to go offworld and intensively interface with a DHD.

Telford would likely be of some help in that regard.

Jackson might possibly be helpful as well—but it could go either way with him.

It would be better to ask Telford.

Or, maybe, it would be better to ask Jackson.

It was going to irritate Jackson off if he went to Telford.

It would also likely irritate Telford off if he went to Jackson.

Well.

This was an easily escaped dichotomy.

He pulled his undershirt over his head, picked up his rumpled dress shirt, and pulled it back on as he paced out along the dimly lit hallway and into Young's too-bright living room.

The man was lying on the couch, one hand over his eyes, no longer on the phone, misery evident in the curve of his fingers into his temples.

Rush hesitated for a moment and then walked forward.

"I need to go offworld," he announced.

Young pulled his hand away from his eyes. "Right now?" he asked dryly.

"No," Rush said, walking forward, beginning to button his shirt. "But soon. Sometime this week."

"Good luck with that," Young said, shutting his eyes.

"I'm not cleared," Rush said.

"Really? You? Not *cleared*?" Young said, stepping over the line from dry into sarcastic.

Rush's hands paused briefly in their serial loop and slide but he regrouped and proceeded, both with the buttoning and with everything else. "Given your history of subpar analytical skills," Rush said, "you'll have to forgive me if I fail to give a fuck about your preconceptions. I need to go offworld."

Inexplicably, Young opened his eyes and gave him a faint smile.

"Are you going to help me or not?" Rush asked.

"*Why* do you want to go offworld?" Young countered.

"Because I need access to a DHD."

"Going to the alpha site for a few hours might be workable," Young said, his eyebrows rising fractionally.

"I may destroy the DHD I need access to."

"Okay, well, that would make the alpha site less of a good choice," Young said evenly, "and unfortunately, it's going to make it harder to get approval to go out, because you're going to need ship-based support, and you'd be gating to a location that can be secured in only a very limited way."

"I'm aware."

"Plus, not only are you an intellectual resource," Young continued, "you're also an extremely high profile target for abduction. I'd imagine that the more chevrons you can unlock, the more they're going to want you. I don't think it's a coincidence that less than twenty-four hours after the base found out that you'd cracked the fourth cypher there was an abduction attempt."

"So don't pick a Lucian Alliance planet to gate to," Rush snapped. "Any natively configured DHD will work."

"It's not that simple, and you know it."

"Jackson is number two on the list, and I notice that *he's* not locked in *his* apartment."

"Jackson can take care of himself."

"Yes. That's why he's *died* so many times."

Young sighed, probably because he couldn't think of an effective counter-argument.

"Why ask me?"

Rush raised his eyebrows and hesitated for a few seconds. "You don't exactly look busy."

"Nice try, hotshot. What's the real reason?"

"Jackson and Telford are currently—disagreeing rather strongly about something, making it inconvenient for me to approach either of them."

"You think they're disagreeing about you?" Young asked, his tone casual, his hand coming away from his forehead, twisting, and ending up behind his head in a movement so relaxed that Rush suspected it concealed sudden, intent interest.

"I didn't say that," Rush replied, "but I think whatever they're at odds about may peripherally involve me in some way."

They looked at one another for a few seconds.

"I'll call Landry on Monday," Young said. "See if we can't work something out."

Rush nodded at him. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Rush crossed his arms over his chest and surveyed the disarray of Young's corner apartment. Partially empty boxes mostly obscured the floor space, as if half emptying boxes was some kind of deliberate strategy that Young had employed. As if he didn't want to finish and discard even a single box.

Rush could identify with that, he supposed. But he also found it irritating.

"Get up," Rush snapped.

"Fucking go to *sleep* why don't you?" Young countered. "I'm taking the rest of the morning off."

"We are finishing this right now," Rush said. "This is the most inefficient unpacking I have ever witnessed in my life. Your kitchen has been unpacked for *days*. Because I unpacked it."

"Two days. Not even."

Rush looked down at the nearest half-empty box, ascertained it was full of books, dragged it over to the empty bookshelf, and began sliding them onto the shelf.

"Are you alphabetizing?" Young asked, from the couch.

"And why the fuck not?"

"Um, no reason."

"You would prefer sorting by size, would you?" Rush tried not to watch as Young painfully got to his feet.

Young ignored his question. "This was not part of the plan, you know," he growled, halfheartedly pulling a coiled desk lamp out of the nearest box and eying it distastefully.

"Did the plan include you purchasing decent coffee? Because that should also be included. In fact, it's going to need to happen before two o'clock this afternoon." He finished shelving his first set of books and bent down to retrieve another set.

"Why?" Young asked, looking like he didn't know what to do with his desk lamp. "What happens at two o'clock?"

"I will get a caffeine withdrawal headache. I am not drinking that atrocious example of American instant coffee again."

"How did you get so dehydrated the other day if you're such a regular coffee drinker?"

"This morning was the first time I had coffee in four weeks."

"Falling off the wagon?"

It was more akin to getting back on the wagon, but there was no reason to tell Young that.

"I was extremely disappointed to end my dry spell with *instant* coffee."

"My apologies," Young said dryly.

"Yes well," Rush replied, snatching the deformable desk lamp out of Young's hand and affixing it to the side of the bookcase. "I suppose that I can let that one slide."

"Thank you. I'm so relieved."

Rush picked up Young's knife and sliced through the tape of the box he had emptied, flattened the cardboard and placed it on the floor next to the bookshelf.

"Don't you need to be working on your ZKP?" Young asked.

"You're awfully fixated on my ZKP," Rush replied. "Is that because you know literally nothing else about computer science?"

"*You* were the one who was fixated on it, but—yeah. Pretty much."

"I'm now writing source code for a modeling program that will allow me to simulate quantum fluctuations within Ancient control crystals following the application of different voltages."

"Oh. Great." Young reached down into a box and pulled out something that looked like a fishbowl.

"Is that for *fish*?" Rush asked, the question coming out more disdainfully than he had intended.

"Some people *like* fish, Rush," Young growled.

Rush gave him a fractional shrug. "Fish seem inappropriate for someone who lives alone and who might be killed on an alien planet."

"You can get automatic feeders," Young said defensively. "Plus—it's not like I don't know people who would feed them if—why are we even talking about this?"

"I have no idea. Buy all the fish you want. I certainly don't care," Rush replied, making short work of finding a second book-containing box and adding its contents to the bookshelf.

"I will," Young said.

"You do that," Rush replied.

"And when I go offworld, you can feed them."

"I'll probably have been abducted by the Lucian Alliance at the point you've recovered enough to go offworld."

"Don't say that," Young snapped.

"Given that the Lucian Alliance is in possession of beaming technology and the SGC lacks sufficient information security," Rush murmured, "I would say it's just a matter of time."

"It isn't," Young snapped. "Of course it isn't."

"I'd find a different backup fish-feeder if I were you."

"Rush," Young said. "Stop it. I'm serious."

"So am I," Rush said, looking obliquely at Young and then back at the books in his hands.

"You need to be careful," Young growled. "This is not something to be cavalier about. The LA wouldn't have a foothold in the SGC if their methods of twisting cooperation out of people weren't so effective."

"Mmm hmm," Rush replied. "It stands to reason."

He located Young's knife and sliced through the second box he'd emptied. He laid it out atop the first.

"Seasoned people have fallen to them. People trained to withstand the kind of techniques they use," Young continued.

Rush looked at the wall, and tried to imagine being tortured—tried to imagine something worse than the tangled chokehold of his own unexhausted mind and found that he couldn't. That was certainly a failure of imagination on his part.

"Any advice?" he asked, turning to face Young, "in case they're successful in acquiring me?"

"Do anything you can," Young said, "*anything* you can to keep that from happening. And stop telling people when you crack each chevron. Let them think you've stalled out. Hit a block."

Rush met his eyes and nodded.

It wasn't a bad idea.

Chapter Nine

It was just past noon, and the sun had begun its conquering creep across the wood paneling of the floor. They had made significant progress, and the organization of each room had started to take shape. Most of the boxes had been unpacked and broken down, the newspaper bagged, the furniture pulled into position, the lights assembled, and extension cords strategically positioned. Rush had approached the unpacking with a frenetic energy that had been more than a little unsettling to watch, until Young had gotten accustomed to it. The guy was just—intense. It was how he was.

It made Young more than a little curious to take a look at the inside of *Rush's* apartment. He had the feeling it would be obsessively organized and extremely utilitarian.

At this stage in the unpacking, Young was slowly and deliberately dealing with items that Rush couldn't or wouldn't categorize, organize, alphabetize, analyze, sterilize, or any other kind of ize.

Personal items.

Ephemera that Emily had left him—little glass things or little porcelain things that she had bought in various places they had been and which she had, for some reason, allocated to him. Things Young really didn't want to look at or think about. He decided that his strategy for those things was going to be to box all of them up and put the boxes in the bottom of a closet.

"I feel like you're confused about the end goal of this process," Rush said dryly, from where he was sitting on the floor, surrounded by a tangle of cables, looking disapprovingly at the box that Young was filling.

Young sighed. "This stuff is going in a closet."

"Right then," Rush said shortly, tipping his head back and shutting his eyes briefly. Like he was tired. Really damn tired.

Young didn't know what the hell the other man thought he was doing, forcing himself to stay awake like this. To unpack an *apartment*. It was strange. Inappropriate. Pathological in some way that was hard to define. It wasn't really pleasant to watch the guy sit there, sorting through a nest of wires, a shadow of his earlier efficiency, making some kind of disorganized attempt at detangling in preparation for setting up Young's TV.

"Rush," he said quietly, "are you okay?"

"Very few combinations of words in the English language irritate me more than the one you just selected." Rush said, shaking his head slightly and focusing a bit more intently on the Gordian knot in front of him.

"You look exhausted."

"There are worse things than exhaustion," Rush murmured.

"Yeah," Young said. "I guess."

"Your opinion was not solicited," Rush replied, threading cords past and through themselves.

Young sighed, rolled his eyes, and returned to his reboxing of trinkets until his cellphone rang, shrill in the quiet of the apartment.

Rush flinched, his hands coming away from the tangle of wires and halfway to his temples before he tamped down on his response.

Young wasted a glare on the side of the other man's head, glanced at the caller ID, and accepted the call.

"Cam," he said. "What's going on?"

Rush looked over in apparent interest, eyebrows raised.

"Nothing good," Mitchell said, his voice tight. "Your cell is SGC-issued, right? We're scrambled?"

"Yeah," Young said, feeling a surge of adrenaline but keeping his voice and posture relaxed as he slowly straightened, one hand on his bad hip. "You even have to ask, after all this time?" Mitchell had his own unique brand of hardassery; different from Telford's, different from Young's, different from J-Shep's, but there all the same—detail-oriented and icy. Young didn't particularly like the fact that it was surfacing. He limped over to the window and leaned against the adjacent wall, looking absently out into the parking lot.

"You probably already know that Telford took command of SG-3 and they were able to get the transport codes from the three LA members who were apprehended in Rush's apartment?" Mitchell asked, ignoring Young's question.

"Right," Young said, squinting into the sunlight. "That I knew."

"So, first of all, the LA *does* have the Asgard beaming technology. It's confirmed now."

"Uh huh," Young said.

"You seem way too laid back about this," Mitchell commented, sounding edgy. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," Young said.

"Really? If everything's actually fine, say 'everything's fine.' If it's *not* actually fine, then say 'yeah'."

"Everything's fine," Young said.

"Really? So why are you being—weird?" Mitchell demanded.

"Think about it," Young replied, exasperated.

"The neighbor?" Mitchell said, less a question than a realization. "You don't want to freak him out?"

"It's a somewhat delicate situation, I think," Young said, keeping his eyes on the parking lot.

"Yeah, I heard from Jackson that he flipped out on you last night and totally shut down in your kitchen for like half an hour."

"More or less," Young said. "Y'know, for the leader of the flagship SG team, you're pretty distractible." His eyes flicked over to Rush, who had gone back to picking through the cables.

"Others might say I have a talent for focusing on relevant detail. You would be so grateful if you were being abducted right now."

"True enough," Young admitted, "but let's get to the part where you tell me what's going on."

"So, Telford and SG-3 managed to beam onto the LA's tel'tak. It was cloaked in a low Earth orbit. Telford copied everything in their databanks and transmitted it back to Earth." Mitchell's voice still had that hard, unsettling edge.

"Right," Young replied, drawing out the word.

"They got clearance from Landry to *keep going*, see if they could get any more intel," Mitchell said shortly. "There was one member of the LA party still on the tel'tak and, via him, they sent a message to the LA, indicating that they had Rush."

"Do you know which House?" Young asked, his eyes flicking absently to Rush and away again.

"Sixth," Mitchell said grimly. "It's Sixth that wants him."

"Masim?" Young asked, his tone casual, his face frozen into a neutral mask.

"We think so. Based on the location of the rendezvous point, we think it might actually be his daughter. It's in her territory."

"Masim's daughter?"

"Yeah. Look, the point is, we don't know. Once they had gotten the intel about the House affiliation, Landry gave the order to pull them back. It was too risky to actually go in like that, pretending they had someone they didn't—they had no idea how many people they might be facing. Plus, as you know—David was undercover with Sixth House, so there was significant risk that he might be recognized."

"Why do I get the feeling that things didn't go according to plan?" Young asked.

"David confirmed the order and communicated that he was turning back. Some of the techheads analyzed the signal strength and can also confirm that he *did* make an abrupt change in trajectory as they were transmitting the message, because the signal distorts. But—they missed their next check in."

"Yeah."

"And the one after that," Mitchell said. "And the one after. We haven't heard from them in seven hours."

Young said nothing.

"They weren't that far out," Mitchell continued, "so we sent the *Odyssey*."

Mitchell stopped speaking.

"Yup," Young said, his vocal chords grating hot and deep over the word. In his peripheral vision he could see Rush look in his direction with an abrupt snap of the head. Young turned away, walking toward his bedroom. He slipped inside and shut the door, pressing his forehead against the wood.

The line was silent.

"They found—a lot of debris," Mitchell said finally. "Some of which was—organic."

Young said nothing.

Mitchell said nothing.

"The thing is," Mitchell continued, "is that—there was nothing left that was larger than a baseball. They'd clearly destroyed the ship and then—fired at the pieces. The theory is that they wanted to conceal something. Some aspect of the ship, of the personnel—something."

"Any idea what?"

"Maybe," Mitchell said. "The lab guys are working on the data, analyzing the material that the Odyssey was able to—gather. Apparently there's maybe not as much organic material as you might expect for six people."

"So they may have beamed some of them off," Young said, feeling sick.

"Yeah."

"They could still be alive. Maybe all of them."

"They *could*, but—"

"Yeah," Young said. "But."

"David's a resourceful son of a bitch," Mitchell said. "So, I guess—" He trailed off. "But um, Reynolds—has the two kids."

"Yeah," Young said, his forehead still pressed against the wall. "I know."

"I hate it when they have kids. God. That should be a program requirement. No kids."

Young said nothing.

"I hate that. I mean, I hate it anyway, but I especially—hate that," Mitchell said.

The line was silent.

"How long before Landry switches the codes?" Young asked.

"All the transponder codes have been switched. Landry's giving David a forty-eight hour window before we deactivate their GDOs."

"You never know," Young said, "but *if* they survived then the LA probably has all five of them."

"That's a lot of intel," Mitchell said, "potentially."

"Yeah."

"Damn it," Mitchell hissed. "Damn it. *We need David* for this shit. No one knows more about the LA than he does. He spent a year and a half under cover—he knows them better than anyone. He hates them more than anyone."

"He has good reason," Young said, his hand pressing into the ache in his lower back, his eyes shut against the memory of an ash-filled sky.

"I know," Mitchell whispered.

They were quiet for a few seconds.

"So what's the plan?" Young asked. "For Rush, I mean."

Mitchell sighed. "There isn't really a plan. Any plan is just—subvertable, you know?"

"He can't be pinned in a room indefinitely."

"Well—" Mitchell said, "that's been the strategy for the last six weeks, mostly, and it's worked okay."

Young was silent for a moment, then said, "Actually Cam, I'm not sure it's worked 'okay' at all. The guy is having a tough time for some reason, and he just—works continuously. I'm not sure how sustainable this is."

"Yeah," Mitchell replied. "It's driving Jackson crazy. He really, *really* wants to send the guy to Atlantis. The problem is, Rush can't crack this ninth chevron address while he's *there* because their Lantean gates don't have the cyphers."

"Atlantis? Sorry, but I just don't think he's going to do very well offworld. I mean, he can barely survive his own apartment."

"Yeah, that's a concern. Sheppard and McKay are willing to take him though; the idea's been floated. Plus, there's some reason to think he'd be an asset to the Atlantis Expedition."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Look, I can't talk about it, but—you've probably already guessed that there's something else the LA wants with your neighbor other than just the intense math skills."

"Jackson implied as much last night. Can't you just *tell* me? I mean, if the LA knows—whatever it is, if SG-1 knows, then what does it matter if I know as well?"

"Because. Landry says no. Plus, *Rush* doesn't know."

"No one's told Rush why they actually want him?"

"No—not really. No."

"Well, that seems like a *bad idea*," Young growled, "because I don't think he's taking this whole abduction scenario very seriously and maybe if he knew—"

"Yeah," Mitchell said, drawing out the word uncomfortably. "There are a lot of internal politics that surround this entire situation. I've told you as much as I can, and then some."

Young sighed. "I know." He brought a hand to his forehead. "What am I supposed to do about this, Cam?"

"I don't think *you* have to do anything," Mitchell said, a note of resignation in his voice.

"I live three doors down from the SGC's hottest intellectual commodity," Young shot back, lowering his voice, more out of instinct than any real necessity. "I'm just supposed to sit by and *watch* this bullshit?"

"What part of it is bullshit, exactly?" Mitchell replied, impersonating an informational linebacker.

"Something is not right here, Cam," Young said. "Something about this is seminally fucked up. Why else would Jackson be so—*pissed* about this whole thing?"

"Everett," Mitchell said, converting his name into a cautious pull. "If you want to help this guy—you're going to need to be subtle about it."

"What do you mean, 'subtle'. If something's fucked up, it's fucked up."

"Yeah, look, it's hard to come right out and say this, but there's a short list of people that could be working for the LA. Not gonna lie to you, man, you're on that list. So am I. So is David and Daniel and Sam and Teal'c and Vala. So is all of SG-2, all of SG-3, and all of SG-7."

"Not really a shocker," Young growled.

"I know, but think about it from Landry's perspective. This is why Jackson is *trying* not to flip his shit about Rush—the more bent out of shape he gets about the guy, the more Landry resists what he proposes. Whereas David, on the other hand, plays it very cool—played it—shit. Do you see what I'm saying?"

Young sighed.

Mitchell said nothing.

"Yeah," Young said finally. "I get you."

"But, for what it's worth," Mitchell said, "I agree with your assessment. It's screwed up. Everything—everything is just really *screwed up* right now."

Young nodded, but said nothing. The smooth white paint that covered the door was cool under his fingertips. He pushed himself away from the door and limped over to his bed, easing himself down onto the rumpled sheets.

"Things are going to calm down," Mitchell said, solid and reassuring and right in his ear. "They have to."

"Maybe," Young replied. "But this guy. My neighbor. He's going to be trouble. You can just tell by *looking* at the guy."

Mitchell sighed. "Can I invite myself over?"

"Yeah," Young said, "I guess. Can you bring me some expensive coffee?"

"Since when do you drink 'expensive coffee'?"

"I don't." He looked up at the barely perceptible patterning in the paint of his ceiling.

"Got ya. I'll do you one better. I'll bring you expensive coffee and Rush's laptop. I heard from Dr. Lee that they cleared it about an hour ago."

"Any word on his apartment?"

"Probably tomorrow."

"All right," Young said.

"Can I bring Jackson?" Mitchell asked.

"Um, I guess, if he consults on the coffee."

"Can I bring Teal'c?"

"What is this, some kind of SG-1 party?"

"No. The ladies are shopping, Jackson is climbing the walls, and Teal'c wants to meet Rush."

"Teal'c wants to meet Rush."

"The Royals are playing. Is your TV hooked up?"

"Cam, seriously, what the hell."

"Look, we're having an SG-1 guys afternoon and you got invited."

"You never invite me to your SG-1 parties."

"That's because no one gets invited. They're less fun than you think. It's always like: 'remember that time you thought you killed someone,' or, 'remember that time we all were tortured for three days'. That kind of thing. Very depressing."

"Ugh," Young said, one hand coming to press against his forehead.

"Yeah, not a good time."

"You just like me because of my neighbor," Young said, trying not to sound as exhausted as he felt.

"You got me," Mitchell said.

"Look, in all seriousness, I don't know if this is a good idea," Young said. "Rush really doesn't strike me as the type who is going to enjoy sitting around and watching a baseball game with the guys. I really don't know how close he is with David—or was,

with David, but he's already pretty stressed at baseline, and he may not take this very well."

"Yeah," Mitchell said, "but Jackson is probably going to be showing up at your front door this afternoon with or without me and Teal'c. I thought that maybe—well, a baseball game might give the whole thing a more low key feel."

"Great. Well, we can see how it goes, I guess," Young replied. "Do you know what Jackson wants?"

"Ehhh," Mitchell said, "I'm worried that he's gearing himself up to do something—that would be a bad idea."

"Like what kind of bad idea?" Young said.

"Like revealing highly classified information to a civilian consultant without Landry's permission."

"You think Jackson's going to tell Rush whatever it is that Landry doesn't want him to know?"

"I think that possibility becomes less likely if we are watching a baseball game," Mitchell said evenly.

"When did you get so savvy?"

"Around the same time I stopped sticking my fingers into interesting looking alien goo."

Young snorted. "All right. When does the game start?"

"Two o'clock," Mitchell said.

"Okay, plan on it unless you hear from me. And bring some beer, will you? Between Rush and Jackson, I think we're going to need it."

"I wonder if Jackson even knows the rules of baseball," Mitchell mused.

"I'll talk to you later."

"I bet he doesn't. But I bet he'll try to teach them to Teal'c anyway."

"Cam. I'll talk to you later."

"Or, maybe he knows the rules, technically, but—"

"Okay," Young said. "Bye."

"Like, I'll bet he *knows* them, but he doesn't have any common sense about the game."

"Cam, I've got to go."

"Damn, he probably can recite the entire rulebook flawlessly in eighty-seven languages."

"Cam. Seriously. Don't make he hang up on you. Because I *will* do it."

"Fine fine. See you at two."

"Yup."

Young ended the call and stared at the ceiling. He ran one hand through his close cropped hair that was just starting to curl at the ends and shut his eyes, trying to make some kind of plan—any kind of plan where there was some chance that his exhausted, irascible houseguest would make it through the afternoon without being pushed past his ability to cope.

After a few minutes, he forced himself to his feet, still lacking any kind of real plan.

He opened his bedroom door and limped back out to the living area.

Rush looked up at him as he came in. He was still sitting on the floor, but the nest of wires that had surrounded him was now unmade, the cable running neatly along the wall at the perimeter of the room, all requisite electronics hooked up and, presumably, working.

"Hey," Young said.

The word hung heavy in the air, and Rush raised his eyebrows. "Hey," he replied, with a slightly disdainful inflection that made the word into something with two syllables and managed to convey the idea that he was doing Young a favor by deigning to use such a colloquialism.

Young walked forward a few steps to sit on the couch that Rush had recently repositioned.

"So?" Rush demanded. "What's going on then?"

Young was silent for a moment, looking at his hands.

"David is missing," Young said, "along with all of SG-3." He stopped there, watching Rush.

Rush stared back at him. For a few seconds, they remained like that, frozen, until Rush shook his hair back, fixed Young with a glare, and said, "you were on the phone for fifteen fucking minutes. Surely you have more details."

"Yeah, I do." Young paused, rubbing his fingers along his jaw. "They were aboard a—" he stopped himself from saying 'tel'tak' at the last minute. "They were aboard a ship, and it

looks like—from the evidence the SGC managed to collect—that that ship was destroyed."

"Ah," Rush replied. "I see." He wasn't looking at Young anymore. His head was turned away, his eyes focusing in the middle distance.

"There's still some chance that he could be—that they all could be alive."

"In which case," Rush replied, his head turning, his eyes snapping back towards Young, "they would most likely be prisoners of the Lucian Alliance, correct?"

"Yeah," Young replied. "Yes."

"I get the impression," Rush said, pulling the words out, dark and direct, "that death would be preferable."

"No," Young said, shaking his head. "I don't think death is ever preferable."

"Don't you," Rush murmured, looking away.

"God, Rush," Young said, desperate for anything to break the eerie atmosphere between them. "No. Alive—there's always a chance to change things. Dead—well, that's it."

"The final collapse of the wave function."

"Yeah," Young said; a bracing word, a downward gaze. "Exactly. So stop being so god damned morbid, will you?"

"I'm fucking setting up your apartment for you," Rush said, managing a casual delivery. "I believe that entitles me to be as morbid as I'd like."

"Nope," Young said, "but you will get some classy coffee out of it."

"Oh really?" Rush said, raising his eyebrows.

"Yeah. The guys from SG-1 are going to stop by with your laptop and some fancy coffee."

"They cleared my laptop?" Rush asked.

"Yeah. They think they'll be done with your apartment tomorrow."

Rush nodded, his gaze shifting into the middle distance. "Do you think they're torturing him?"

"David?"

"Yes. Fucking obviously David. Or are their other mutual acquaintances we have that are missing, presumed dead?"

"I don't know if they're torturing him," Young said. "Maybe."

"What do they do?" Rush asked.

Young shut his eyes.

"I don't know," he lied.

"Yes you do. You must."

"Rush—there's no way to know what they're doing, if he's dead—if he's alive—" Young waved a hand, unable to look at him. "There's no way to know. It's better not to dwell on it."

"Works that way for you, does it?" Rush asked, a ruthless, wild edge to his words. "Must be nice."

Young locked eyes with him, taking in the rapid, desperate rhythm of Rush's breathing, the tension in his shoulders, the way his weight had shifted subtly forward, as though remaining still was nearly impossible.

"Rush," Young said, the word slow, forceful, and hopefully grounding.

Rush shifted back slightly and made a clear effort to unwind.

"Please—just, leave it alone," Young said.

"Why?" Rush whispered, his eyes narrowing, taking in Young's stance, lingering at the place where his left hand rested absently at his injured hip. After a short interval the set of the mathematician's shoulders loosened marginally. The man didn't miss much.

"I don't want to talk about it," Young said, staring at the floor. "And I don't want you to *hear* about it. You're—what, a *math* professor? There is absolutely no reason for you to have this kind of shit in your head."

Rush said nothing, and Young looked up to find the other man giving him a twisted smile. "Oh you know what they say," Rush looked at Young from beneath the fringe of the bangs that fell into his eyes. "*Nihil novi sub sole.*"

"Latin?" Young guessed.

"Ancient, actually, but I won't split hairs with you there," Rush said, turning and flicking on Young's TV in an abrupt de-escalation of tension.

"So what does it mean?" Young asked, still unable to entirely relax in the face of Rush's mercurial shifts.

"Open a book, Young," Rush replied, absently flipping through a few channels before shutting the set off. "It won't kill you."

"You're handier than you look," Young said dryly, indicating the TV with his eyes. "Which is, in case you were wondering, not at all handy."

"Do you make it a point of insulting people who are doing you favors?" Rush asked, bracing one arm against the floor.

"I'm just trying to hold my ground here," Young said.

"And I appreciate that," Rush said, smiling faintly.

"Plus, you started it. I read books you know."

"Books with what kind of word-to-picture ratio?"

"Shut up, Rush."

"A four year collection of *Car and Driver* does not count as a book, even if it is chronologically organized."

Young stared at him.

"I've been unpacking for you," Rush said, in a tone that implied he thought Young was an idiot.

"Well," Young said, trying to rally, "first of all, there is nothing wrong with liking cars. Second of all, you also alphabetized my actual books, or organized them according to the Dewey Decimal System or something. So you should know that I do read."

"Your collection of 'actual' books," Rush said, "is desultory and, if I were to estimate, I would say only about sixty percent yours."

"Why?" Young asked, the word prolonged by trepidation. He wondered what Emily had given him.

"You don't seem like the kind of person who would have three different editions of *Sense and Sensibility*, for example."

Young raised his eyebrows and then stood and limped over to the bookshelf.

"Well, shit," he said, staring at the three copies in question.

"Revenge, do you think?" Rush asked, coming to stand next to him.

"No," Young said, "probably an accident. It's Emily's favorite."

"Ah," Rush said delicately. "A mispacking then."

"Yeah," Young said, cocking his head, running his eyes over the shelves. "*A Girl's Guide to Everything* though—that one is probably revenge."

"Indeed."

"She always did have a wicked sense of humor," Young said absently, trying to ignore the hollow feeling that the words left behind as he spoke them.

"Mmm," Rush said, neutral and noncommittal, as if emotional evisceration was something he could recognize, even at its most subtle.

And maybe it was.

Because, despite the wedding ring that he wore, the man was utterly alone. And though he seemed to prefer that, seemed to seek it out, Young suspected that he didn't handle it very well.

Young glanced over at him. The man had one arm wrapped around his rib cage, one hand fisted beneath his chin. He was staring at Young's bookshelf. "Well, we're going to have to do something about this situation before Jackson gets here. Otherwise he's going to silently judge you," Rush said, either unaware of Young's scrutiny or unperturbed by it.

"Yes, that's so much worse than being judged aloud. Repeatedly. And with sarcasm."

"At least you know I'm not hiding anything."

"Oh yeah. Straightforward. That is the first word that comes to mind when I think of you."

Rush shot him a pointed look, then dragged an empty box next to Young's bookshelf and started rapidly pulling things off the shelves that failed his pretentiousness litmus test, or whatever criteria he was using.

After only a few seconds it became clear that Rush was creepily accurate when it came to books that Young had actually purchased versus those that Emily had partitioned to him.

"This is weirding me out a little bit, not gonna lie," Young said, watching Rush hesitate for a moment over *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, before shoving it back onto the shelf.

"Well, think about how I felt upon realizing you have a fondness for Franz fucking *Kafka* of all people," Rush shot back.

"I mean, you're just—pretty accurate."

"'Pretty' accurate?" Rush dropped into a crouch to survey the final shelves, one shoulder pressed against the edge of the bookshelf.

"All right. Fine. Very damn accurate."

Rush paused in his sweep of the final shelf, hesitating over *The Demon Haunted World*. "This," he said, pulling it out, "I suspect is not yours, but I'm going to leave it for you anyway. You should read it. And—Jackson will like it."

"Thanks," Young said dryly. "But how do you know I haven't already?"

"Because," Rush said, straightening up slowly, without a trace of his typical nervous energy. "Y' fash your books, and this one is fuckin' pristine."

Young raised his eyebrows. "Fash?"

"Get a fucking education," Rush said, his accent receding immediately.

"I'm gonna write this shit down and just ask Jackson, seeing as *he's* not a asshole."

"F. A. S. H.," Rush said, hooking his right hand behind his neck to massage the tense musculature there as he spelled the word. "Enjoy the thirty minute etymological discourse that's in your future."

"Whatever," Young growled. "I assume you meant that I beat the hell out of my books."

"It's a terrible habit," Rush replied. "But it's more like—" he raised his free hand and made a vague circle. "You worry or trouble your books. You torment them."

"That's basically what I said."

"That's not at all what you said. It's perhaps what you connoted." Rush's eyes were closed, his head angled forward slightly, his right hand digging into his neck.

"Rush," Young growled, "take a god damned nap."

"When are they bringing the coffee?"

"Fourteen hundred hours," Young said. "That's when the game starts."

"What game?"

"Royals vs. the White Sox."

"That means fuck all to me," Rush said.

"Baseball," Young said dryly.

Rush sighed, his eyes still closed. "They're staying?"

"Look," Young said, "I can tell them to go to a damn sports bar or something, if you'd prefer. It's just that Jackson evidently wants to talk to you, and Mitchell thought that maybe the whole thing would be a bit more low key if it happened over beer and a baseball game."

Rush shot him a keen look. "Low key?" he repeated with a dangerous liquidity. "What an interesting choice of word. What does he want?"

"Umm," Young said, thrown by Rush's abrupt change in demeanor. "I'm not sure."

"You're not sure," Rush repeated. "Well. That's convenient."

"What do *you* think he wants?" Young asked carefully, watching as Rush paced away a few steps, stopping himself at the opposite side of the room before turning and backing against the wall in a movement that had possibly been intended to be casual, but came off as besieged.

Young looked at him, but didn't move. Didn't let his eyes flick toward the door that was a straight shot from Rush's current position.

Rush didn't reply to Young's question, but *his* eyes flicked toward the door.

The guy wanted *out*. Out of the apartment, out of his situation, possibly even out of the SGC. He wasn't going *to get* out though. And testing himself against the reality of the situation was only going to drive home how limited his options really were.

Difficult though it was, Young forced himself to look down at the box close to his feet, now mostly full of books destined for Emily. He leaned down to rearrange a few of them, then looked up at Rush.

"Do we have any more newspaper," he asked, "or did you bag all of it?"

"I think," Rush replied, as if it were a great effort, "that there may be some in the other room." He indicated the adjacent dining area with a tip of his head.

"You want to grab it?" Young asked nonchalantly.

Rush didn't reply, but he pushed away from the wall and walked into the dining room.

Young released a shaky sigh of relief, pressing his left hand to his aching lower back. He wasn't positive, but he was fairly certain that Rush had been on the verge of making a break for the door, a situation which probably would have been salvageable, given that the transport scramblers for the building were back online, and presuming that the LA wasn't just fucking *waiting* for him to exit the building. Probably they weren't. Probably David's initiative had set them on their asses, at least for a few days.

He wondered what the hell Rush was freaking out about.

It had something to do with Jackson, or whatever Rush thought that Jackson was going to tell him.

Young grimaced, absently staring at the linear shadows made by the slats of the blinds as the sun continued its advance across the hardwood floor. He could see how Jackson's sustained interest could be terrifying. Offworld, the man's name was practically synonymous with the SGC. Onworld, his opinions often seemed undisputable given his track record of calling things correctly and his unfailing obsession with righting wrongs. Telford's semi-open dispute with Jackson was practically enough, in and of itself, to cast aspersions on his moral character and—

That was it. It *had* to be. Young suspected that Rush had an idea of what Telford and Jackson were fighting about, and there was a good bet that Rush preferred Telford's position, whatever it was. Or maybe it wasn't even that. Maybe it was that their conflict prevented things from proceeding in either direction, and with David potentially—potentially *out of the picture*—that left Jackson unopposed.

Rush walked back into the room with handfuls of newspaper. He looked less edgy, but still wound *way* the hell too tightly for Young to do anything except take some of it from him and start shoving it into the loose spaces between the books in the box. After a few seconds, Rush knelt down to help him.

He wish he knew what Rush preferred—Nick or Nicholas. Probably a little late to ask, this late in the game.

"So," he said carefully. "I can just tell them to get lost, you know," Young said. "I really don't give a fuck about the Kansas City Royals."

"Does anyone?" Rush asked, his fingers curling around the edge of the box that they were packing with more meticulousness than the task really merited.

"Mitchell's from Kansas—they're his home team."

"Ah."

"Seriously, hotshot," Young said quietly, "I can tell them to drop off your fancy coffee and laptop and go."

"It doesn't eliminate the problem," Rush said. "It only defers it."

"What is the problem, exactly?"

"The problem," Rush said quietly, "Is that Jackson is—quietly terrified of whatever lies beyond the ninth chevron address."

"He's—*afraid* of it?" Young repeated, unable to hide his surprise.

"He's afraid of the progression," Rush said. "He's afraid that if seven chevrons take you within the galaxy and eight chevrons take you without, then nine chevrons—"

"Nine chevrons what?" Young asked.

"Off this plane, off this brane, both, neither—no one knows."

"Brane?"

"Like I said, Young, open a fucking book."

"Come on, don't be a jerk. This is serious."

"Off this brane would mean out of this universe," Rush said, "and into another."

"Why would this scare Jackson?"

"Well," Rush said, looking down fixedly at the box, "I would imagine it's because he's *been* off this plane. I would also imagine it has something to do with the Ori. I also suspect—" Rush shut his eyes. "That he knows more than he's told me about this address."

Young needlessly rearranged the position of a book and its affiliated newspaper.

"And David—David wants, or, perhaps *wanted* is the better term, to be the one—to go," Rush said.

"So you're worried about what, exactly?"

"That Daniel will stop me. That he'll kill the Icarus Project."

"Would that really be so bad?" Young asked.

"Yes," Rush whispered. "Yes."

"You could go to Atlantis," Young said. "That's what Jackson wants. That would be okay. There would be like—tons of stuff to figure out there."

Rush gave him a twisted half-smile. "I'm never going anywhere," he said. "I think we both know that."

"Sheppard *wants* you, apparently. And McKay."

"Now you're just trying to make me feel better without any kind of reference to reality," Rush snapped. "You think I have *any chance* of being cleared for an assignment off world? I've been officially employed for six weeks, I don't even work on the base, and already they've made me pass two psych evaluations because they're so suspicious about the state of my mental health. So McKay and whatever god damn colonel is out there may have the good fucking taste to *want* me, but there is no way in hell that am I going to be going." He shot Young a pointed look.

"Sheppard," Young replied, equally pointedly. "He's the thinking man's colonel. You'd like him."

"It doesn't matter," Rush hissed.

"All right. Well, look, I really don't think that Landry is going to cut the Icarus project or pull you from it. In fact, my guess is that the top brass is going to be all the more interested in it if they think it might lead to another plane of existence—especially considering that the conflict with the Ori is not going well from what I hear."

"No?" Rush asked, his eyebrows raised.

"I don't think so," Young said. "But forget I told you that. You probably don't have the clearance to know."

"I don't have the clearance to know fucking *anything*," Rush sighed. "And stop repacking this god forsaken box, will you? It's very irritating."

Young rolled his eyes.

Rush got to his feet and paced over to the coffee table to collect a roll of packing tape. He turned back. "Hold it down," he said, gesturing toward the box, his accent creeping in on the final word.

"You are," Young said, aligning the flaps of the box, "so fucking tired, Rush."

"Your point being?" Rush asked, clearly making an effort to sharpen his diction.

"It's really bugging me."

"Get used to it." Rush taped along the edges of the box, neatly folding the tape around the corners in precise, synchronized sweeps of his thumbs. "You want lunch?"

"Yeah," Young said, "sure."

"Right," Rush said, breaking the word off as he stood. He reached down to offer Young his hand and slowly pulled him to his feet, his eyes searing, but his expression unreadable. Young couldn't quite hold his gaze, and Rush turned, heading toward the kitchen with more apparent energy than he had any business displaying.

It was going to be a long afternoon.

Chapter Ten

He was exhausted. This was, of course, a dead brilliant state of affairs, counterintuitive though it might appear to the casual observer. Casual observers weren't good for much, in Rush's experience.

He leaned over the table, Vala's laptop open beside him, and watched the dust catch and ride the air currents—not even courteous enough to be laminar on the scale of decimeters—and wondered about scales of perturbation relative to ultimate outcomes and whether there was infinite scalability of perturbable units. Probably. Possibly. Maybe there was.

"Rush—are you, like, *doing* something?"

He was irritating Colonel Young. He wondered if that counted as 'doing something.' In *his* book it certainly did. Then again, his book was not exactly a universally applicable book. Speaking of books, speaking of crystals, speaking of systems that stored and transmitted caches of information over millions and millions of years—there had to be a way for the gate network to detect and depress rather than amplify any perturbations within the lattice of linked gates; otherwise, the entire thing would just devolve into a spread of unpredictability over time. *Not uncontrollable*, necessarily, just *unpredictable* because of the inherent constraints of sensitive dependence on initial conditions in a situation with innumerable variables. Which the gate system certainly had. How had they done it? Had they woven their way 'round the constraints of chaos theory? Possibly. Then again, possibly not. Maybe they hadn't gotten around them so much as it was *his own viewpoint* that was warped, or, if not warped, then at least temporally biased. He was, perhaps, looking at atmospheric phenomena from the perspective of the dust mote. Short lived, ephemeral, changes in temperature and pressure utterly predictable on its compressed timescale, which, by association could be—

"Rush."

"*What.*"

"What are you doing?"

"Thinking."

He felt better than he had in days. In *days*. He had been up for about thirty-six hours and exhaustion was finally starting make a dent in the deflect-and-descend of his recalcitrant thoughts to the point where he could actually relax and fucking think

without the prospect of being dragged down into some kind of unnecessary tangent hell. If sanity were a function, what would its domain be? Its range? He liked Young. Quite a bit, actually.

"Seriously. Just get up, go in my bedroom and fucking take a nap. This is like, torturous to watch."

"Tell me to take a nap one more time and I will never make you another meal so long as ah fuckin' live."

"Nice accent."

"Nice fucking—" Unbelievably, his brain failed to supply him with anything even remotely witty.

Young raised his eyebrows.

"Shut up," Rush said, sitting up straighter, shaking his head slightly to clear it.

"That means I win, you know," Young said.

Rush looked up. Young was leaning against the wall, watching him with crossed arms and an amused expression that was colored with more than a hint of frustration. At present, amusement seemed to be carrying the day.

"You win what, exactly."

"If you say 'shut up,' that means I win. Young: one; Rush: zero."

"More like Young: one; Rush: twenty-five."

"We're starting right now," Young said with a half shrug lifted straight from Rush's own repertoire of body language.

Rush narrowed his eyes.

Someone pounded on the door.

Young looked at him. "Go," he said. "Take a nap. I'll tell them you're asleep. You *will* be asleep if you lie down for about three seconds."

"That's it," Rush announced. "No dinner for you."

"Rush," Young growled.

"Fuck," he said, with honeyed precision, "you."

Young shook his head.

Rush smirked at him and got to his feet, heading toward the door.

In one smooth motion, Young stepped forward, his hand wrapping around Rush's elbow, in a fluid close-and-drag, holding just long enough to check his forward momentum. Rush snapped his arm away from the hand that was already releasing him, jerking away with enough force that he had to rebalance himself on a chair.

"Whoa," Young said guardedly. "Sorry."

Rush looked at the wall, trying not to see what had nearly happened—the painful cascade of furniture and humans and laptops when an overly violent hypothetical recoil met chair and or table, resulting in injury for all involved parties which would be difficult to justify post hoc when someone, probably Jackson, was asking him to explain how it was that he had re-shattered Colonel Young's back, a conversation that would probably proceed with a great deal of vitriolic erudition on his part but very little in the way of rational explanation. As it was, he recovered from his entirely-within-normal-limits flinch following a longer than average stare at the wall that he managed to torque into something that fell within the bounds of irritation even if it had not begun there.

He was tired.

He was *tired*.

"Let's pretend that you have enough common sense not to waltz over there and open that door," Young growled.

"Waltz?" Rush echoed dryly.

"It's us," he heard Mitchell call through the closed door. "Not the LA. Not the bad guys. The good guys. Very good. Entirely guys. Today."

"I'm sure that's what they all say," Rush said, remarked, crossing his arms over his chest as he indicated the door with his eyes.

"Shut up, Rush."

"This is not going to go well for you, I'm afraid. Rush: one; Young: one."

Young glared at him and walked toward the door, his limp perhaps a shade less pronounced than it had been. What was that exactly—anticipatory machismo? Whatever it was, it didn't concern him. Rush perched on the edge of the table and awaited his laptop cum Daniel.

Young opened the door a few inches and then flung it wide, staggering slightly as Mitchell shoved a six-pack of beer in his direction. Rush stepped forward instinctively,

which was a distressingly impractical impulse because he was something like *five meters* away. He leaned back against the table. No one had noticed.

"Aw crap," Mitchell said, reaching out to steady Young in almost the same motion as he'd unbalanced him. "I always forget about this injury bullshit. You okay?"

"Yeah," Young replied though gritted teeth, clearly far from 'okay'. "Fine."

"Rush," Mitchell said, walking straight back toward the dining room, carrying an unnecessary quantity of beer. "Hey. You look—good. Better. Hi."

"Better than what?" Rush asked, feeling his eyes narrow.

"Better than unconscious," Jackson said, drawing even with Mitchell. The resemblance was uncanny.

"Are the pair of you related?" Rush asked, with as much disdain as he could manage to pour into his tone and expression. No harm in starting off on the offensive.

"Separated at birth," Mitchell replied, clapping Jackson on the shoulder as he headed through the kitchen door, presumably to refrigerate the beer.

Jackson sighed and handed Rush a rectangular item that seemed to have been hermetically sealed in layers of red plastic and tape.

"Is that my laptop?"

"They uh—" Jackson said, holding it out, "gift wrapped it for you?"

"Unacceptable." Rush snapped. "What was *done* to it?"

"I don't know," Jackson replied. "But hey—at least they gave it back to you."

Jackson's perpetual optimism was terribly fucking grating at times.

"*And*," Jackson continued, "I brought you coffee." He displayed what looked like a quarter pound of whole beans.

His propensity to come bearing coffee was, admittedly, *less* grating.

Rush sighed, hooked a hand over his shoulder, pressed his fingers into the muscles at the back of his neck and said, "Thank you. But I need a fucking coffee grinder."

"Well," Jackson said, looking pleased with himself, "I *also* brought you a grinder. Not a 'fucking' grinder though."

"Well," Rush replied, "one can't have everything I suppose." His eyes tracked Young as he limped into the kitchen, abandoning Teal'c at the doorway with a shoulder-clap, which seemed to be the colonel-equivalent of something like "aloha." Jackson noticed

the trajectory of his gaze and half turned to follow it like the insufferable interpersonal savant he was. Rush took advantage of his momentary distraction to snatch the coffee out of his hand and inspect it.

"What do you think?" Jackson asked.

"I think it might be passable."

"Oh it's more than 'passable'."

Jackson waved Teal'c over with a vague sweep of the hand. "Teal'c, Nick. Nick, Teal'c."

Teal'c nodded at him.

"Hello," Rush said.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Dr. Rush," Teal'c said.

"Likewise," Rush replied.

"Let's make this stuff. What do you say?" Jackson asked. "I'm dying here. I haven't had coffee since nine o'clock this morning. Did you really end up drinking instant? Mitchell said that Young said that you had to drink instant. I told him I didn't believe that you would do any such thing because I never would and you're about a thousand times more picky about your coffee than I am—I mean, unless I'm stuck in the field, no way am I resorting to instant. It was developed in 1901 and it really has shown horrifically little improvement in that time, especially relative to convenience foodstuffs when considered—" he made an alarmingly high energy hand gesture, "in the broader cultural context."

Teal'c and Rush exchanged a look.

"What?" Jackson demanded.

"Nothing," Teal'c said.

Rush shrugged.

Jackson sighed theatrically. "No one appreciates me."

"I would appreciate it if you would make me coffee," Rush replied mildly.

"As would I," Teal'c added.

"Give me that," Jackson said, grabbing the coffee beans back from Rush and making his way toward the kitchen. "You heathens."

Rush considered his laptop, studying the thick red plastic that completely sheathed it.

"What the fuck is *this*?" he murmured.

"Plastic," Teal'c replied.

Rush shot him a pointed look.

Teal'c raised an eyebrow and held out a surprisingly normal looking pocket-knife.

"You are," Rush said, "the first person I have met since coming to Colorado Springs who doesn't have a *fucking ridiculous* knife."

"That," Teal'c said, indicating the blade with his eyes, "is not my only knife."

"Of course not." Rush efficiently sliced open the plastic encasing his computer.

"You are a mathematician?" Teal'c asked.

"More or less," Rush said. "You're a leader of the Jaffa Nation?"

"More or less," Teal'c said, looking toward the window where the sun fell mercilessly through the slats in the blinds.

"Cryptographer," Rush said shortly, his eyes narrowing as he pulled the computer out of its synthetic crimson corolla. He ran his fingers over its edges, then turned it over, and opened the battery casing.

"Council member," Teal'c said, "and bloodkin to all Jaffa."

"An' yet," Rush said, not quite able to prevent the loss of the 'd' and the compensatory sharp crack of the broken 't' behind his teeth. "Here you are, about to watch a baseball game. Seems like you might have better things to do with your time."

"I like baseball," Teal'c said neutrally.

The kitchen door slammed open, and Rush nearly dropped his laptop battery. He was fairly certain Teal'c had noticed, but he managed to relax enough that he could fit the battery back into the bottom of his laptop with something approaching his typical speed and dexterity.

"I'm just saying," Mitchell said, wincing as he examined the wall behind the door, "that it's weird to drink coffee and beer at the same time. It just doesn't make any sense." He sacrificed one of the three six-packs he was carrying to prop open the kitchen door.

"It makes *perfect* sense," Jackson said, still out of sight within the kitchen, "if you have a caffeine dependency, which I *do*."

"Yeah. I know. And that seems like a terrible idea," Mitchell replied. "We need to talk about this. Coffee addiction is a liability in the field, Jackson."

"O'Neill attempted to break Daniel Jackson of his coffee habit many times," Teal'c said, eyeing Mitchell. "He was never successful."

"That's because he gave up," Mitchell said, looking back into the kitchen. "Pour half of that down the sink."

"Noooooooooooo," Jackson replied. "No, I will *not* be doing that."

"Baby steps, Jackson. Baby steps."

"Coffee is included in the field rations."

"And when you get captured by the Ori?"

"Caffeine withdrawal will be the least of my problems," Jackson replied in an admonishing singsong.

Mitchell sighed. "This isn't over, Jackson. Teal'c, have you seen the chips?" Mitchell called as he clicked on the TV.

"I have not."

"Damn. Did we forget them?"

"I believe *you* may have forgotten them," Teal'c replied.

"I have chips," Young said, appearing in the kitchen doorway. "At least, I think I do. Vala was pretty thorough in the kitchen stocking."

"Nice," Mitchell said. "That's Vala for you."

"What is *that* supposed to mean?" Jackson snapped from the kitchen.

"Um, nothing?" Mitchell said. "I just—"

Whatever he would have said was cut off by the mechanical whir of the coffee grinder.

Rush managed to turn his unavoidable flinch into a shoulder roll that he was fairly certain deceived neither Teal'c, who seemed to have decided that he was extremely interesting, nor Young, who was still standing in the kitchen doorway. Fuck them anyway, fuck *all* of them—no one would function optimally like this, ever-observed for even the smallest deviation from the required drapery of amused self sufficiency—the tipped up chin, shoulders back and down, the perfect fucking diction without a break in the rhythm of the thrust and fucking parry of the witty repartee, breaking down for nothing, not even for death or torture.

Or internal.

Or Auto.

He shook his hair back.

"Computer okay?" Young asked, walking toward him, eyeing the remains of the red plastic with a dubious eye.

"I haven't turned it on yet," he said, civil and crisp, his elocution nothing short of exemplary.

Teal'c headed toward the kitchen, potentially in search of 'chips'.

Mitchell flipped the TV on with the abrupt, mechanical hitch of engaging circuits.

He flinched.

Young sighed.

"Rush—"

"What." The word was a snapped-off hiss.

"Just—tell me if you want me to kick them out," Young said. "Okay? It's fine. It's *fine*."

"All right," Rush murmured.

"I'm serious," Young whispered, his eyes dark and intent.

"I *said*," Rush replied, "all right."

"I know what you said, I just don't believe you."

"And that," Rush snapped, "would be no one's problem but your own."

"You just seem kind of twitchy."

"Would you mind terribly just shutting up?"

"Young two, Rush one."

"Hey Nick," Jackson called from the kitchen, "Want to give me a hand in here for a minute?"

Rush stepped forward, but Young's hand closed over his shoulder.

If Young did not stop *touching him*—

"I got it," Young said gruffly, letting him go immediately. "You just—enjoy your reunion with your laptop."

Rush sank into a chair, unable and unwilling to argue—cracking through the patina of hypomanic good will that Jackson cast like a net wherever he went, allowing Young to take the brunt of it, allowing him to forestall whatever it was that Jackson was here to do. Whatever he was here to say.

He preferred David.

He preferred David with his infrequent smiles, and his lack of bullshit, his lack of sympathy and his lack of sensitivity. He preferred his merciless drive, his struggle to transcend, to never linger. He preferred the way, in San Francisco, he had always faced into the wind that blew in from the bay, eyes locked on the horizon.

He hoped the man wasn't dead. Hoped he wasn't being tortured to the point of death or insanity.

Rush's fingers traced the familiar edges of his laptop before he lifted the screen and powered it up. Transferring his ZKP and the data he'd compiled and analyzed would take no small amount of time.

He could hear Jackson and Young speaking quietly in the kitchen, their words an indistinct, atonal blur.

He shook his head, configured the Bluetooth, and started an over the air file transfer because he did not feel up to the energetic investment that locating the appropriate cable would require. He tried to direct his thoughts into a productive avenue, such as modeling the quantum response to a weak attack on the interface between gate and crystalline array.

Teal'c edged out of the kitchen, chips in hand, to join Mitchell on the couch.

"Rush," Mitchell said. "Come on."

He turned in his chair.

"No thank you," he replied.

"Aw, come on," Mitchell repeated.

"I'd rather die," Rush clarified politely.

"Um, okay then."

Jackson emerged from the kitchen, coffee in hand.

"Don't be a jerk to Mitchell," he said, raising his eyebrows at Rush as he set the coffee on the table. "He can't take it like I can."

Jackson dropped into an adjacent chair, earning himself a glower from Young.

"What are you working on?" Jackson asked, oblivious or indifferent to the vector of Young's borderline inappropriate hostility.

"Number five," Rush replied. "Obviously."

"You didn't sleep, did you?" Jackson asked, propping his chin one hand.

"Did *you*?" Rush shot back.

"No," Jackson replied, like he didn't see the relationship between the paired questions.

"So I don't see what you're complaining about then," Rush said, taking a sip of the coffee.

"My house is made of glass," Jackson admitted. "This is true."

Young joined them at the table, dropping into the seat across from Jackson his beer clicking quietly against the tabletop.

Jackson looked up in mild but obvious surprise. Rush wondered if he was accustomed to more subtle attempts at interference. Young was about as subtle as a ballistic projectile. The man's angle, whatever it was, remained opaque to him. He seemed to be taking an interest in Rush more out of boredom than anything, but that didn't explain why Young was so insistent on blocking Jackson's latest attempt to convince or coerce him into going to Atlantis as one prong of a multipronged attack that would eviscerate the Icarus Project.

If that was what Jackson was here for.

There was some possibility that Jackson was here for something else *entirely*.

Rush ran his thumbnail around the rim of his coffee cup and glanced up, meeting Jackson's eyes. They were intent. Questioning. The man held his gaze for just a fraction longer than was socially appropriate before he finally spoke. "I found something of yours." The words were casual. Jackson dropped his eyes and took a sip of his coffee.

"Oh yes?" Rush asked, just as casually.

Beside him, Young shifted. Rush didn't have to look at him to feel the full force of his lateral scrutiny.

Jackson said nothing, but he slowly reached into an inner pocket of his jacket and pulled out a pair of glasses. He set them on the table with a quiet click and then slid them toward Rush.

Beside him, Young shifted, some of the tension going out of his frame.

"Do you remember," Jackson asked, from the apex of casual indifference, "where you left them?"

Rush stared at the square black frames. He'd left them with David. In David's office, on the corner of a too wide, too organized desk, following a meeting that had occurred post-cracking of the third cypher. David's office wasn't a place that *Jackson* was in the habit of frequenting.

"Of course," he said smoothly. "When did you find them?"

"Early this morning," Jackson said, "when I was looking for something else."

Rush hung onto his neutral facial expression with difficulty. He felt a muscle in his cheek twitch subtly. Once. Twice. "I see," he said. "Did you find what it was you were looking for?"

"No," Jackson said.

"Well," Rush said, picking up his glasses and carefully unfolding them. "Your loss is my gain, I suppose."

"I wouldn't look at it that way," Jackson said.

Again, their gazes met.

Young cleared his throat. "Look," he said, "if you two are sleeping together, you can just say so. Put it out there. I really don't care."

Jackson choked on his coffee.

Rush shook his hair back out of his eyes, with as much hauteur as he could manage in the face of Jackson's frantic coughing. He slipped his glasses on and looked at Young over the tops of the black wire frames before pushing them into position.

Young gave him just a hint of a smile.

Rush smirked back at him.

"We're just friends," Jackson said, when the coughing had subsided.

"We're not friends," Rush said coolly.

"No, we're definitely friends. But *friends*," Jackson said.

"Whatever," Young said with a half shrug.

"So—I'm going to go and watch sports," Jackson said. "And—for your information—that is a sentence I never thought I'd willingly construct." He pushed back from the table gathering his coffee with a dignified disdain that Rush couldn't help but admire before wandering into the living room.

He and Young looked at one another.

"Where'd you leave your glasses?" Young asked, too quietly to be heard by anyone else.

"Jackson's fucking nightstand," Rush said, his tone as smooth as he could make it.

Young gave him a long, inscrutable look.

"Everett," Mitchell called. "You coming, or what?"

"Yeah," Young said. "I'm coming."

Two hours later, he was—

Still tired.

How to code for a crystal.

That was the problem that he was attacking in a free form, poorly organized, pathetic excuse for a mathematical narrative that seemed to tip into number theory whenever he was this fucking exhausted. Or drunk. His brain seemed to have a fascination with trying to superimpose a rationally continuous number line with a really continuous number line and wasn't that just an elegantly constructed mental thumb-screw. Square root of two—defining its own gap in a gapless line like the saucy little fuck it was.

He was tired.

There was an abrupt, unanimous eruption of disapproval from the other room at whatever was had just happened onscreen.

"What the heck. He'll tank his average at this rate," Mitchell said, in apparent dissatisfaction.

"Too right he will," Young commented.

For two hours Rush had been working on Carter's coupling code—the iris-gate interface from which he could steal at least part of what would become the foundation of the invitation to interrogate for his zero knowledge protocol. He scanned through her code—not elegant, not short, but raw and comprehensive and powerful. It created her framework and then worked through the inherent problems that self organized out of her detailed vision.

It was like reading her diary.

She was thorough. She built solidly and adjusted fluidly, inventively. When her solutions created problems, she built a subsequent round of solving into the source

code. She wasn't a programmer by training. Her code was always a means to an end, not the end itself.

Already, he liked her.

He'd heard she rode a motorcycle.

He wondered if that was true.

Jackson's phone rang.

"Hello?"

He had to peel his hands away from his temples.

It was just so fucking bright.

Did it never rain in Colorado?

"Oh hey."

It was possible that he was taking his current experiments in sleep deprivation a bit far.

"Yeah. It's nice, I actually—" Jackson broke off.

Especially considering the kitchen incident the previous day. Night. Hours ago.

"Why?" Jackson asked, drawing out the word suspiciously.

Rush half-turned to see Jackson was up from the couch and heading toward him.

"The man has a *name*, you know."

Rush raised his eyebrows.

Jackson rolled his eyes.

"Well I don't know if *he* wants to talk to *you*."

He presumed it was Vala.

"Vala," Jackson mouthed.

He held out his hand, and Jackson passed him the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hello gorgeous," she said, her voice somehow more immediate than he'd been expecting. "Have a minute?"

"I suppose."

Jackson was staring at him curiously.

"Would you mind—possibly—going somewhere that Daniel can't hear you?" she asked him.

"All right," he said. "One moment."

He stood, ignoring Jackson's blazingly curious look, and headed down the short hallway, away from the company and into the second bedroom in Young's corner apartment. The room had begun to take shape as a study of sorts. He shut the door behind him and then leaned back against it, trying to stay on his feet but somehow ending up on the floor, following an exhausted slide down the door.

"Go ahead," he said.

"Okay," she sounded like she was whispering. "I don't want anyone to know about this."

He gave the opposite wall an incredulous look. "Well, phoning me via Jackson is not what I'd call an auspicious beginning."

"I'm in a bookstore," she said.

"Ah yes," he replied, shutting his eyes, "extremely embarrassing."

"I want to buy a book on mathematics, but there appear to be several choices," she continued on, gamely ignoring his sarcasm.

He gave in to the impulse to lie down in the midst of the empty, unpacked floorspace.

"It's not clear to me why this needs to be a secret," he said.

"Well," she replied, "two reasons. One, I would imagine there's some kind of mathematics proficiency required to be a fully fledged member of a gate team—"

"That would make sense," Rush said, interrupting her. "I therefore doubt it's true."

Vala made a little amused sound, "I also—I don't want this to be—discussed. I don't want to publically attempt it and fail. I don't want to call attention to what I suspect is a significant deficiency in my qualifications to be a part of SG-1. I don't want—"

"Yes yes," he said. "All right."

"So advise away, gorgeous."

"How much formal mathematical training have you had?" Rush asked.

"None."

"None?"

"None."

"Addition?" he asked, "subtraction—"

"Yes," she said. "Multiplication and division. I'm extremely financially savvy, you know. Also, I have—some borrowed experience with spatial configurations and—well, we called it 'ona rok,' but it was a way of describing uniform and non-uniform motion."

"Borrowed experience?"

"I don't think you have the security clearance for that, gorgeous."

"All right, well, what exactly do you want to accomplish?"

"All of it," she replied.

"All of what?"

"All of math."

He smiled faintly. "Best to learn our conventions then. Start with algebra."

"I don't go to bookstores very often," she whispered. "I still have to be accompanied off the base."

"Algebra," he said, "then geometry."

"Then what?"

"Isn't Colonel Carter going to notice if you show up with something like thirty pounds worth of textbooks?"

"For your information, I have a stylishly large shoulder bag."

"Fantastic," he said.

"You sound exhausted," Vala said.

"Incorrect." He could feel his muscles relaxing into the sun-warmed wood of the floor.

"For what it's worth, I don't think they'd give you a hard time. They're so fuckin' wholesome, y'know?"

"SG-1? I know," she sighed. "That's exactly the problem."

"Aye," he said, "I suppose it is."

"Can I have your phone number?" Vala asked.

"Why?" he asked.

"I like having contacts," she said.

He rattled off his number.

"Right then, gorgeous," she said. "I've got to buy these and conceal them before Sam finds me. Do me a favor and imply to Daniel that I was flirting with you mercilessly this entire time."

He opened his eyes to give the ceiling a disdainful look. "Weren't you?" he asked dryly.

"That's the spirit," she said.

He ended the call and shut his eyes.

He was going to get up.

Falling asleep on the floor would be a terrible idea. For one, anyone opening the door would probably assume that he was fucking unconscious, which was not the case. For two—his train of thought shattered apart for no real reason that he could discern.

He rolled over and propped himself up on his elbows in preparation for getting to his feet.

It was then that he saw it there on the floor—not twelve inches from his current position. A small white square of paper that had been slipped under the door.

It was unquestionably Jackson's handwriting.

With a thrill of dread he reached out and pulled it toward him in one long sweep.

Next time you're at the SGC, pull your own medical file. Read the entire thing.

He closed his hand around the note, crumpling it in a fist and buried his head in his arms.

Chapter Eleven

Young could see it.

It rested behind his eyes even now, in the bright, slanted light of the summer afternoon, beneath Mitchell's too determined, too accented commentary, beneath the tap of Jackson's fingernails against the glass of his beer bottle, beneath Teal's impassive expression. It hung out there somewhere in the vacuum of space, against a field of unfamiliar stars—that smear of metallic and organic debris, beading together in a fine, frozen mist. He shut his eyes, but that only brought it out, glittering and stark against the dark behind his eyelids.

He took a swig of beer. It tasted bitter. Clean.

There was a cut to a commercial break and Mitchell leaned forward to open another bottle. "Who's driving?" Mitchell asked.

"Not you," Jackson said.

"I will drive," Teal announced, from where he had set himself up in Young's armchair.

"Nice," Mitchell said, popping the top off a bottle and sending it flying to rest somewhere beneath Young's coffee table. "Absent comrades," he said into a moment of unnatural quiet as an advertisement spot faded down into nothing.

Young touched his bottle to Mitchell's with a quiet clink of glass-on-glass.

"Absent comrades," Teal repeated, taking a sip of his beer.

Jackson looked away, his face twisting, pained. He stood abruptly and disappeared down the narrow hallway in the direction of Young's bathroom.

Mitchell shut his eyes, but only for a moment. "Baseball," he said, shifting on the couch to watch Jackson's retreat, sending a spike of agony through Young's back and hip. "Ain't nothin' better."

"I prefer hockey," Young replied through gritted teeth, trying not to give away the fact that he felt as though every sensory fiber in his back was dying a brutal, agonizing death.

If only his nerves *would* just up and die, that would suit him just fine.

He was going to have to find some ibuprofen soon.

After about five minutes, Jackson emerged from the bathroom, and Mitchell stopped shifting on the couch.

No one was really into the game, not even Cam, who was spearheading their attempts to go through the motions of talking loudly, plus or minus hand clapping with the proper emotional pitch, following the minor successes and failures of the Kansas City Royals. Young and Teal'c kept pace with him out of bromantic courtesy, uttering the appropriate responses with various levels of enthusiasm.

"Aw crap."

"Damn."

"Most regrettable."

Jackson was pacing the room behind them, uninterested in the game, clearly preoccupied. Young glanced at him occasionally, trying to take stock of the situation as best he understood it.

One—Jackson and Telford were currently or had been in open conflict about something regarding the Icarus project. Two—According to Rush, Jackson was extremely wary if not outright frightened at the prospect of dialing the nine-chevron address. Three—Jackson knew why Rush was at the top of the LA abduction list, as did the rest of SG-1. Four—Rush did *not* know why he was at the top of the list. Five—Mitchell thought that Jackson was going to make an attempt to pass Rush classified information against Landry's orders. Six—it was a good bet that the thing Jackson wanted to tell Rush was the thing that made Rush the top of the LA list.

Young spared another surreptitious glance at Jackson, who had stopped his pacing to look out through the mostly closed blinds. From the direction of his gaze, Young could tell that he was looking not at the parking lot, but at the mountains—toward the base.

Rush had been talking to Vala for a long time.

Too long, maybe?

As if Mitchell had just had the same thought, he noticed the other man's eyes flick toward the shadowed hallway.

Was Vala helping Jackson? Teamed up with him, a tighter alliance than the bureaucratic bonds of the SGC allowed or knew? Was she telling Rush—whatever it was that Jackson wanted him to know? If she was, there wasn't much Young could do about it.

"What do you think they're talking about?" Jackson finally asked, coming to stand next to the couch, one arm wrapped around his chest, beer in hand.

Maybe Vala was *not* in league with Jackson.

"You," Mitchell said.

"You," Teal'c said.

"Math?" Young said.

"Why would they be talking about *me*?" Jackson snapped. "Don't be ridiculous." He took a sip of his beer. "Math—maybe. Nick manages to twist everything around to it if you're able to breach his fortress of one-liners."

"I noticed," Young said.

"It's been a long time," Jackson said. "I mean, they've been on the phone a *long time*. Right? I can't imagine they have that much in common. Do they? Would they? Maybe? Actually, they might."

"Definitely keep debating it aloud with yourself," Mitchell said. "It'll be a good conversation starter when Rush walks back into the room."

Jackson turned around.

Teal'c looked amused. "I believe that Dr. Rush and Vala Mal Doran would make a formidable team."

"Oh god," Jackson said. "You're right but—in all the worst ways."

"Indeed," Teal'c replied.

"You don't think they're—*planning* anything, do you?"

"Daniel," Mitchell said. "Chill. What the heck are they even going to 'plan'?"

"He probably fell asleep," Young said. "He's been barely hanging on for hours now."

"Well," Jackson said, "I need my phone. I'm going to go check."

"You don't need your phone," Mitchell said abruptly. "In fact, you *hate* your phone."

"I do not 'hate' my phone," Jackson replied primly.

"You have, on many occasions, described your dislike for your phone," Teal'c said, backing Mitchell.

Jackson glared at the pair of them.

"I believe your exact words were 'I hate this thing, multifunctional devices are never a good idea'," Teal'c said.

"When did I say that?"

"In the car," Mitchell said.

"What car? When?"

"In *my* car. Today. On the way over here. Two and a half hours ago."

"I don't think that's true," Jackson said.

"It's totally true," Mitchell said.

"That never happened."

"It did," Teal'c said.

Jackson sighed.

"I'll go get your phone," Young said, getting painfully to his feet before anyone could tell him not to. "I need some ibuprofen anyway."

"I'll get it for you," Jackson said.

"Nah," Young said. "Take a seat, Jackson. Drink your damn beer."

Mitchell grabbed Jackson's wrist, dragging him down onto the couch.

"Maybe *several* beers," Young mouthed inaudibly, turning his back on the three of them. He made his way down the short hallway and ducked into the shadowed darkness of his unlit bathroom to down two ibuprofen. He traced his thumb over the unfamiliar line of the faucet as he finished his glass of water, then walked across the hall to the closed door of the second bedroom, listening at the door to see if he could discern the sound of talking. The room was silent. As quietly as possible, he eased the door open.

If he hadn't been mentally preparing himself, the whole faceplant-to-the-floor thing that Rush had going would have been extremely alarming. As it was, the boneless sprawl was just—mildly unsettling. He stepped through and eased the door shut just as quietly as he'd opened it.

Sure enough, Rush was holding Jackson's phone.

Halfway through dropping into a crouch, he realized that his current course of action was a terrible, terrible idea. He managed to abort by virtue of grabbing the doorframe and pulling himself back upright, biting his lip against the pain in his hip and back that seemed to writhe like a live thing. Like a fucking parasitic alien snake.

He slid down the wall, his back to the warming paint in a much safer route to the floor, his injured leg extending out in front of him. He rested for a moment, his head tipped back against the clean, white expanse of the unadorned wall as he breathed through the pain—trying not to fight it as it washed over him like a slowly receding tide.

After about a minute he was able to tip his head forward to level a silent glare at Rush.

When he felt like he had his equilibrium back, he leaned forward and carefully made an attempt to rescue Jackson's phone, edging it out gingerly from beneath Rush's fingers, dragging it cautiously against the hardwood floor. The mathematician seemed like he was pretty solidly out, and Young figured it wouldn't be too much trouble to just —

Rush snapped into sudden action—his fingers closing around Jackson's phone, wrenching it out of Young's tenuous grip. He flipped over, pulled away, and, in a motion that looked more instinctive than anything, sent Jackson's phone straight into the opposite wall.

Young jerked back, his hands instinctively going to his hip, and then to mid thigh for the sidearm he wasn't wearing.

"What the fuck," Rush shouted, pulling himself into a crouch.

"God *damn* it, *Rush*," Young shouted simultaneously, his heart hammering in his throat. "Take it easy."

"What the fuck were you *doing*?"

"Um," Young said, his back to the wall, both hands raised. "Getting Jackson's *phone*?"

They stared at each other for the span of about thirty seconds, breathing heavily.

Finally, Rush calmed down to the point that Young's words registered. He looked over at the device in question, which was now lying face down about ten feet away from them.

"Good work there, hotshot," Young growled. "I think you killed it."

"Fuck," Rush breathed, uncoiling from his defensive crouch. He slid over to retrieve the phone from what was likely its final resting place. The screen was a webbed lattice of cracks, pale against the black, reflective surface. The mathematician examined it intensively for the span of about five seconds, before he set it back on the floor, face down. He pulled in a shuddery breath, and then a second one. He straightened his glasses, neatly folded the crumpled square of notebook paper he was holding, shoved it into his pocket, and then pushed his hair back in one shaky sweep. "And what the

fuck," Rush asked with an unreal amount of poised disdain, "do you think you're doing. Exactly."

The guy was unbelievable.

"Oh no," Young said. "You don't get to turn this one around and make *me* seem like the guy who's half out of his head. Because that is *you*. For *sure*."

Rush shot him a disgusted look and Young did his best *not* to feel like an idiot.

Someone knocked on the door.

"Um, hey. Everyone alive in there?" Mitchell called hesitantly.

"Yeah. Mostly," Young called back.

Mitchell cracked the door open, and then slowly swung it wide to reveal both himself and Jackson standing in the doorway.

Teal'c had apparently decided to sit this one out.

"Heeyyyy," Jackson said slowly.

"I regret to inform you," Rush said, "that your phone did not survive Colonel Young's retrieval attempt." He held it up for Jackson's inspection.

Jackson pushed his eyebrows together, managing to look somehow puzzled and disapproving and skeptical all at the same time. "I can see that."

"Yes well. My apologies," Rush said, forcing himself to his feet in a motion that seemed to require more energy than he had to spare. "I'll write you a check."

"Did *Colonel Young* survive Colonel Young's retrieval attempt?" Mitchell asked, looking down at him.

"Yeah," Young said. "I'm fine."

"Yup," Mitchell said quietly, extending a hand down to Young. "Eeeeevvvveryone's fine. Everyone's *great*."

Young took the proffered hand and Mitchell pulled him to his feet, solid and careful.

Rush handed Jackson his phone.

"Mmm," Jackson said, turning the item over in his hands. "The vintage look."

"Oh sure," Mitchell said, giving Young a significant look and a long-suffering eye-roll.

"Now he likes it."

"It has character."

"Does it turn on?" Rush sighed. "Or are you preoccupied with form to the exclusion of function?"

Jackson smiled—a small and startled quirk of the lips. "If I were stuck on a desert island," he said, "and I could bring only one person, it would definitely be you."

"I'm going to tell Carter you said that," Mitchell said.

"No you're not," Jackson replied absently, without looking up. He turned his phone in a slow-motion continuous revolution through his fingers. "Because if you do, I'll tell her that you were the one who spilled coffee in her phase shifting array."

"You wouldn't."

"That was you?" Young asked.

"You heard about that?" Mitchell asked. "But *no*, it was *not* me."

"Everyone heard about it."

"The coffee was mostly shifted *anyway*. It set her back by, like, three hours. I don't even drink coffee," Mitchell said defensively.

"You will never get Sam to like you better than she likes me," Jackson said, pressing the power button on the device.

"Sounds like a challenge," Mitchell replied, crossing his arms and leaning back against the wall.

Rush stepped forward and snapped the phone out of Jackson's hands. "Why the fuck did I give this back to you?"

"No idea," Jackson replied.

Rush held down two buttons simultaneously and the phone powered up.

"Oh hey. Great," Jackson said, looking pleased.

Rush sighed. "Would you like a new phone?"

"Nah," Jackson said. "The shattered look is a good look."

Rush blinked in an exaggerated manner and shook his head. It wasn't the first time Young had seen him do it, and again he wondered whether it meant that Rush was thrown by the amount of stupidity he was encountering, or whether he was just *really* damn tired. Maybe it was the combination. There was something about it the motion that just seemed to suggest that the guy wasn't one hundred percent with it.

Jackson, apparently, felt the same way. He edged closer to Rush. "So what did Vala want?" he asked.

"My phone number," Rush said.

"Seriously?" Jackson said.

"Yes."

"Did you give it to her?"

"Are you going to stay in this room?" Rush asked, avoiding Jackson's question.

"Um—no?"

"Well, let me know where you're going to be, so that I can go somewhere else."

"You just *broke my phone*," Jackson replied. "Can you at least be civil?"

"I'll give you one thousand dollars and or *my phone* if you will just—leave me alone."

Jackson sighed.

"And on that note," Mitchell said, "look at the time. I think we're supposed to meet the ladies for dinner pretty soon. I think Vala wanted to try Japanese."

"There's no good Japanese food in Colorado Springs," Jackson said.

"Someplace opened up around the corner from O'Malley's," Mitchell said.

"It won't last," Jackson said. "Nothing interesting ever lasts here."

"Well, it *definitely* won't last if we don't give them our money," Mitchell said.

"Very true," Jackson replied. He looked over at Rush.

Rush was staring at the wall.

"Are you going to take my advice?" Jackson asked.

"Yes," Rush said.

"Good," Jackson said. "We'll talk more later."

"What advice?" Mitchell asked, his tone hardening.

"Just health related stuff," Jackson replied with a fluid shrug. "Very boring. Very ordinary."

"Jackson," Mitchell snapped.

"What, insomnia is somehow subversive now? Maybe I should have okayed *that* with General Landry."

"I have an idea," Mitchell said, "you stop talking, and we go get Japanese food."

Jackson shot Mitchell an irritated glance before looking back at Rush. "Like I said—we'll talk more later."

"I'm sure we will," Rush said shortly, crossing his arms over his chest.

Young and Mitchell exchanged significant glances before Mitchell turned to follow Jackson out of the room. Young turned to look at Rush. The other man had hooked one hand over his shoulder, his fingers digging into the back of his neck.

"You okay?" Young asked.

Rush shut his eyes.

"What did Jackson tell you?" Young murmured.

"Nothing." The word was nearly inaudible. "Nothing."

"Trying to find out things that you're not supposed to know—" Young began quietly, "well, it's a bad idea, hotshot."

"You really believe that?" Rush asked, looking up at him with his dark, intolerable eyes.

Young looked away.

"I didn't think so," Rush whispered.

Young said nothing, just turned away from him, into the dimness of the hall. He emerged back into his living room to find three fifths of SG-1 gathering up the various things that they'd brought with them. Jackson was at the table, looking uncertainly at Vala's computer.

"You can take it," Rush said from behind him. "I'm finished."

"All right," Jackson replied. "You really should get some sleep, you know."

"Yes yes," Rush replied.

"You can stay at my place," Jackson said quietly.

Young bit his lip.

Rush shook his head.

"Yo, Jackson," Mitchell called from where he was standing with Teal'c next to the doorway. "A glacier just passed by."

"Hilarious *and* subtle," Jackson drawled, tucking Vala's laptop under one arm and raising an eyebrow at Rush. "You see what my life is like?"

"Les hommes parfaits comme les nombres parfaits sont très rares," Rush said.

"Comme je l'ai dit—desert island. Number one pick," Jackson replied.

"You have impeccable taste," Rush said.

"Both a blessing and a curse," Jackson replied with a twisted smile.

"You speak French?" Young asked, looking at Rush.

"I was quoting," Rush replied.

"That wasn't an answer," Young said.

"Noticed that, did you?" Rush glanced at him obliquely.

"Nick," Jackson said, looking back over his shoulder, "are you sure that—"

"Bye guys," Mitchell said, stepping forward to drag Jackson into the hallway.

Young gave them a half-hearted wave before shutting the door. He leaned forward for a moment against the solid wood before turning around to take in Rush, who had one shoulder braced against the wall, his eyes half shut—whether out of exhaustion or in response to the glare of the afternoon sun, Young couldn't say. Young watched him for a few seconds, trying to decide whether Jackson had succeeded in sharing the unknown, unidentified piece of information with him—whatever it was that Landry wanted concealed, and Jackson wanted out in the open.

"What?" Rush asked. Even now, even visibly exhausted, he managed to curl a ghost of menace around the word.

"You all right there, hotshot?"

"Yes," Rush said, shutting his eyes entirely. "Don't call me 'hotshot'."

"What was that thing with the phone?" Young asked.

"What thing with the phone?" Rush asked, his words slurring slightly.

"You're—a little bit hair triggered," Young said cautiously. "You know that?"

"You were the one creeping about," Rush replied. "What the fuck do you expect?"

"Um, from a math professor? Not what I got."

"I think—" Rush said with a vaguely circular hand gesture, "that perhaps you should recalibrate in some way."

"Maybe *you* should recalibrate."

"You're the one whose expectations do not match up with reality," Rush said. "I'm perfectly fuckin' aligned."

Young made an incredulous face that Rush did not see, due to the fact that his eyes were closed.

"Rush," Young growled. "You're killing me here. Take a nap for god's sake."

"I am uninterested in your suggestions," Rush replied.

"Rush, so help me god, if you pass out I am calling it in as a medical emergency."

"You wouldn't," Rush said, cracking his eyelids open.

"I absolutely would."

"Oh I suppose you would at that." Rush sighed. "This is better, you know."

"Exhaustion? Better than what?"

"You'll get the idea," Rush murmured, "if you know me long enough."

Young stepped forward and closed a hand around Rush's elbow, tightening his grip against Rush's inevitable, compensatory recoil before steering the other man toward the couch.

"I don't sleep on couches," Rush murmured.

"I think you make an exception for this one," Young said.

"I don't think I do."

"Yup," Young said, "I'm pretty sure about this."

"I despise couches," Rush informed him.

"That's very interesting," Young said, managing to partially unbalance Rush as he pressed him sideways and down onto the sofa. "Tell me more."

"Shut up."

"Young three; Rush one," Young growled.

"Fuck. Enjoy it while it lasts."

"Yeah yeah," Young said, fighting the twist of a smile.

Shake out. Hang up. Young was half an hour into creating an organizational system for his closet when his phone rang. The caller ID did nothing for him—his phone was reading it as unknown, which almost certainly meant that it was someone calling from the base.

"Young," he said, cradling his phone awkwardly between shoulder and ear.

"Colonel." Landry's gravelly pseudo-joviality was unmistakable. "It's Landry."

Young grimaced and dropped the pants he was holding, his left hand coming up to grab the phone.

"General," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"How's the hip?"

It was the back, actually, that was more of the problem, but hey. Close enough.

"Fine," Young said. "Better."

"Glad to hear it," Landry said.

There was a strange silence that seemed to stretch interminably while Young stared, unthinking, at his wall, trying to figure out what, if anything, he was supposed to say.

"I know you're technically still on medical leave, but I'm calling to ask if you'd mind coming in for a meeting on Monday afternoon," Landry asked.

"No problem," Young said. "Can I ask what this is about?"

"I'd rather not say," Landry said. "I know we're scrambled, but—it's of an unusually sensitive nature."

"Understood," Young said. "What time?"

"Thirteen hundred hours," Landry said. "Also, I just saw Bill Lee—it looks like you'll probably get your apartment back to yourself in the next few hours. They've almost cleared your neighbor's place."

"Great," Young said, shooting a skeptical look at his closed bedroom door. "Sir, while I have you on the line—Dr. Rush told me he believes he may need to go offworld to make any significant progress on the next cypher."

"I'm assuming your response to that was laughter," Landry said.

Sometimes it was very difficult to tell whether Landry was being sarcastic or not.

"Um, no," Young said. "He seems pretty certain that he's going to need to do this. He says he needs a DHD."

"Have him write up a detailed protocol for what he wants done," Landry said. "I'll send Carter to do whatever—wait. No. I can't send Carter. I'll send—well. Someone."

"I think he's going to tell you that *he* needs to go," Young said.

"And I'm sure he thinks that." Landry sighed.

Young stayed quiet.

"Have him write it up," Landry said. "Have him include a rationale for his personal involvement, and submit the report to Carter. If she agrees that no one else can do it, I'll let him go to the alpha site for three hours. Not one second more."

"So," Young said, "he may end up breaking the DHD of whatever planet he gates to."

"You're pulling my leg."

"No sir."

Landry sighed again. "Well, I'll say this much for him—at least he told us ahead of time. But no. There is no way we are risking even the possibility of putting him on a ship."

"That's what I figured you'd say," Young replied. "He just—seemed pretty certain that it was going to be necessary. That's the only reason I brought it up."

The line was silent.

"But," Young said, "you're probably right. I'm sure there are other people who can—do what he can do."

Again, the line was silent. He wondered if he had pushed things too far. He wondered what the hell had gotten into him.

"If," Landry said, pausing significantly, "*if* I can figure out a way to do this in a manner that is somewhat secure—do you think he can handle going into the field? Two out of three times he sets foot on the base he ends up being forced into a psych evaluation. I want your honest assessment on this one, colonel."

"He's maybe a bit less reliable than your average unreliable SGC-issue genius," Young murmured. "I think it would depend on who you sent with him. Some choices would be—better than others."

"Let me think about it," Landry said. "In the meantime, have him get that report to Carter. He's going nowhere unless she agrees it's necessary."

"I'll let him know," Young said quietly.

"See you Monday, colonel."

"Yes sir," Young replied.

He ended the call and sighed, one hand coming to rest on his lower back as he stared into space, trying to think of nothing. Trying not to think of David, an organic smear across space—or screaming his throat raw as they tortured him. Maybe to death. Trying not to think of Daniel, and the subtle fear in the perpetual hunch of his

shoulders. Trying not to think of the hardness that crept more and more into Cam's voice. Of the occasional, pained freeze of Vala's hands. Of Rush, unconscious on his couch.

It would be all right.

There was no point in trying to figure out everything at once.

He pulled the next shirt out of his box, unfurled it, and hung it in his closet.

Chapter Twelve

On Monday morning, after thirty-seven hours spent in the confines of Colonel Young's apartment and another twenty spent in his own now-certified-as-safe apartment, Rush leaned against his wall, watching shadows fade to gray as the sun rose on the opposite side of the building. The sound of a solitary engine coming to life broke the stillness of the dawn.

He did not know how to proceed.

His windows faced west. West-facing windows were an empirical disaster post-noon, but he preferred that to being knifed in the optic nerve every morning in a welcome-to-the-day-with-a-supraorbital-scalpel-of-solar-radiation phenomenon.

Jackson's windows faced east and, like many things about Jackson, that bothered him. If one had been killed by electromagnetic radiation, waking up to a shower of it every morning seemed terribly cruel. Perhaps Jackson hadn't noticed. Perhaps he did not equate solar radiation with radioactive decay; certainly there were differences, but those were of degree. The final common pathway was the same. Jackson was very perceptive. It was likely that he knew. He knew, and did nothing. Living in the dark was not practical, after all.

Fucking Daniel.

The remembered sound of metal to glass.

She had always liked it, the snap of her wedding ring against a hard surface. In the silence, he could very nearly hear it.

He watched gray light spread across darker gray asphalt and tried to decide what to do.

Theory or practice, abstraction or empiricism, to be in the world or to be of it—false dichotomies forever falling to fucking hell, where only the fallacious went when they died. Cognitive errors, cognitive dissonance, aural dissonance; it was only the longing for the hypothetical that composed his tenuous bridge to functionality, serving as a workaround for the places in his mind that were best left in that abyss between physical survival and the exquisite architecture of the purely theoretical.

What to do.

He was interested in the gate, in the subtle cryptographic pressures that would make it yield everything to him.

He was *less* interested in himself, specifically what lay in that region between basic survival and higher math—the part of him that was pathetically packed away along with the rest of his previous life to await whatever was coming for him at the unlocking of chevron nine. *Something* was coming, the same thing that had *always* been coming for him—the thing that she had deferred for him even right up until the end—paying a personal cost that he could only guess at but never truly know.

And for what. For this. One last problem to solve. One last problem to shatter, revealing that which was underneath. Revelation was not an easy, popular, nor satisfying career choice, generally speaking. Not when one was a mathematician. Especially not then. He could not think of a single person for whom it had ended well.

He drove the heel of one hand into against his left eye and made his *n*th attempt to focus. He hadn't determined how seriously he should take Jackson's earnest concern, so full of fucking import it seemed to displace the oxygen in the air. How he should take the slide of his glasses across the table, the implication that Jackson had been illicitly searching Telford's office, the further implication that the rift between the two men was deeper than anyone guessed. Profound enough that Jackson would risk what had almost certainly been an unauthorized breach of security to look for something that Telford had been trying to conceal.

And Daniel.

It was *just like* Jackson to do this—to accrue power by giving it up in some kind of bizarre reverse-kamikaze interpersonal maneuver. The man had as good as admitted to an act that would be viewed, in a best-case scenario, with extreme suspicion by General Whomever-The-Fuck and the IOA. In a worst-case scenario, such an act could get him investigated, kicked out of the program, and/or charged with treason if he ended up on the wrong side of an overly draconian anti-LA policy. The man had put an alarming amount of implied knowledge straight into Rush's own ledger and left it to him to declare himself in the pro-Jackson or anti-Jackson camp.

Pull your own medical file. Read the entire thing.

Would it have been so fucking hard for the man to just communicate whatever it was that he'd wanted to say?

'Nick, you're not human.' That one seemed unlikely, but if it turned out to be the case, he wouldn't be particularly perturbed.

'Nick, the SGC gave you the memories of a fucked up cryptographer as a social experiment.' He should be so lucky.

He supposed that had Jackson been explicit, it would have been difficult for him to maintain plausible deniability if Colonel Young had discovered the note that he'd slipped under the door.

There was something pernicious and unsettling in the suggestion that he look at his medical file. That argued for the revelation of personal, potentially disturbing information, which perhaps was *not* best addressed via post-it note. At least—that would be the conventional wisdom. Empirically, Jackson just couldn't seem to comprehend that Rush simply did not give a fuck. About anything. With one exception.

He was going to deflower that delicate, gloriously constructed, nearly impenetrable web of cyphers that wove in and around the circuitry of the gate. He was going to dismantle it—force it to open to him, to rip through it, stepwise and incremental, for no other reason than that it had crossed paths with him and his mathematical vendetta against the arcane, against the abstruse, the false, and most of all, against anything with the audacity to shut him out.

He would not be shut out.

Not out of anything, and most certainly not ever, ever out of a mathematical or computational lock.

He would pull his own medical file, but not because he believed that Jackson's preferred course of action aligned with his best interests. Not because he trusted Jackson any more than he trusted Telford. He would pull it because it might help him unlock the gate. He would pull it because it was related to the Icarus project. He would pull it because it had been locked away from him, and that was unacceptable.

Such a course of action was not without risk—to know was to enter an irreversible trajectory. One could not unsee the precarious foundation of set theory or the entropic progression. Having looked, one could not look away.

Three hours later, external hard drive in his back pocket and keys in hand, he knocked on Young's door.

There was no answer.

He knocked again.

After a protracted interval Young opened his door with a slow, cautious swing.

The uniform gave him pause—dark and blue with the little fucking birds on it—as well as various other examples of arcane semiotics that both appealed and repulsed. He didn't like it.

"I knew it would be you," Young said, already sounding aggrieved. "I could just *tell*."

"You realize that you can't separate your ability to characterize people by their knocking styles from your contextual awareness of the relative probabilities of different individuals showing up at your door."

Young stared at him.

"I am unimpressed," Rush clarified.

"Well that makes me unsurprised."

"On several levels, apparently."

"True."

"Are you going to let me in?" Rush asked.

"Actually, I was just leaving," Young replied.

"So I see. I was under the impression that you were on medical leave."

"Not today."

"I was just coming to inform you," Rush said, "that I am driving in to the base. I have a meeting with Dr. Perry."

Young shot him a look that transitioned directly from amused irritation to irritated irritation. "To the base? No one would schedule you for a meeting *one business day* after you nearly got abducted. And why are you telling *me*? Call dispatch and they'll send someone for you."

Oh yes.

Yes of course.

Call dispatch.

What was he, a fucking ten year old with a deficiency in problem solving?

Oh, hang on a tic.

That wasn't him.

That was *Young*.

"I don't get fucking 'scheduled', Young, I schedule myself. Furthermore, I called dispatch approximately five minutes ago and they informed me that my functional status is currently 'undecided'. Therefore, they cannot authorize or deny any kind of official transport as of the present moment and would prefer that I stay in my current location until such a time as they advise me otherwise."

Young looked at his watch and then stepped back. "Get in here," he said. "And never discuss anything of importance in any hallway. Ever. Always inside."

Rush shot him a pointed look over the rims of his glasses as Young shut the door behind him.

"You have no common sense," Young said, managing to look significantly more intimidating in uniform than he did in jeans and a T-shirt.

"I don't think that avoidance of hallway conversations falls into the 'common sense' category," Rush snapped, trying to regain his equilibrium.

Young sighed. "Can't it wait? Whatever it is that you think you have to do?"

"Until what point, exactly? The time when I'm no longer an abduction target?"

"Rush. You have to stay here."

"No, I do *not*." He could hear an edge creeping into his tone that seemed to match the edge creeping into his thoughts. He paced over toward the window, trying to fight his way free of any sense of entrapment. He placed his hand on the glass. It wasn't helping.

"Rush, you're a half-step away from being put in protective custody. The only reason you're not *already there* is that from an information security standpoint, the SGC is about as penetrable as a sieve right now. Don't give them a reason to—"

Young's words faded down abruptly as Rush whirled to face him.

"To what," he hissed.

Young didn't answer.

"To. What."

"To force you into anything you *don't want*," Young said carefully. "I get the impression that there's more at stake here than just you personally, hotshot."

"What do you know?" Rush snapped.

"Nothing," Young said, locking eyes with him. "Other than the fact that there are a lot of parties who are very—interested in you. Do you know why that might be?"

Briefly, he contemplated telling Young about Jackson's note. "No," he snapped instead, the persistent ache in his shoulders nearly unbearable. "I don't know."

Young's jaw tightened, and he dropped his eyes. "All right," the other man said, pulling out his phone. "I'll give you a ride. I have to call it in, though."

"What's to call in?" You still have Mitchell's now superfluous portable scramblers don't you? Just give me one. I'll fucking *hold* it. Problem solved."

"Rush, I can't just—"

"This only becomes a problem if you *make* it a problem because you have a closet desire to fill out a form in triplicate and wait three days to do *exactly what I'm proposing*."

Young looked at him with a pained, uncertain expression.

Rush bent down to sweep the nearest scrambling device off the floor. The metal casing was warm beneath his fingers. A single light pulsed with a faint blue glow.

"Rush," Young said, bracing one hand on the wall. "Holding that glorified router is not a solution. The only thing it protects against is a remote beam-out, which that extra thing in your arm should be protecting against *anyway*."

"I'm aware."

"Well then you should realize that—"

"Yes," Rush snapped. "Whatever you're about to say? I've realized it."

Young stared at him. "If they can't beam you out, they'll come for you by force. I can't protect you from that."

"I doubt anyone can," Rush said. "Just fucking tell dispatch we're carpooling so that no one annexes me to some underground bunker somewhere because they're under the mistaken impression I'm irresponsible."

"You *are* irresponsible."

"Not—" he had to look away from Young for a moment in order to regain his fraying control. "Not that irresponsible. Not to such a degree"

David would have understood.

David understood it *all*.

That was the problem with David.

That had been the problem with David.

"No," Young said in that careful, low tone that he was coming to despise. "No, you're not."

Rush looked back at him sharply. "Well then," he said, "what are you waiting for? An instruction manual?"

Young rolled his eyes but pulled out his phone.

Rush turned away from him, pacing edgily a bit further into the other man's now familiar and ninety percent unpacked apartment. Only odds and ends remained to be sorted. Or trashed.

"Yeah, hi, this is Colonel Everett Young. Can you pass me through to ah—who's coordinating right now? Harriman?"

He could tell by the echo of Young's voice that the other man was facing him. Watching him. Was he so interesting, so notable, so unstable, so clearly—so clearly whatever it was that he clearly was? It had not been this bad in a long time. And there were reasons for that, best left unexamined. It was all right. Everything was fine and stable and sustainable. He tipped his head back, pressing his fingers against the rigid tension that seemed to comprise the back of his neck. He looked at the clean expanse of wall that Young would never write on. That *no one* would ever write on. He dropped his shoulders back and down and tried to snap back into a lower energy state. Self-examination was neither required nor advisable.

"Hey Walter—look, do you know about the whole situation with Dr. Rush?"

Dr. Rush. That was nice. Well then.

"Yeah. Yeah, the consultant."

Young paused.

"Yeah. The famous one."

Rush raised his eyebrows.

Young shot him a look that ended up being an odd blend of self-conscious aggression.

Rush opened his hands and rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, Harriman, I *know*. The guy is literally my neighbor. Look, he wants to come in to the base to meet with Dr. Perry and there's some kind of holding pattern in place. His status is like—stuck in bureaucratic limbo or something. I'm going to authorize myself to just bring him in. Can I do that?"

Rush gave Young a look that was designed to convey as much disdain as he could pack into an over-the-glasses stare.

"Well I don't know," Young said, turning away from Rush's scrutiny. "I'm not an expert on dodging red tape—but this guy is basically living in a Kafka novel."

Rush pushed his glasses up and toned his disdain down, but it was a wasted effort because Young wasn't looking at him.

"Just stick a note in there so it looks legit. So it *is* legit. I'm *making* it legit."

Absently, Rush ran his fingers over the transponder implanted under the skin of his left forearm searching out its contours with his thumbnail before switching to trace the nearly imperceptible, still sensitive place where his encryption key was buried.

He wondered if Telford was still alive.

"Yeah," Young said. "Yup. I'll see you soon." He ended the call and looked over at Rush. "All right hotshot," he said. "Try not to get abducted this afternoon. Otherwise I'm going to look bad."

"Perish the thought," Rush said dryly, heading for the door.

"You taking your router?" Young asked, eyeing the flat metal scrambler that Rush was still holding.

"It's a non-redundant security measure," Rush snapped.

Young fished in his pocket for his keys, and looked up at him. "Take it easy. I thought the chip in your arm was supposed to scramble your signal."

"The chip," Rush said, watching Young lock his door, "is a gatekeeper. All subcutaneous transponders used by the SGC receive a query code and then broadcast a unique signal, allowing for lock on and beam out."

"Right," Young said, pocketing his keys.

"The chip encrypts my broadcast signal, preventing a lock unless the transporting party also has the correct key, stopping any unauthorized party from initiating a beam out. The scrambler, on the other hand," Rush waved the device subtly in Young's direction, "literally distorts the energy signature of the transporter, preventing *any* kind of lock, including a local transport sweep of a limited area."

"The scoop," Young said grimly.

"The what?"

"That's what Carter calls it," Young replied as they walked down the dim hallway shoulder to shoulder. "Or at least that's what Mitchell says that Carter calls it. If you have a fairly precise location for what you want to beam out but you don't have a signal, you can scoop up everything in the area."

"I suppose," Rush replied.

"Oh come on. That's exactly what it is."

"I prefer 'local transport sweep'."

"No one's going to remember that one though. Besides. The 'scoop' sounds more polite than what Jackson's been calling it. Dollars to donuts it's Jackson's name that sticks."

"Isn't it always." Rush looked over at him.

"The slice." Young said, in response to Rush's inquiring gaze. "Because of—"

"Ugh," Rush said, looking away, unable to completely control his facial expression.

"Yeah."

"Precision—would be difficult to achieve, I suppose."

"That's why we *never* do it."

"Then how—"

"Don't worry about it, hotshot." Young reached out and punched the button for the elevator.

He tried not to think of anything. Failing that, he tried to think of the complex plane. Of the direction of travel around a closed curve. A short, silent elevator ride gave way to the menace of bright light beyond a clear glass doorway. Rush paused briefly to swap his glasses for shades, peripherally noting as Young did the same.

"God," Young said. "It looks brutal out there."

Rush said nothing. He pressed the glass of the door forward and forced himself out into the wall of heat. The air was dry and shimmering, but it was the light that was worse. The light was always worse.

"This is terrible," Young said.

Was Colorado a desert? The only thing he could see were distant mountains and expanses of asphalt. Whatever its biome, Colorado Springs was fucking hideous.

"Rush. My car is this way."

"I'm driving," Rush informed him.

"Nope. Nope, I think we were pretty clear on the *me* giving *you* a ride and not the other way around."

Rush stopped, unable to face the idea of giving in to Young in this unremitting rain of photons.

"Rush. We're not arguing about this."

"True," Rush said. He tossed the signal scrambler he was still holding at Young in a high parabolic arc, pulled out his keys, and started toward his car.

Young stepped sideways to catch the device in a motion that looked like pure instinct.

"Rush. *Rush*. What the hell are you doing?" Young growled, very nearly dropping the flat metal casing that still glowed faintly blue before his fingers closed around it solidly.

"Catch," Rush said, dry and belated.

"Rush, *you* are the one who should be holding this thing," Young growled.

"It has a six meter radius," Rush replied, turning toward his car. "I therefore recommend that you come this way."

He unlocked his white Prius.

"You drive a *Prius*?" Young asked.

"It's open," Rush said, sliding into the driver's seat.

The heat in the car was merciless. He could feel his hair beginning to cling to the back of his neck.

Young didn't get in the car until Rush had already started it, whether out of some kind of need to make a stand, pure irritation, or indecision—the rationale behind his hesitation was unclear. When he finally did slide in, with a pained, stiff movement, he slammed the door behind him with unnecessary force. "Has anyone ever told you that you're a lot of work?"

"Not in those precise words," Rush said, turning on the air conditioning.

"Well you are."

"Am I supposed to be insulted by this?" Rush asked.

"You drive a Prius?" Young said. "Seriously, a Prius?"

"Well, what the fuck do you drive then?"

"Not a Prius. That's just so—"

"So what," Rush snapped, throwing the car into reverse and backing out of his parking spot with rapid precision.

"God, be *careful*. This parking lot is really tight." Young's warning faded down on the last word as Rush straightened the wheel and accelerated toward the exit.

"Are you planning on being like this the entire time?" Rush enquired politely.

"Like what?"

"Terribly fucking annoying. What's wrong with driving a Prius?" He pulled out of the parking lot and into the wide flat expanse of road that meandered through the obligate suburban sprawl before it narrowed in its ascent up to the base.

"Nothing's *wrong* with it, it's just that—you are *definitely* breaking the speed limit." Young glanced over at the dashboard. "Did you know that?"

"Aren't you in the Air Force? Do you not fly planes at—" he wasn't entirely sure how to elegantly escape the phrase he had just poorly put together, so he just went with the mathematical conclusion he'd been conceptualizing in the first place. "Mach undefined?"

"Mach undefined? I don't know what that even means. I figured you would at least drive stick."

"I do drive stick," Rush said, "just not in this car. Mach is a dimensionless number which measures the—"

"I know what 'mach,' means, hotshot. I *am* a pilot."

"Do you? Astound me." Rush smirked faintly and accelerated to make the upcoming light that hung out over the road, its color nearly invisible against the glare of the sun.

"A ratio of velocity to the speed of sound. You are an *asshole*, and you are not the only person in the world who knows anything about math—and you *really* should not change lanes in an intersection." Young sounded like he was speaking through clenched teeth.

Rush glanced over at him. There was a tightness around his eyes that suggested perhaps rapid acceleration and deceleration were not so much conceptually objectionable as empirically painful. He did not decrease his velocity, but he decided at the next light he would decrease its rate of change. "Correct, except for the fact it's the ratio of velocity to the local speed of sound. And there is no law regarding lane changes in intersections. I specifically looked into this."

"Number one—is that supposed to tell me what the hell 'Mach undefined' means? You're a terrible explainer. Also, I don't know about wherever you were before you were here, but there is, most certainly, a law about lane changes in intersections in Colorado."

Rush suppressed a sudden flash of irritation. "How am I supposed to keep track of all of these ridiculous state-to-state differences? 'Undefined,' amongst other things, refers to the conceptual difficulties in dividing a number by zero, which really doesn't make any fucking sense. You can't partition anything into *no* subsets. It causes all sorts of problems."

$f(x)=1/x$. That was a nice one.

"Where is the speed of sound zero? Is that what you're getting at?"

"Where indeed?" Rush replied, accelerating smoothly to meet the rise of the incline that separated the ugly parade of strip malls from the ascent to the base.

Young was quiet for a moment. Then he said: "Space?"

"Technically, it's less that the speed of sound in a vacuum is zero and more that compression waves literally cannot propagate without a medium so—" Rush shrugged and he took a switchback at an utterly sedate speed. The sun was fucking pitiless. Perhaps he should have let Young drive. Then he could have shut his eyes.

"So basically we just had a five minute conversation that could be summed up as you not understanding why I am so put off by you ignoring speed limits based on the argument that I fly vehicles in space and so I should just be fine with the fact that you drive like a maniac?"

"That's an adequate if inefficient summary of my position, yes," Rush said, accelerating slowly out of another switchback.

"You can die just as easily in a car as you can in space," Young growled.

That had the ring of some kind of universal truth.

"I'm an excellent driver," Rush said.

"Hotshot," Young said, "that's kind of like telling people you're a lady."

"I fail to follow what I assume is going to be some kind of failure in reasoning but, by all means, explain yourself."

"Okay, bad example maybe. It's like telling people that you're ethical. If you have to say it, then you aren't."

"That's an unreasoned assertion," Rush said.

"I'm, like, three seconds away from a logical fallacy," Young said dryly. "Aren't I?"

"I suspect that is your usual state."

"Shut up, *Rush*."

"Rush: two, Young three," he said, smirking.

Young sighed. "I'm still winning."

"For now."

He accelerated out of another switchback and into the limited shade of the mountain, his speed smooth and controlled, and yes, perhaps the rate of change of his velocity was faster than the average but that did not mean that there was any inherent qualitative or quantitative defect in his handling of narrow turns or his judgment of distance, position, acceleration, or timing. The intersection lane change—well. Fine. Apparently Colorado gave a fuck about those things.

When they had made the final approach to the base, flashed their badges and parked, Young looked over at him and passed him the signal scrambler. "I am never driving with you again."

"How are you going to get home, then?" Rush asked dryly. "Limp?"

"*I'm* driving back," Young growled, his expression closed.

"I don't think so."

In all honesty, that would be fine with him. By the time he was done here, his headache would likely have passed straight through its known landscapes and into the lesser explored territory of Total Excruciation.

Rush opened the car door into the thick heat of the troposphere and stepped out, caught between the deluge of sun and the heat that rose off the pale, cracking asphalt of the parking lot. He shut the door, pocketed his keys, and pushed his hair out of his eyes.

He and Young crossed the parking lot together.

The cool air and comparatively dim lighting just past the security station were a relief, but, unfortunately, he suspected it was too late to reverse the headache trajectory that had been set in motion the moment his retinas had started to take the full brunt of the sun.

Young hit the button for the elevator. His entire frame seemed more rigid than usual. As if he didn't want even the security cameras to know that he was injured.

The elevator opened with a low chime and they stepped inside.

Young reached out and hit the buttons for floors nineteen and twenty-seven simultaneously and then looked over at Rush. "Seriously, hotshot, do *not* leave without me."

Rush stared at the metal wall of the elevator directly in front of him.

"And stay on level nineteen," Young added.

"Naturally," he replied.

"Why do I get the feeling that you're just going to do whatever the hell you please?"

"I have no idea."

The elevator doors chimed softly and then opened on level nineteen.

"Keep that scrambler with you," Young said. "And don't leave the level. And don't talk to anyone you don't know."

Rush turned back to give him a look that he hoped conveyed something along the lines of shut-the-fuck-up-if-you-would. Judging by the termination of Young's ridiculous string of orders and the subsequent eye roll, he concluded that he had been at least moderately successful.

He walked down the main hallway.

Predictably, he was stopped after about thirty feet by a civilian scientist with sandy hair.

"Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for Dr. Amanda Perry's office," Rush said.

"Oh. Yeah. Okay. Great. And, um, who would you be?"

His would-be guide seemed to require a one-to-one ratio of useless words to words with informational content.

"Nicholas Rush," he replied.

The man dropped his pen. When he bent to retrieve it, his iPhone ended up on the floor as well. The mechanism by which that had occurred was not clear to Rush.

"Oh hey," the other man said, having retrieved both his phone and his pen. "Dr. Volker. Dale Volker. Astrophysics." He held out his hand.

Rush shook it. "Ah yes," he said. "I believe Dr. Park mentioned you."

"She did? That's awesome. I mean. Well. Or I guess—but hey. Nice to meet you, seriously. Everyone is pretty excited about all the stuff you've been doing. Decoding the address. Unlocking the locks. Cool. Coolness. Really great."

"Mmm," Rush said noncommittally.

"I heard you got number four?"

"I did."

"Lisa said that Sam said that Daniel said that you said it was a stream cypher. Is that true?"

No wonder this place had a problem with security.

"I'd rather not discuss it," he replied.

"Oh." Volker said, switching from admiring to conspiring. "Right. Stressful times. Security leaks. I get it."

"No," Rush snapped. "No, I think that *you*, in no way, 'get it'."

"Um—"

"Please don't talk to me." He pressed the heel of his hand against his left eye, and tried not to think about his headache.

"Okay," Volker said sounding offended and disappointed and heartbroken and pathetic.

Rush wondered if Volker was in any way related to Jackson. Their hair color and build were perhaps similar. As was their puppy-like enthusiasm and emotional vulnerability. Perhaps this place was full of clonal variants of Jackson. Perhaps Volker was a result of a xenobiological misadventure. Rush immediately found him slightly more relatable. They walked in silence for the span of about forty-five seconds before Volker passed through an open door and led him past a well-equipped lab, benches covered with crystalline arrays connected to corresponding computers.

He wondered if Dr. Perry overclocked her processors to handle the interface with Ancient control systems.

Volker stopped in front of an open door that directly adjoined the lab and knocked tentatively on the frame.

"Come in," Dr. Perry said.

"Hey," Volker said, preceding him. "Hey Mandy, is now an okay time for you? There's someone here who wanted to talk to you."

Rush shut his eyes, trying to prevent irritation-induced cell death in his brain. It didn't feel like it was working.

"Now is fine," Dr. Perry replied.

"Go ahead," Volker said, giving Rush a dark look.

Rush rolled his eyes and edged past Volker and around the doorframe. Dr. Perry was sitting at her desk, her eyes flicking rapidly over the large monitors in front of her. There was a pathologic stillness in the way that she sat that registered viscerally a split second before he took in the highly mechanized wheelchair. Well, that probably explained why she was so damned slow when it came to typing. He tried not to feel like a complete *ass*. She should have told him. Why the fuck should she have told him, actually? No real reason.

He was fairly certain that if he had no physical outlet for his anxiety he would fucking expire and he wondered how she did it. Maybe she wasn't a fucking mess of neurotic obsession about the unknown, but if that were the case that would make her a fairly singular quantum physicist. Quantum was just fucking unsettling. Everyone agreed.

She looked up at him and they regarded each other steadily for the span of approximately one second.

"Hi," she breathed. "You must be Dr. Rush."

He raised his eyebrows briefly and leaned against the doorframe, crossing his arms, trying to settle his thoughts. "You sound so certain."

"You look like you know your way around the inside of a math textbook," she said, projecting a bit louder.

He narrowed his eyes and looked down at his outfit. Jeans, a white button-down shirt, non-descript shoes. He failed to see how anything about his clothing choice suggested anything mathematical.

"Plus, that's a nice—" she paused for a split second and flashed him a smile, "portable signal scrambler you've got there, so—that was also a clue."

He placed the flat box on the edge of her desk and then dropped into the only chair in the room, putting the desk between them. "Yes yes," he said, waving a hand dismissively before refocusing. "Look. Dr. Perry. I have a problem."

"I hear you have several. Five, actually. And it's Mandy."

"Fine. But I think it's six."

She gave him a pointed look.

"Nicholas."

"Nice to meet you. In person. Why do you think it's six?"

"One for each chevron and then—" he made a sweeping hand gesture. "The last."

"The last?" she repeated. He found her amused tone to be somewhat unsettling.

"They used base ten math."

"So you actually have no evidence for your it's-not-nine-it's-ten hypothesis."

"That's what, currently, makes it a hypothesis," he said.

"Touché." She paused to take a breath. "So. How can I help?"

"I'd like to take a look at the source code, the RTTI, and the output of whatever program you used to solve Shor's algorithm using the your crystalline drive control elements."

"Absolutely," she replied, again sounding somewhat breathless, her eyes intent and animated. "I can't put it on the network for you—but we can rustle you up an encryptable portable drive, I'm sure."

He pulled his external hard drive out of his back pocket and held it up.

"Great," she said. "I know you're going to need a significant chunk of time to look it over and start to work with it, but there are a few comments I can make now that will likely speed up your interpretation of the data."

He raised his eyebrows at her.

"First," she said, "your operations are going to be unitary matrices."

"Obviously," he said dryly, "The question is—"

"Which can you apply?" she finished, cutting him off. "Hold your horses, will you? The available set is determined by the character of the crystalline lattice on a quantum scale. We were able to experimentally define a set that was sufficient for rendering Shor's algorithm. Hopefully you'll be able to code using the selection that we've empirically defined, but if you can't, we may be able to expand it based on your needs. Currently that's not a priority for my lab—but it could easily become a sub-focus if you felt like it was necessary. Do you know—" she paused to take a breath, "what it is that you'd like to achieve?"

"I'd like to try to achieve quantum entanglement between my terrestrial laptop and the control crystal of the DHD," he said.

"You want to hack a quantum computer?" Her voice rose in slightly in pitch.

He gave her a half smile and pushed his hair back. "Hack is such a—vulgar term."

She flashed him a brilliant grin before speaking. "All right. Let's say for the sake of argument that it works. Even if you achieve entanglement, every time you crack the cypher you'll likely to collapse the wave function and reset the key permutation."

"Maybe," he said, "but I'm not sure "I'm not going to need to crack it," he said slowly, leaning forward. "I thought I might try a zero knowledge protocol to demonstrate successful entanglement and then see what happens."

He watched her consider what he'd said.

"I think—I think that could work," she said, flashing him another even, brilliant smile. "You demonstrate entanglement and you also demonstrate an understanding of the fundamentals of quantum computing, which—they're really going to like. The Ancients, I mean. It's going to appeal to them. They might just—*give* you the key."

"That's the hope," he said.

"God," Perry said. "Yeah. That's really satisfying. If it doesn't work—it should."

"Agreed."

"Does your ZKP exist yet? Can I take a look at it?"

"It exists, but in a classical computational form."

"Send it to me when you start transposing it into the key of quantum."

"I'll drop you a note," he said.

"I don't mean to harp on this or anything, but I would really love it if you would pitch it to me, if you get a chance."

"I'll keep you apprised of any advances, major or minor."

"I appreciate that, especially as intrapersonal communication is not really a forte of yours, apparently."

"I resent your tone, I'll have you know," he replied, smirking at her.

"Sorry," she said, again with a brilliant uncontrolled flash of teeth. "That was perhaps a bit of an off-key remark."

"Don't worry about it," he said. "I'm aware that I can come off as sharp at times."

"All right," she said, "I suspect we could do this all day. We need to scale back."

He gave her a faint smile. "You said comments. In the plural."

"Yes," she said. "You distracted me with your zero knowledge protocol. Two, you're going to need a method for verifying entanglement before you run your ZKP."

"I'm aware," he pushed his hair back.

"Do you have one?"

"No," he admitted.

"I may be able to help you with that. We'll measure Shannon's entropy in the DHD control crystal—that much is relatively straightforward to do, even in the field. Getting a simultaneous and accurate entropy measurement of your laptop—that's going to be a bit trickier. We may have to crack the thing open while it's running to keep it isothermic with the control crystal of the DHD."

This was about an order of magnitude more practical than was generally necessary for him.

"That sounds—difficult," he said, absently considering the line made as the opposite wall met the ceiling.

To be more precise, it sounded labor intensive, expensive, and logistically challenging. If, by some miraculous and heretofore unguessed at interpersonal genius on the part of Colonel Young, General Landry was convinced to allow Rush offworld, he was somewhat concerned about the prospect of negotiating for a team of science personnel and what would likely be at least several thousand dollars worth of equipment that might not even *exist* for something that would very likely not work at all, and could have the unfortunate side effect of stranding the entire party on whatever world they gated to.

"I think it will be," Perry said. "Difficult. But—I don't think you can get around it. If your ZKP doesn't work, you're going to need to know if it's because entanglement failed."

"True," he looked back at her.

"As I see it, there are three major barriers," she said. "One—the success of your attempt at entanglement. Two—verifying success. Three—getting the cypher key via your ZKP."

"I don't think the last one is going to be a problem." He shook his hair back.

"You sound very sure of yourself," she said.

"In this, perhaps," he said.

She looked at him for a moment, her expression losing its amused cast. "Well then," she said finally, "swing that chair around so you can see my fantastically expensive state of the art monitors, and we'll go through the quantum coding."

He spent two and a half hours with Dr. Perry before her aide kicked him out for reasons unspecified.

He was somewhat surprised Young had not yet tracked him down, but—that suited his purposes just fine.

He threaded his way through the sparsely populated corridors, drawing curious stares from more than a few passers-by. No one stopped him as he made his way back to the elevator and swiped his ID to open the door. Once inside, he hit the button for level 21, hoping his pathetic security clearance was sufficient to get him to the infirmary.

The grey homogeneity of the walls and floor were somewhat disorienting, but he made his way with little difficulty to the main entrance of the medical unit. He rounded the door and was faced with an empty room, lined with examination tables. Curtains hung drawn back against the walls in intervals of white, attached to rollers on the ceiling, waiting to be drawn.

He stopped, ran his hand through his hair, and backed up a half-step.

"Dr. Rush?"

It was Dr. Lam.

She was standing in six meters away, inexplicably facing an empty gurney, a stack of folders held against her chest. She had half-turned to face him. This time she was wearing heels and a white coat and looked considerably more—*medical* than the last time he had seen her.

"Are you all right?"

Already, this was not going well.

The gleam of fluorescent lights off tile. The way that it is never truly dark here. Only the click of the keys feel like home. *Darling*, she'd said. *Talk to me, won't you?*

"Are you feeling okay?" Lam asked him, her voice slowing.

She took one step forward.

Even the quiet click of her shoe against the concrete floor sounded competent.

"Yes," he said. He shook his hair back and flashed her a quick, mirthless smile. "Yes of course. I was wondering if I might review my medical records."

"Ah."

The room was so quiet.

Where was everyone.

Where was *anyone*.

"Is there anything in particular that you're wondering about?" Her expression was neutral, and he could read nothing there.

"I would like to review my medical records," he repeated, matching her impassivity. "In their entirety. I wasn't aware that I needed to specify a reason."

"You don't," she said.

They looked at each other.

"Now would be nice," he added.

"Have a seat," she said, unperturbed by his curtness. "I'll pull the hard copy." She tapped her hand once on the back of the chair that was positioned near the gurney she had been contemplating when he arrived. "I'll be right back."

He looked at the chair.

He looked at the gurney.

He paced away toward the opposite wall.

It was fine.

No, it wasn't.

Yes it was.

He was here for a specific purpose.

He could hear Lam's shoes echoing through the quiet infirmary. Position was hard to gauge. So was direction. The walls were hard and compression waves reverberated to the point of meaninglessness.

"Dr. Rush. Are you sure you're all right?" Lam was back, after an uncounted interval of pacing.

"Quite sure," he said, turning around. He managed a brief, uneven smile.

Lam did not smile back. She held out a file. "I can't allow you to leave with this. You'll have to read it here."

It was not long.

"Fine," he said, avoiding the chair and instead perching on the edge of the gurney.

She looked at him for a moment longer, then neatly hooked the toe of one black pump around the leg of the chair and pulled it back toward the wall. Her eyes were downcast, and there was something in the slow hook and drag of the black leather of her shoe that suggested regret.

He opened the file and began to read.

NAME: Rush, Nicholas

DOB: 11/1/1965

Chief Complaint: Establishment of care.

History of Present Illness: 43 YOM, known ATA/LTA pos by NMDP tissue typing, in good health, presents today to establish care at SGCMU. No outstanding complaints. MRI, CT, EKG, EEG appended. All results WNL.

Past Medical Hx: None significant.

Prior hospitalizations: Patient reports none, SGC background check reveals:

1974: Southern General Hospital, Glasgow, Scotland. Near drowning. Records incomplete. Two day stay.

1986: John Radcliffe Hospital, Oxford England. Records destroyed seven years post admission as per policy regarding visits pertaining to mental health.

Family History: Unknown. Patient reports he does not keep in touch with his family.

Social History: Lives alone, wife recently deceased. Patient reports he is coping well.

Smoking hx: 20+ pack years. Drinking: none reported. Caffeine intake 5+ drinks per day.

Review of Systems: Positive for headaches, likely migraine/tension headache mixed picture. Further eval deferred.

Physical exam: No abnormal findings. Vital signs WNL.

Assessment: Patient is a 43 year old ATA/LTA+ man in good health.

Plan:

- 1. Medical clearance: Patient is medically cleared for duty.*
- 2. ATA/LTA status: Gene expression levels by qPCR ordered today. Whole exon sequencing ordered today. Flow cytometric analysis ordered today. Await results.*
- 3. Smoking cessation: Patient reports that on a scale of 0 to 10, his motivation to quit smoking is currently rated at 0. Brief motivational counseling therefore deferred at this visit.*

He came to the end of the page and scanned back over it, wondering what the fuck 'ATA/LTA status' referred to. Contextually, it seemed that it was related to genetics. He flipped through several pages of material that seemed to consist of various appended tests, including an MRI (goa'uld negative), a CT scan (negative for significant

intracranial abnormalities), an EKG (normal sinus rhythm), and an EEG (high amplitude, high frequency 'in ATA band.'). He flipped through them all in short order.

He considered asking Lam what ATA/LTA meant. She was hovering in his peripheral vision, not watching him, but not *not* watching him.

He decided against it.

The next page was densely packed with rows of letters positioned beneath small, overlaid multicolored peaks—all As, Gs, Cs, and Ts. Unquestionably, it was a genetic sequence. He looked at it intently for a moment, but the only thing he was able to decide was that the height of the peaks seemed to indicate the degree of confidence in the corresponding nucleotide. The heading at the top of the page said 'ATA sequencing results.' He flipped through the homogenous pages, watched the heading change from 'ATA' to 'LTA,' to 'NRA.'

So.

They had sequenced three genes.

At the end of the last sequence, there was a paragraph titled 'Interpretation of results.' He narrowed his eyes.

Interpretation of results: Excellent quality sample obtained from the NMDP. Patient is a homozygote for the ATA gene and LTA gene. He is a hemizygote for the X-linked, newly ID'd NRA gene. Given homozygosity, ATA and LTA expression levels are predicted to be extremely high. Effect of NRA is currently unknown, but recommend further study, including whole genome sequencing and alignment to all Ancient tissue samples on file. Recommend sequencing of family members if genetic material or individuals can be located. Recommend comparison to other carriers of ATA, specifically CB (geographically suggestive) and JS (only other individual with two copies of LTA) to assess for any commonalities in ancestry. Recommend in-field testing of patient's ability to operate Ancient tech. Recommend contacting Dr. Carson Beckett for his opinion regarding sequence, expression levels, and how best to proceed.

His family. Good luck with that. Dead, dead, and hopefully dead.

"Everything okay?" Lam asked him quietly from halfway across the room, outside his peripheral vision.

"Fine," he responded without looking at her.

He flipped the page, scanning through another graph, this time of qPCR results. Someone had written an exclamation point in pen in the margin of the page and circled one of the fuckingly unitless numbers.

Biologists.

He flipped the page again, skipping the LTA qPCR data and turning to the final paragraph.

Interpretation of results: As predicted, ATA mRNA levels are equivalent to those of JS. It is likely that this represents a physiologic ceiling of some kind. LTA levels are also equivalent to those of JS, which is consistent with the patient's homozygous status. Projective ability and sensitivity is predicted to be extremely high. Effect of NRA is unknown at this point, but it may explain extremely high amplitude EEG waves in the 30-100+ Hz range not observed in JS.

He hooked one hand over the back of his shoulder. Who was 'JS,' and what was the fucking *function* of these genes?

Had they—*not* recruited him for the mathematics?

Had it been for *this* instead, some inherent genetic anomaly—not for *who* he was but *what* he was?

That seemed unlikely.

And yet—Jackson had wanted him to see this.

One thing was extremely clear. He was not going to get this opportunity again. Jackson had been looking for a loophole in the chain of command and he had found one.

Rush glanced over at Lam, across the room, in front of an open drawer.

She was watching him. She must know what was in the file. She must know what she had given him. Her face gave nothing away, but her eyes were unsettled. "Personal medical files are the property of the patient," she said into the silence. "But unfortunately, policies can change very rapidly around here."

He nodded shortly at the warning and flipped to the next page. It contained an email from Carson Becket, dated June 12, 2008.

Dear Dr. Lam,

Thank you for involving me in the care of your patient, Dr. Nicholas Rush. I have reviewed the records and tissue-typing results that you sent via the Midway Station secure FTP package. I was able to confirm protein expression equivalent to the highest levels that we have on file for both the ATA and LTA proteins. As noted previously, this is suggestive of

an upper limit seen in those who carry two copies of each gene. I was also able to subject cultured cells to EM radiation that corresponds to that used by Ancient technology and found that the electrophysiological responses of Dr. Rush's cells were equivalent to JoSh cells.

The most interesting aspect of this case is the NRA gene. I have gone back over the records of all ATA carriers and homozygotes, and can find no other instances of NRA. As the gene is X-linked, I would be quite interested in obtaining samples from the patient's mother if possible, as well as any siblings. I understand from a personal communication from General Landry that preliminary indications are that most, if not all of Dr. Rush's relatives are deceased, but I would remind you that there may still be tissue samples available that could be used. I understand also that there is some concern regarding information security at the SGC at the moment, so I defer to your decision about the timing of gathering as complete of a family history as possible—but I maintain that it should be gathered.

To date, I have isolated the NRA gene and purified the NRA protein. There are some indications that the intron spanning exons 6 and 7 may encode a microRNA that could end up being a more important target than the protein itself. As of yet, I have not determined its function and I suspect that it will be quite difficult to do so without access to—

Someone rapped quietly on the wall and he looked up to see Mitchell standing in the doorway. "Hey Dr. Lam—you busy?"

Rush froze.

Mitchell hadn't yet seen him.

Lam walked forward quickly, her heels echoing. "Colonel Mitchell. What can I do for you?"

It was a valiant effort, and it was almost enough, but Mitchell's eyes were restless. "Dr. Rush," the man said slowly, taking in the file that was in his hands. "What are you doing here?"

Rush said nothing.

"He asked to review his medical file," Lam said neutrally, still standing between them.

"I see," Mitchell said, his eyes flicking between the pair of them. "I don't think he has clearance for that."

"You will find, if you read the information security guidelines, that the contents of civilian medical records are the property of the patient and are available to be reviewed within the confines of the SGCMU."

Mitchell looked at them both for a moment. "I'm sure I will," he said carefully. "Who tipped you off?" The question was unmistakably directed at Rush.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," Rush lied.

"Rush," Mitchell said. "It's important. Who was it?"

"I was curious," Rush said. "That's all."

"Was it Jackson?"

"No," Rush lied. "No, of course not."

"Cause this has Jackson written all over it."

"Colonel," Lam said, walking forward to stand at Mitchell's shoulder. "I think it's important for everyone to keep in mind that the *only* thing that has happened here is that Dr. Rush requested his medical file, which is well within his rights, and I provided it to him."

"With all due respect, Dr. Lam," Mitchell said, "that's *not* the only thing that's happened here."

"Why wasn't I told," Rush hissed, "about this gene. These genes—whatever they are."

Mitchell gave him a measured look, but some of the hardness in his gaze seemed to vanish. "You weren't *told*," he said quietly, "because your risk of falling into the hands of the Lucian Alliance is *so high*, that anything you know—they could end up extracting from you. And we didn't want them finding out just how much we've discovered about the Ancient genetic code."

"They must know something about this," Rush snapped, brandishing the file at Mitchell. "Otherwise, why would I be at the top of their list?"

"They know about the ATA gene," Mitchell said, "almost everyone does. We think they also know about the LTA gene. But they don't know about the new one—at least we don't *think* they do. The one that *only you* have. Give me the file."

Rush hesitated.

"Don't make this more of a mess than it already is," Mitchell said. "You're already looking at a three-day debriefing regarding *exactly* what you found out."

Rush glanced at Lam and she inclined her head fractionally in Mitchell's direction.

He shut the file and handed it over.

For a moment, they were silent.

The loud shriek of an alarm rent the air, and all three of them flinched, instinctively looking up at the ceiling. Near the top of the wall, a blue light began to flash in a slow strobe. Over the sound system, someone spoke.

"Unscheduled offworld activation."

"Aww *shit*," Mitchell said.

Chapter Thirteen

Landry was running two hours late.

Young perched uncomfortably on a chair outside the general's office, timing his wait in the periodic flow of cold air from the vent above his head as the base AC kicked in at regular intervals. He tried not to watch the flat, unchanging surface of the closed door. He tried to keep his thoughts away from the snarled mess of confused musculature that seemed to comprise his back and hip these days, a mental exercise that would have been far easier had he not been subjected to Rush's unexpectedly NASCAResque driving style earlier in the day.

He tried to bury the intense urge to find out how Rush would do behind the controls of an X-302.

He suspected it might be pretty damn impressive.

But then again, maybe not, because John Sheppard was the best, most natural pilot that Young had seen in his entire life, and riding in a car with Sheppard was virtually indistinguishable from sitting in a stationary chair.

Well, except for that time just after the inauguration of the McKay-Carter Intergalactic Gate Bridge when Young and Cam and J Shep and David had all driven out to Vegas for thirty-six hours for no real reason other than to celebrate the fact that Cam was finally off the crutches.

On long, empty stretches of road, Sheppard had a thing for acceleration, circumstances permitting.

God, he missed the guy.

McKay came back on a fairly regular basis to do scientific things or whatever, which mainly seemed to consist of talking about how great he was and annoying Sam Carter. Sheppard rarely left Pegasus. He seemed to like it out there on Atlantis. That, or he hated Earth, one of the two.

Young's musings were cut short as the solid wooden door to Landry's office swung open to reveal the general standing in the frame, looking simultaneously jovial and irritated.

Young stood and saluted.

"Colonel," Landry said, returning the salute, "Good to see you. Come on in."

He entered the office to find General O'Neill seated in one of the two chairs in front of the desk. Young paused, taken aback at the other man's unexpected appearance.

"Sir," he said, snapping off a second salute—this one ricocheting down from his lower back to his left heel.

"Everett," O'Neill said, waving dismissively at his salute and shaking his hand instead with a brisk clap to the forearm. "How's the back? And the hip? The knee? Y'know. All of it."

"Fine," Young said. "Improving."

"Advil?" O'Neill held up a tic-tac container that was full of orange pills. That, or just—orange tic-tacs. "You look like you could use some."

"No thank you, sir. I'm fine."

Things seemed to be shaping up as more informal than formal, if the Advil masquerading as tic-tacs was any indication. When dealing with O'Neill, however, it was not good policy to assume anything. This could be friendly banter, or it could be the foliage draped around a metaphorical pit with accompanying metaphorical sticks. It made it somewhat difficult to respond to the general's statement in an appropriate way.

"Have a seat, colonel," Landry said, offering an alternative to advil.

Unfortunately, sitting really wasn't much better than standing. He lowered himself into the chair with a slide that wasn't slow enough to prevent another twinge of agony in his back. It was hard to take one's time when being meticulously observed by two senior officers. He drew in a long, subtle breath while they watched him. Like indecisive hawks. He did his best to remain unperturbed, but the quiet of the room was unsettling. Unbidden, the specter of a foothold situation rose in his mind—subterfuge leading to infiltration leading to conquest. In the current environment, it was not an easy thought to dismiss.

"What do you know," Landry began, "about the Icarus project?"

"The same things that everyone knows," Young replied cautiously. "That a nine chevron address was discovered on Atlantis. That once you dial the first five of the sequence, the lock on all of them is lost. That there's an entire cypher system buried in the gate keyed to each of chevron. That even if dialing is successful the amount of energy required for event horizon formation is so vast that it would require a planet worth of naquadia to power it." Young shrugged. "That and—my neighbor is the guy decrypting the chevrons."

Landry smiled faintly.

"You two are *neighbors*?" O'Neill said, squinting at him slightly. "Seriously?"

"Yes sir," Young replied.

"You can cut it out with the 'sirs' every two seconds," O'Neill said. "This is a *chat*. Informal. Technically, you're still on leave."

Young looked at him, trying to veil his reflexive skepticism. "Sure," he said. "Sure thing." He felt like Rush was not the kind of guy that one had casual 'chats' about.

"So what's he like?" O'Neill asked.

"Rush?" Young asked, stalling for time.

"Yeah," O'Neill replied, with a the barest trace of impatience.

Young was certain that O'Neill knew *exactly* what Rush was like—a complete pain in the ass who was maybe a stone's throw away from a nervous breakdown, or a physical breakdown, or some kind of unspecified breakdown and who, on a good day, could maybe scrape himself together enough to go shopping for forty-five minutes. In short, someone who had absolutely no business being at the epicenter of the gathering storm that seemed to be building around Cheyenne Mountain. "Oh, you know," Young said, with a casual shrug. "Smart guy. Good in the kitchen."

O'Neill turned to Landry and they exchanged a quick, incredulous look. "The kitchen?" O'Neill mouthed.

"He *cooked* for you?" Landry asked. "Rush. Nicholas Rush."

"Yup," Young said, giving the pair of them a tight smile. "An omelette in the French tradition. Amongst other things. Crepes and—*coq au vin* I think it was, on Saturday night? He seems to be into French cuisine generally, but that could just be—I don't know. A mood thing. It's hard to say. I've only known him for about four days."

Whatever they had been expecting him to say, it hadn't been that. They stared at him for the span of roughly three seconds with identical expressions.

"Can he make *quiche* though?" O'Neill asked finally. "You can't find good a good quiche in this town to save your life."

"I'm sure he makes an *excellent* quiche," Young said.

"I love quiche," O'Neill said. "They always make it too dense at that place next to the kinkos—what was it—Madeleine's? The crust isn't bad but—" O'Neill trailed off with an equivocal hand gesture. "You know."

Landry shifted in his chair.

"Okay," O'Neill said, clapping his hands against his thighs, "that was a fun fact about your neighbor, but we were hoping for something a bit more along the lines of your assessment as to how capable he is of going into the field."

"I've only known him for four days," Young said neutrally.

"Yeah, during which he *lived with you* for a chunk of the time," O'Neill said, a subtle edge to his tone. "You're not generally one for hedging, Everett."

"Well," Young said, "He's a complex guy, I think."

"There are two people on this base who arguably know him better than you do," O'Neill said with more intensity than he'd displayed so far. "One is Daniel, and the other is or, more likely *was*, Colonel Telford."

"I see," Young said, trying to bury everything that Telford's name dragged along with it.

"Their opinions on his functionality," Landry added, with his low, rumbling cadence, "diverge. *Wildly*."

"He's a quick thinker," Young said, grimacing involuntarily as he shifted in his seat. "Witty. Lots of snap, lots of energy. Lots of focus. He stayed calm in a crisis, even after its magnitude became apparent to him." He paused, marshaling his thoughts.

Landry gave O'Neill a pointed look. "Almost identical to Colonel Telford's assessment," he said, as if he had just won a point.

"With respect sir," Young said. "I wasn't finished." He paused for a moment, choosing his words carefully. "He's volatile and panicky, but not in the typical way. He's not set off by anything that's immediately apparent, but once he becomes upset, he has to work at calming himself down and he doesn't do it effectively. He's passed out twice in the past week, once from dehydration and once from what I would guess was a panic attack."

"*Not* so good for the field," O'Neill said, shooting Landry a pointed look of his own, "which is what Daniel said."

"As I mentioned to you on the phone," Young said, looking at Landry, "I think it could be done, but he'd need the right team."

"And I'm working on it," Landry replied. "We need that address unlocked."

The room was silent. Young could hear the subtle tick of someone's watch, loud in the heavy air.

Landry and O'Neill were waiting for one another—to do what or to say what—Young didn't know. "This isn't about Rush going offworld to break a DHD," he asked finally. "Is it."

"Not really," O'Neill admitted. "No."

Young glanced back and forth between the two generals, waiting for someone to put their cards on the table.

"There's a base," O'Neill said, "that we're constructing on a naquadria-laced planet. It will probably be completed sometime this fall."

It was already late July.

"Short timetable," Young said.

"Yes," O'Neill replied. "It is."

Silence descended again, thick and full.

"We may want to send him. We may need to send him," O'Neill said.

Young kept his expression absolutely neutral. "Why *him*?"

"Do you think," O'Neill asked, carefully ignoring his question, "that he could handle a prolonged, resource-poor, dangerous mission?"

"No," Young said. "No way. Absolutely not."

Landry and O'Neill looked at each other again, and Young had the feeling that points were being awarded in some kind of silent debate.

"Jack," Landry growled.

"Hank," O'Neill said smoothly.

"You saw what Jackson found," Landry snapped.

"And I heard what 'Jackson' said," O'Neill shot back. "Colonel," O'Neill said, turning to him. "How would you like command of the Icarus Base and military command of the Icarus project, presuming we're able to dial the gate."

It hadn't sounded like a question. "Excuse me?" Young asked, trying to organize what O'Neill had just said into a string of words that made any kind of sense.

"The man is on medical leave," Landry growled. "Dr. Lam is unclear as to whether he's going to ever be approved for anything other than light duty—"

"Then he can watch stuff happen from a control room," O'Neill snapped. "That's what we have MALPs for."

"With respect," Landry said, "Colonel *Telford* was the IOA's choice—"

"Telford isn't here." O'Neill said icily.

"He has six hours left on his window—"

"Are you arguing with me, general?" O'Neill asked.

"No, sir," Landry said, his expression difficult to read.

So. Not so much a friendly chat as a meeting with more subtext than substance. These kinds of things were not really Young's area of expertise. He tried to order his thoughts and figure out what was happening here.

One—Landry and O'Neill were opposed, with Landry apparently supporting Telford and O'Neill apparently supporting Jackson. Two—Landry seemed to want Telford in command of Icarus, and Young got the feeling that O'Neill wanted anyone but Telford in command of Icarus. Three—Rush was at the heart of all of it. Four—Young had never seen O'Neill so outwardly perturbed.

It was unsettling.

He cleared his throat. "What is Rush's role in all of this?" Young asked.

"He's the brains," O'Neill snapped, sitting back in his chair.

"I figured as much," Young replied, trying to figure out a way of asking what he wanted to ask without laying it all on the table. "And that's why he was recruited?" Young asked. "That's why you want to send him? Because he's got the cryptography chops to open the gate?"

They both looked at him sharply.

"Seems like maybe I'm missing something."

"That's not why he was recruited," O'Neill said. "The fact that he's completely blown the area 51 nerds out of the water when it comes to unlocking the gate—well, that's just a nice bonus."

"So why was he recruited?" Young asked.

"He was recruited for another project," O'Neill said. "A project that took tissue samples from national banks to look for the ATA gene."

"Ah," Young replied. "So he's a natural positive?"

"He is," O'Neill confirmed. "In fact, within the past year, a little over a dozen people in this country have been ID'd as having not just one but two different Ancient genes.

We're sure there are more out there—the screening process goes in batches, and not everyone's a bone marrow donor."

"Two different Ancient genes? I thought there was just the one."

"Turns out no," O'Neill said dryly, "the Ancients actually had *lots* of genes."

"Right," Young said, resisting the urge to let his face turn even mildly insubordinate. "So where are the other people? Besides Rush."

"Recruited or vanished," O'Neill said.

"Vanished?" Young replied.

"A seventeen year old Harvard freshman," Landry said, breaking in with a gravelly voice, "And a fifty-six year old doctor. Both turned up by the screen and vanished within a week. Presumably targeted by the LA. The other ten are in Colorado Springs with as much security as we can give them."

"When Rush turned up," O'Neill said, "within *hours* we has set up security for him. We also sent Daniel to give him the spiel."

"I'm surprised he went along with a security detail," Young said. "Rush, I mean."

"Well he wasn't gracious about it," O'Neill replied wryly. "It was Telford who convinced him. Telford who coordinated security for him in San Francisco for two months before he finally left and moved down here."

"What changed his mind?" Young asked.

"That's his business," O'Neill replied.

Young nodded. O'Neill's revelation explained a great deal regarding why the LA was so keen to get their hands on a math genius who was also the next John Sheppard, but it didn't explain the pall of wrongness that seemed have been cast over the entire situation from the moment that Jackson had deposited Rush on his couch four days ago.

"What," Young asked, knowing he was treading on dangerous ground, "have Dr. Jackson and Colonel Telford been fighting about?"

"Wall carvings," O'Neill said shortly.

Young looked at him, trying to decide if he was being serious or not.

"That's all you're getting until we know if you're in or if you're out."

"I need some time to think things over," Young replied.

They looked at him as if this were some kind of moral failing.

"Rush has clearance for none of this," Landry said. "You're not to discuss it with him."

"Right," Young said. "Can I talk to Jackson?"

"Yeah," O'Neill said. "Go right ahead. Hopefully he'll only tell you about three classified pieces of information rather than ten or so."

Landry sighed and looked down at his desk.

"We're going to need a decision soon. Within forty-eight hours," O'Neill said.

"*If* Colonel Telford doesn't make it back," Landry clarified.

"Yeah." O'Neill looked at his watch. "Of course. I would never dream of upsetting the IOA."

"You don't think going over their heads to appoint Colonel Young to the post qualifies?" Landry asked.

"It's well within my authority to appoint Young as Telford's second in command, effective immediately. If it turns out that Telford's window of opportunity closes, then—" O'Neill waved a hand and looked over at Young. "You'll have the command if you want it."

"Understood," Young said shortly.

"And if the window *doesn't* close?" Landry growled. "If he makes it back, what then? Colonel Young is not suited to function as Telford's number two. Look at him. The man can barely *walk*, Jack."

Young tried to keep a neutral facial expression.

"Well then," O'Neill said, "we'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

"Any materials I can look over before I decide would be—" Young began, but stopped when O'Neill shook his head.

"You're in or out on this one, Everett."

Young nodded.

In the ensuing silence, the subtle flash of a blue, mechanized slow strobe caused them all to look up.

"Unscheduled offworld activation." Harriman's voice was clipped over the sound system.

Young tensed, pushing himself up from the chair with his arms more than with his legs and back. Landry shot to his feet, O'Neill followed—not really delaying, but managing to lend an air of nonchalance to the movement. He looked up at the light.

"Ah—that takes me back," he said dryly.

Landry beat them both to the door, though not by much, and they descended the stairs as a unit, Young bringing up the rear, forcing himself to keep pace with the other two through gritted teeth as they headed toward the control room. Young looked up through the windows to see the iris, reassuringly shut in front of the spinning gate, as the three of them filed into place behind Harriman.

"They just locked on six, sir," Harriman called back with a quick glance over his shoulder. "Sirs," he amended.

"Hey Walter," O'Neill said. "Long time, no see."

"General," Harriman replied.

The gate flared to life, the abrupt appearance of the event horizon reflecting with a pale blue flash against the back wall of the room. The trinium of the iris obscured most of its brightness.

"We getting anything?" Landry asked.

"Not yet," Harriman said.

Streaming lines of various colors on monitors arrayed around the room jumped simultaneously.

"We just had an impact," Harriman said, "against the iris."

Young grimaced.

The monitors jumped again, flatlines rising into blips, sinusoidal waves bursting into brief flights of increased frequency.

"And another," Harriman called out, "and another."

"Where's Carter?" O'Neill snapped, his hands coming to the back of Harriman's chair. "She still shows for these things, right?"

"Right here," Carter's voice came from the back of the room as she threaded her way forward. "What have we got?"

"We've got no signals," Landry growled, "but three impacts."

"Four," Harriman said as the monitors jumped again.

"Hi," Carter whispered as she slipped past O'Neill.

"Hi yourself," O'Neill murmured, as she slid into position next to Harriman.

"Five," Harriman said, with a terrible sort of finality.

SG-3 and Telford.

They might have lost their GDOs.

They might have lost their radios.

They might have had nothing.

They might have figured that death was better than whatever they were escaping from.

That was something he understood.

No one spoke.

Several seconds ticked by.

"Six?" Harriman said, as the lines jumped again.

"The force of the impact indicates the iris is being hit with something with the mass between zero point two and two kilograms," Carter said, swinging around.

"Meaning what?" Landry growled.

"Meaning that I think someone might be throwing rocks, sir," Carter said, her eyebrows lifting.

"Yeah, or *grenades*," O'Neill said.

Carter tipped her head to the side with an equivocal expression as she shrugged.

"True."

There were three impacts in quick succession.

"Morse code?" Young suggested.

There were three more impacts, separated by long pauses.

"Still no GDO," Carter said, her voice tight. "If we're going to open it, we should do it now, before they attempt to come through."

"Scramble the team," Landry growled.

"Lieutenant Scott," Harriman said into his radio. "Lieutenant Scott, you have a go."

"The LA knows so much about us," Young said quietly, trying not to picture David on the other side of that event horizon. "You think they *don't* know Morse code?"

Landry shook his head once, his expression tight and unhappy.

To open, or not to open. It was not an easy decision to make—teams and individuals went missing and presumed dead on a fairly regular basis. Sometimes they were able to extract themselves from whatever scenarios they found themselves in. Sometimes they were able to retrieve their GDOs, or at least their radios—but, sometimes they weren't.

Landry and O'Neill glanced at one another.

"Hey," Mitchell said, appearing at his shoulder, slightly out of breath. "What've we got?"

"Morse code with rocks," Young said. "Maybe."

"You think it could be Telford?" Mitchell asked.

Young shrugged as he caught Mitchell's eye in the dim light of the control room.

Mitchell gave him a short, grim nod.

"Why not dial the alpha site?" O'Neill asked. "That's where they *should* be going if they're coming in without GDOs."

"They apparently don't have radios either," Carter said. "We're getting no EM signals. The alpha site isn't going to open their iris without radio contact because they don't have grounds to override the protocol. Telford might be gambling that with the upper level command staff stationed here, we'll be more likely to deviate and let him in. That, or—it's someone else. The LA. The Ori—it could be anyone."

"This just—*seems* like him," Mitchell said. "It seems like something David would do."

"Agreed," Young said.

"Agreed," Carter added. "Without GDOs or radios—if they somehow made it out—" she trailed off.

For a moment, the room was silent.

"Open the iris," Landry growled.

Young crossed his arms and clenched his jaw as the iris dilated, the light putting blue highlights in Carter's hair. Mitchell stood next to him, his arms crossed, his feet set apart.

A rock, roughly the size of Young's fist, came through the gate. It was followed by another.

"Well, *that's* a good sign," O'Neill said.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then—

Reynolds appeared first.

The man crashed back into material form, hitting the ramp in a high velocity, uncontrolled, bloody fall. He was screaming, something short, monosyllabic, and repetitive, but the shock of his sudden appearance made it difficult for Young to focus enough to make it out.

"Oh god," Carter whispered, half out of her seat. "He's saying no. He's saying *no*."

There was a brief interval of silence.

Then, the room exploded into noise.

"Shut it down," Landry roared.

"Iris is not responding," Harriman said tightly.

"What the hell is that *stuff* coming through behind him?" Mitchell called, pointing at a thick, white substance flowing through the bottom of the open gate.

"I'm trying and I *don't know*," Carter replied. "We don't have the equipment for an on-the-fly analysis. But it's continually in transit."

"Shut the iris," O'Neill snapped. "Shut the iris, Carter."

"Yes," Carter said. "I'm *trying*, sir."

"Lieutenant Scott," Landry growled into his radio, "move on the room."

Telford came through next, as if he had been shoved, covered with blood, his shirt half-torn away.

"Aw shit," Mitchell said.

"Shut it *down*!" Telford screamed, looking up at them, with a sweeping, terminating hand gesture. "Shut it down, shut it down shut it down shut it—" he was cut off as Ramirez slammed into him bodily as she was pitched through the gate, knocking them both partway down the ramp.

Young stepped forward to stand directly behind Carter, his thoughts racing, trying to pin down a *purpose* to whatever the LA was doing—because there was no doubt in his mind that it *was* the LA.

Why send their own people back to them?

Unless these three had been meant as a human incentive of the right mass and chemical composition to get the SGC to open the iris. Maybe they had been meant to provide convincing sensor signatures if the *rocks* hadn't done the trick.

"Where's that *iris*, Carter?" O'Neill, evidently, was thinking along similar lines.

"Sergeant Siler, do you copy? We need you to prep the vents," Harriman shouted into his radio to be heard.

"Matter is actively being transmitted," Carter called over her shoulder, her eyes never leaving the readouts in front of her. "The iris won't close when material is in transit—it's built into the safety protocol."

Behind Telford, Young could see the white vapor continuing to stream through the gate, settling along the floor, dense and thick.

"*That* shit? Are you *kidding* me?" Mitchell snapped. "How is some gas different from *air*? Air doesn't transmit, *water* doesn't transmit, what the hell is that stuff?"

"It's denser than air," Carter snapped, her eyes on the monitors, "Just look at it, Cam, it's *denser than air*. And it's being *pumped* through. The stargate transmits discrete units that are moving with intent, meaning sufficient momentum which apparently this—"

"Send in the team," Landry shouted over Carter's explanation. "Pull them out of there and vent this garbage through the filters."

"We *can't* vent it," Carter snapped, "until we know what it is. It might be a placeholder so they can keep the gate open, or it might be a *neurotoxin*."

"Well *this* is a shit show," O'Neill said, as the event horizon rippled.

No other members of SG-3 were shoved through, but this time four people appeared, leather clad, weapons at their shoulders, standing in the white swirl of gas. They were wearing self-contained breathing apparatuses.

"Put the base on alert," Landry snapped. "Give the order to evacuate all nonessential personnel. This is a foothold."

Overhead, the light levels dimmed to a pulsing red. Below them, the doors to the gateroom opened and Lieutenant Scott's team moved into the white opacity of the air. The sound of gunfire began, muted on the other side of the thick glass. Young watched Telford come from the side and drag one of the incoming LA party down into smoke that had begun to rise like water in the room. But four more LA members appeared. And then another four. And then another set of four. Then he lost track of them in the thick white smoke that poured through the gate, into the room, and out into

the corridor beyond, fluidly passing around and past the rearguard of Scott's team, silhouetted at the edges of the doorway.

"We need more manpower down there," Landry snapped at the room. He pulled out his radio and looked down at Harriman. "Who's planetside?" he growled.

"SGs one, five, nine, eleven, twelve, fifteen, and twenty-two."

"Get them down here, along with base security."

"I'm going in," Mitchell said. He pulled out his radio and spoke into it as Harriman finished calling out his litany of backup. "Teal'c, this is Mitchell, what's your location?"

"I am on level twenty-eight in the armory," Teal'c voice came over the radio.

"Pick me up a mask, I'll meet you at the gateroom." Mitchell looked over at Carter. "I assume we're doing the manual-power-cut-thing?"

Young ached with the desire to accompany him.

"Yes," Carter said, her expression pained, "but I don't know how easy that's going to be," her she had to raise her voice to be heard over the sound of gunfire in the gateroom. "They're still coming through."

"Rush is here," Young said, a flash of realization that flowered to fill the spontaneous silence in the conversation around him.

"What?" Landry growled, rounding on him. "What do you mean 'here'."

"I mean on the base," Young clarified. "Level nineteen."

"Well, get him *out* of here," Landry said. "Either do it yourself, or find someone else, but get it done."

"Yes sir," Young said, already heading toward the door.

"Everett," Mitchell said, falling in next to him as they threaded their way past. "He's on twenty-one. The infirmary."

"I told him to—never mind," Young said.

"Yeah. We can talk about your neighbor later. He—"

Jackson and Vala nearly plowed into the pair of them as they entered the control room.

"Daniel," Mitchell snapped, "with me. Vala—you're with Young."

Jackson and Mitchell peeled away from them, heading toward the armory as Young and Vala stepped together into the hall.

Young felt his eyes beginning to water. Already the whitish haze had spread along the floor throughout the level, obscuring their boots as they headed away from the control room.

"Well, handsome," Vala said, her whisper punctuated by a mostly muffled cough. "Where to?"

"Level twenty-one," Young replied, the acrid air irritating his lungs as well. "We have to get Rush out of here."

"Your neighbor?" Vala asked. "He's here? Talk about bad timing."

"Maybe," Young said grimly.

Vala shot him a significant look.

"So I'm hoping this white stuff is *not* going to kill us," Vala said, fanning the air in front of her face. "I vote for masks."

"Come on," Young whispered as he limped forward, trying to put the pain in his back out of his mind. "It'll get better as we go up."

"Right," Vala said, the word barely audible over the approaching sound of gunfire. "Well, no time like the present," Vala whispered, pulling her zat.

Young pulled his own sidearm and together they advanced back toward the periphery of the level.

"So," Vala whispered as they rounded a corner, "the elevators are shut down, so my question for you, handsome, is—are we doing this the hard way, or the *very* hard way?"

"Meaning?" Young growled, not a fan of the constant chatter.

"The stairs," Vala said, "or the ladder in the wall?"

"Stairs," Young said. "We want to be fast."

"Well, if speed is what you want," Vala said, "perhaps you should just let *me* go."

She had a point, but he also didn't entirely trust her.

He didn't know that he necessarily trusted anyone these days.

"Let's stick together," he said, coughing quietly. "It's only six flights of stairs and we've got a lead on the LA, presuming they manage to hold them off at the gate room."

"And presuming they have no one on the inside," Vala said. "And presuming that Dr. Rush stayed in the infirmary after Colonel Mitchell left. And presuming that you can make it up six flights of stairs in a timely fashion."

"Yes," Young replied. "Presuming all those things."

"And," Vala whispered, "presuming this white stuff," she glanced down at their feet, swishing one boot in a delicate arc, "doesn't kill us after half an hour or so. That's a lot of presuming, don't you think?"

"Yeah," Young said grimly, trying to muffle a cough. "I think if this stuff were going to kill us, it already would have. It's probably a means to an end."

"But what end?" Vala whispered, shooting him an anxious look.

"Keeping the gate open," Young replied. "And maybe—maybe something else."

"I don't like it," Vala replied as they reached the stairs.

Young looked up. The ascending concrete tunnel of the stairs angled away from them and out of sight in linear intervals. The emergency lighting gleamed off the concrete, stark and unfriendly. "Less talking," he said grimly, as the sound of gunfire began to approach their position, "more climbing."

"Whatever you say, handsome," Vala whispered.

Chapter Fourteen

White-coated medical personnel had appeared from the linear dark of corridors and from behind closed office doors to flit from station to station around the SGC infirmary, logging into terminals, unlocking cabinets, and activating touchscreens beneath eerie blue light.

Apparently, 'unscheduled offworld activations' were serious things.

Rush couldn't justify the inexplicable dimming of the lights. He hoped it was due to some practical consideration—such as emergency lighting operated at a lower than typical level of power consumption, thus freeing up energy for other purposes—but he was somewhat dubious that this was actually the case. He had no direct evidence of inefficiency on the part of the SGC, but he was deeply suspicious of the efficacy of any organization, even one ostensibly built upon the foundations of something as auspicious as interstellar travel that proceeded via the warping of spacetime.

"So," he said, narrowing his eyes in Dr. Lam's direction. "You're certain I can't leave? Even though we distinctly heard General Landry," he drew out the man's name in an attempt to subtly indicate his displeasure and/or remind her of the man's rank, "give the order for nonessential personnel to evacuate the base."

"I'm sure," Lam replied.

"Yes well, *I'm* certain that I am nonessential," Rush said, crossing his arms over his chest, still perched on the gurney he had been sitting on for the past half hour, watching the pale silhouettes of medical personnel pass back and forth, bright against the dimness.

"You're not going out there," Lam said, her heels clicking against the cement floor as she paced toward the door, checking the integrity of its lock, or some other intrinsic property that was obscured to him. "You're not joining the evacuating throng."

"Throng."

"Yes." Lam said. "If you were out there, you'd see. Topside, it's a throng. Subside—well, it's anyone's guess. *And you*," she said, placing a special emphasis on the word, "do not belong in a *throng*."

"Mmm," he said. "Perspicacious."

"Correct," she said, finishing her apparently purposeless check of the door. She gave him a fleeting smile.

"Don't *you* evacuate under these kinds of conditions?" he asked her. "I can't be sure, of course, but you seem like an intellectual resource who would not be directly integral in a firefight."

"I'm flattered," she replied, raising one eyebrow at him as she crossed the room, her shoes clicking across the pale blue sheen that the lights put on the polished cement.

He shrugged.

"But medical personnel do not evacuate unless there is a general order to do so," Lam continued. She inserted a key into a locker that he otherwise would not have found particularly noteworthy, opened it, and pulled out several identical alien-looking devices. She handed one to Rush.

"And this is—" he said, skeptically examining the coiled metal. It was cool to the touch and lighter than his visual inspection had suggested.

"A weapon," Lam said, depressing a small button on the side of the device. It sprang open in her hand. "It's called a zat."

A zat. How onomatopoeic.

"No thank you," Rush replied, placing the sinuous curl of dull metal next to him on the gurney.

Lam locked eyes with him. "Seriously? Because I haven't been working here for all that long, but I have to tell you, that is the first time I have *ever*—"

The repetitive clang of metal on metal interrupted her, and the handful of medical staff whirled towards the sealed doors to the infirmary, most with zats in hand.

Rush found the set of white-coated, weapons-wielding physicians to be—a really fucking bizarre set.

He picked up his alien handgun out of a strange sense of collective obligation.

The metallic clangs sounded again.

He flinched, but he wasn't the only one to do so.

This time it was quieter and a bit more akin to urgent knocking.

Lam walked purposefully toward the door. She held down a button on what was evidently some kind of intercom unit.

"Please identify yourselves," Lam said.

"Vala Mal Doran. And guest," Vala's voice crackled through the speaker system.

"Colonel Everett Young."

Young sounded as though he were in a *particularly* bad mood as he gave his authorization code and confirmed that Lam was clear to open the doors.

Lam pressed a release to reveal Young leaning heavily on Vala, one hand braced against a wall.

Almost immediately Young locked eyes with Rush and glared at him in a manner that seemed to indicate extreme displeasure. Rush glared back at him over the tops of his glasses in a manner that hopefully indicated equally extreme *disdain*.

Young rolled his eyes.

Rush raised his eyebrows.

"Colonel," Lam said, stepping laterally to take some of Young's weight. "What happened? Were you injured?"

"It's nothing," Young said through gritted teeth as one of Lam's staff hit the door controls. "I'm fine."

"Funnily enough," Vala replied, "we're here to rescue *you*."

"What?" Lam asked sharply, eyeing the pair of them dubiously.

"Well, not *you*, hot stuff," Vala amended. "That one, over there." She smiled at Rush. "Hello, gorgeous."

Rush nodded at her.

"What's going on?" Lam asked, as she and Vala steered Young in the direction of the gurney that Rush was leaning against. "Dr. Brightman has been monitoring the emergency channel, but no general advisory has gone out yet."

Rush got out of their way in the most expeditious manner possible.

"We've got an in-progress foothold situation downstairs," Young said, managing to articulate understandably through an impressively clenched jaw, "and so we're *not staying*," he continued, clearly making an effort to derail his own forward momentum.

Vala stopped with him, but Lam tried to proceed in the direction of the gurney until the three of them came to a staggering, uncoordinated halt.

"Rush," Young growled, "come on."

Rush looked at him skeptically. "You can barely walk."

"Excuse me," Lam said, "but Dr. Rush is not going anywhere."

"What?" Young replied, sounding exhausted and incredulous and like he had just about reached the end of his mental and physical resources.

"Not until I get clearance from General Landry," Lam replied crisply. "I'm not releasing him to you. Not to you, not to anyone."

"He's not a patient," Young snapped. "He's not yours to release."

"Everyone on or affiliated with this base is my patient," Lam snapped right back, pulling out her radio as she stepped away, carefully removing Young's arm from her shoulders in the process. "If we are in the midst of a foothold situation then I have to assume, until proven otherwise, that this is related to the LA—and I am *not*," she paused, cocking her head at Young, widening her eyes slightly, as if trying to remind him of something, "*releasing him* until I am specifically cleared to do so by General Landry."

Young looked at her for a moment, his expression unreadable.

Rush tried not to find the entire situation patently ridiculous, but it was difficult.

Young was not going to fucking *abduct* him.

"Okay," Young said, "radio it in, but make it quick."

Rush stepped forward, giving Young a dubious and obvious once-over. "You look terrible, you realize."

The line of Young's jaw loosened and subtly shifted in a way that suggested he might be amused. It was hard to tell. "Coming from you," Young said dryly, "that means a lot."

Rush narrowed his eyes.

Lam shifted the channel on her radio and the device crackled to life with the tail end of whatever Landry was saying. "—Siler to shut them down. Shut them down entirely."

"This is Lieutenant Scott—visibility is down to about a meter on level twenty-eight—sir, we can't see what we're doing, I don't know how they're operating in this stuff."

"Hold your ground, lieutenant," they heard Landry growl.

Lam stood, her frame tense, waiting for an opening in the chatter.

Vala caught Rush's eye and with a subtle tilt of her head, managed to convey the idea that she wouldn't mind a hand in supporting Young's weight.

"This is Siler—ventilation is sealed with respect to the surface, but if we shut down the internal recirculators anyone without a mask below level twenty-five is going to have a difficult time breathing—this stuff is heavy and is going to entirely displace normal air on the lower levels if we don't keep mixing."

Lam's eyebrows pressed together, and she angled her head down.

"Difficult time breathing?" Rush repeated, stepping in and closing one hand around Young's elbow before the other man could argue, and then pulling his arm over his shoulders.

"They're pumping some kind of dense gas through the gate," Young said, subtly leaning into Rush. He looked at Lam. "Flip to the med priority channel and override, you're not going to get a break."

"I'm not going to override for—" Lam stopped, midsentence, looking up at something near the ceiling.

Rush followed her gaze, twisting slightly to see a thin stream of whitish vapor that had begun to cascade down from a vent near the ceiling.

"Well *that's* not good," Vala murmured, her head angled up.

"I concur," Rush said, looking at it dubiously.

"The stuff has gotten into the air re-circulators," Young snapped, looking at Lam. "Call it in. We have to get him out of here."

Lam flipped her radio back to whatever it had started on, depressed the button and spoke into it.

"This is Dr. Lam for General Landry, Colonel Young and Vala are here to provide an escort to one of my patients—can you authorize this?"

She waited for a moment.

"Carolyn," Landry replied. "Let them go. How's the air on twenty-one?"

"It just started to come through up here," Lam said into her radio as she opened a cabinet.

Young and Vala were already moving toward the door. Rush matched their pace, trying to take as much of Young's weight as he could.

"Masks," Lam snapped at them, as they approached the door. "Wait. We have masks."

One of her staff came forward with three in masks in hand.

"Fantastic," Vala said, pulling hers on.

Young followed suit.

Rush looked dubiously at his.

"You realize that if the gas is heavier than air and displaces breathable oxygen and we're trapped in a local sink then filters won't actually help," Rush said, looking at Young. "Right?"

"Just put it on," Young growled.

"The stuff could be toxic as well as dense," Vala said shortly.

They both looked at her.

"What?" she snapped. "Not just a pretty face, here. Now let's go, gorgeous."

Rush put on his mask.

Lam stepped forward and pressed the zat he had abandoned back into his hand.

"Good luck," she whispered as she opened the door to the quiet of the corridor beyond.

The light was dim and blue. It reflected off surfaces and soaked down into blackness in corners, behind pipes, and in the dark recesses of doorways. There was no one in sight. All of the nonessential personnel had presumably already made their way up the long stretches of stairs. He wondered what Amanda Perry did in situations such as this—when the elevators were shut down and an evacuation order was sounded. There must be some kind of protocol in place for her.

After only a few minutes of quiet progression along homogenous corridors, they reached the stairs. The air in the stairwells had a faintly hazy cast that was more pronounced near the floor.

The sight of it was unnerving.

"This looks worse than before," Vala whispered, glancing at Young. "Is it coming down from above us?"

"We'll find out," Young said. "But if this stuff is in the re-circulators then it's a good bet it'll start showing up all over the base."

"Let's go," Vala said edgily. "I don't like this. It's giving me a bad feeling."

"Agreed," Young growled back, adjusting the grip he had on his handgun, which was currently digging unpleasantly into Rush's left shoulder. They started forward together, managing to make it up the first flight of stairs at something approximating a normal speed. Rush suspected that such a pace was not going to be sustainable. Not for Young.

In the infirmary, he'd heard Landry give the order to shut off the air re-circulators. That would be a colossally stupid idea. They needed to filter the stuff *out* and pump clean air *in*. If the gas wasn't toxic—if it was just sinking beneath normal air, if it was just sitting

down in the lower levels, then without self contained breathing units everyone down there would suffocate.

He hoped someone fucking realized this.

Carter would realize.

He'd seen her source code.

She would know.

Was she down there?

She would know.

"Was Colonel Carter in the gate room?" Rush whispered into the turbid air.

"Yeah," Young gasped as they made the next landing. He took several deep breaths.

"Why?"

"Simply curious," Rush replied, equally breathless. It was difficult to tell if he was having trouble breathing because of threatening panic, or because of reduced oxygen content in the air, or because it was fucking *difficult* to drag Colonel Young up flights of stairs.

He felt unnaturally warm.

"Go," Young said.

They went, tearing through the haze as quickly as they were able.

He didn't understand this mist.

He didn't understand its *purpose*.

Young's arm tightened suddenly around his shoulders, his sidearm digging mercilessly into Rush's left deltoid as Vala took a misstep.

"Sorry," Vala breathed, her voice high and breathless. "Sorry, handsome."

For the sake of convenience, Rush decided to assume that whoever had dialed the SGC—he'd call the dialing party the LA, again for the sake of convenience—had hostile intentions.

"It's fine," Young hissed. "Keep going."

So. The LA had presumably dialed into the SGC for malevolent purposes unknown and in order to achieve their objectives, had instigated the flooding of the entire base with this dense, whitish gas. The thing that he did not understand was why they would choose to hamper their own incursion by use of a suffocating, opaque, double-edged

weapon. Surely it would cause them the same amount of inconvenience and danger that it would cause the base personnel. It stood to reason therefore, that it had some other advantage that was not immediately apparent to him.

They made the next landing and paused for a moment, Vala's hand pressed to the gleaming white silhouette of the number eighteen, emblazoned on the wall in reflective paint.

Someone was shaking. It was either Young or Vala—already exhausted from their rapid ascent from level twenty-seven. Rush looked down at his feet. The skin of his ankles above his shoes felt oddly warm.

"Go," Young said again.

They started up the next flight of stairs.

If there was an advantage conferred by the gas to the LA, then it was likely to derive from some property intrinsic to it.

It was dense.

It was opaque.

It seemed to cause some kind of mild exothermic reaction on skin contact.

It—

"Shit," Young hissed quietly.

Rush looked up.

Ahead of them, pouring off of the level seventeen landing, was an advancing wall of white.

He tensed, feeling his already labored breathing speed up.

"Deep breaths," Young said calmly. "Hyperventillate and then hold it. We'll go straight through past the landing. It will be clearer above seventeen."

"Right," Vala said, her tone clipped, her chin angled up. "Of course it will."

Rush nodded shortly, trying to force himself to take a deep breath in the face of the rapidly advancing blue-white wave.

He took a second breath.

A third.

And then it hit.

He lost his depth perception and his visual field in one disorienting swoop, but more than that—it became immediately apparent to him what the utility of the gas was to the Lucian Alliance.

Instinctively, they all slowed.

Every centimeter of his exposed skin was lit up with a luminescence that was emitting at the red end of the visible spectrum and likely into the infrared, if the warmth was any indication.

Neither Young nor Vala were emitting electromagnetic radiation of any kind.

Rush unwound his right hand from around Young's waist and held it in front of his face, watching the vaguely pinkish-red light flicker around his fingers, his forearm, glowing faintly through his white shirt—

"Go," Young shouted, breaking the spell and pulling them all up through the mist.

What the fuck.

What the *fuck*.

He couldn't breathe.

The red glow against the white was disorienting.

He was emitting electromagnetic radiation in an exothermic reaction between either something he'd been *coated with*, which was fucking unlikely, or something that he *was*. How the fuck did Ancient genes work, anyway, and what did they do?

"We're slowing down," Vala said, her voice breathless. "I think we're slowing down."

"I can't tell," Young whispered.

It was so quiet.

And so featureless.

Except for the glow.

"Ignore it, gorgeous," Vala said. "Ignore it."

The mist was a tag. It was one component in a two-component tag. The other component being him.

He couldn't see anything but white.

He couldn't breathe.

"Do not," Young gasped, "do not panic, hotshot."

He wasn't panicking.

He wasn't even remotely.

Not panicking.

Not panicking.

Black edged.

But emitting.

"One," Vala said.

Nothing else.

"Two," Vala said.

Young was trembling.

"Three," Vala said.

He could not breathe.

"Four," Vala said.

That was expected.

"Five," Vala said.

It was hard to orient. It was hard to feel the press of gravity in a field of featureless white.

"Six," Vala said.

He was going to die here.

"Seven," Vala said.

Unless he was abducted first.

"Eight," Vala said.

In which case, he would die somewhere else.

"Nine," Vala said.

Most likely.

"Ten," Vala said.

But *they* would still die here.

"Eleven," Vala said.

Vala was counting steps.

"Twelve," Vala said.

It was hard to hear her.

"Thirteen," Vala said.

Young was so heavy.

"Fourteen," Vala said.

He took the next step but there was no step there.

Everyone made the same mistake.

The sensation of falling was hard to discern, but the sensation of three people tangled against a hard surface was not.

He spread his hands out against the featureless white.

The surface in front of him was hard. Was it a door or was it a wall or was it the floor.

He tried to feel gravity.

He shut his eyes and tried to *feel* it.

The stairs were behind him. He was on the landing. Young was gasping, trying to push himself up. Rush tangled his right hand in the fabric of Young's jacket. "Vala." He called as best he could. "Vala."

He could hear her, breaths coming like sobs, a moving darkness on the other side of Young.

There was no time for anything but absolute accuracy.

"Left," he breathed, dragging Young forward, across the landing.

Vala was a formless dark on the other side of Young, an inverse of his own reddish glow.

He tripped against the first step, falling against the ascending stairs.

Vala managed to keep Young from following him down.

He forced himself back to his feet, resuming his place on Young's left.

No one had the energy left to count out loud.

He could hear his own blood roaring in his ears.

One, zero.

The air began to clear.

One, one.

The whiteness faded back down to a turbid blue-white, clearing enough for him to see the next landing.

One, zero, zero.

His chest ached with the need for oxygen.

One, zero, one.

He stopped counting. All conscious thought shunted laterally and down into pure effort.

They reached the landing.

He and Vala buckled at the same time sending the three of them back to the floor beneath the white glare of the number sixteen. Vala inched unsteadily towards him, her hair sweeping over her shoulder in a dark curtain. He spread his hands, bracing himself against the cement floor of the landing, pulling air into his lungs, trying to overcome the powerful impulse to pull off his mask.

He watched his hands.

He watched his hands, where they were pressed to the floor through a few inches of mist, give off a faint red light. In his peripheral vision, he was aware of Vala and Young looking at him. He waited for someone to ask for clarification as to what the fuck was going on. But no one did. Perhaps they weren't curious. That seemed unlikely. Perhaps they *already knew* what he had just discovered in his medical file.

If that were the case, Young had really been playing it fucking close to the fucking chest.

It wasn't much of a conceptual leap to make three assumptions. One—the differential 'glow effect,' for lack of a better term, produced by the mist was visually tagging him. The mechanism could be worked out later, but was likely not keyed to him in a personalized way, but somehow predicated on a property conferred by one of the three Ancient genes he carried. Two—regardless of the exact mechanism by which he was fucking glowing, his contact with the mist was producing an electromagnetic signature that had the convenient feature of alerting him to the fact that it existed, but the inconvenient feature of likely being remotely detectable. Three—

"Get up," Young snarled, dragging Rush up by his shirt. "Get *up*, Rush."

Three, if his two-part glow-tag were indeed remotely detectable, it would be a signature that could be locked onto for transport or tracked and pursued by infiltrating parties.

That was not good.

"Stay out of that stuff as much as you can," Young hissed, staring at him from behind the transparent plastic of his mask. "Don't stick your god damned *hands* into it." Apparently, his neighbor had come to the same conclusions Rush had. "I'll bet," the other man said, his voice low and immediate, "that you just lit up the hand-held sensors of every LA member on this base."

Young's double-handed grip on his shoulders was difficult to tolerate.

"Yes," he replied breathlessly, "yes that's quite likely. I'm sure they can still detect me." He swept one hand rapidly through the translucent air, producing a faint red haze on his palm. "But why not pull me out when they had such a—" he couldn't catch his breath, but he continued anyway, "—such a spectacular signal?"

"You can't transport out of the SGC," Young whispered, "because of all the signal scramblers that we have here. But that doesn't mean that they're not all converging on us right now."

"Boys," Vala breathed, "the only way out is up, so what do you say we *get going*." It wasn't a question. She peeled one of Young's hands away from Rush's shoulder and forced a return to their previous configuration.

They began to ascend again, heading toward level fifteen.

Rush didn't understand how Young was managing to do this. All indications had been that the man was seriously injured. He hadn't ever enquired as to the specifics, but it stood to reason that, given the extended medical leave, his injuries were at least fairly serious.

"That's great," Young snarled, looking up at the thick whitish mist advancing slowly over the landing of level fifteen.

"The distribution and density of these pockets doesn't make sense," Rush murmured. "We shouldn't be running into concentrated blocks of the stuff so frequently and so—"

Vala screamed something that *wasn't English* as a wave of destabilization hit him from the side, knocking him down to the steps. He hit hard, Young on top of him. Above them the air split to accommodate the trajectories of different kinds of weapons, energy based and projectile based.

He didn't understand how anyone could have gotten *ahead* of them but someone was certainly firing at them from level fifteen and while Rush didn't know much about

tactics but he *did* know that having the lower ground in a straight, open stairwell was not a good strategic position.

Young started firing his sidearm *right* fucking next to Rush's ear, *again*, but at least that meant the man *wasn't dead*, so, all in all he supposed that was a net positive.

Rush looked up to see Vala, dark against the blue-white glow of the mist. She had positioned herself ahead and to the right, ascending against the wall, firing a spread with her snake-like energy weapon.

"Go," Young shouted at him. "Fucking *fire* your goddamned *weapon*, Rush."

Ah yes. Right.

He was holding a weapon—the same kind that Vala had, EM based and open in his hand. He looked up into the mist ahead, but couldn't see a damn thing. He fired anyway, toward the point at which energy blasts seemed to be originating from.

It seemed to make no difference. He couldn't see anything but blue-white above them so he stopped sending purposeless shots into the mist and looked up at the wall immediately above his head.

"What the hell are you *doing*?" Young shouted above the deafening roar of gunfire.

Rush fired at the metal railing running along the wall, sending a burst of blueish energy traveling up into the mist that obscured the landing of level fifteen, and illuminating two indistinct silhouettes, crouching near the wall. That was useful. He began firing continuously, lighting up the railing as Vala took down one of the silhouettes with a flare of blue energy. Only a few seconds later, Young knocked the other one back into the white opacity with a well-placed shot.

Rush started forward, but Young pulled him back. "You are *not* first, hotshot."

"Oh yes," Rush hissed back, "and you're in *fantastic* shape are you."

Vala had already reached forward into the advancing cloud of white, and dragged back the person she had either stunned or killed—he had no idea what the effect of that blue energy was. In one quick motion she pulled off the man's self-contained breathing unit. She passed over the small canister of air and associated mask to Rush.

Rush passed it over to Young, who rolled his eyes and shoved it back at him. Not about to engage in some kind of childish display of petulant altruism, Rush swapped his filter mask for the breathing unit as Vala plunged back into the mist, her sinuous weapon in hand.

"*Vala*—" Young hissed, taking a half step up. He grimaced, and his left knee seemed to give out beneath him.

Rush was just barely able to prevent him from going down.

Somewhere in the swirling opacity, he heard Vala fire a single shot.

For a moment she was a backlit, dark silhouette before fading again to white.

After only a few seconds Vala reemerged from the thickest part of the mist with the second breathing unit, which she tried to hand to Young.

He shoved it back at her, and she put it on.

"We're going back down," Young whispered.

"Wrong direction, handsome," Vala replied dubiously.

"I know that," Young said. "Come on."

"I assume," Rush said through gritted teeth as Young leaned heavily on him, "that you have some kind of plan."

"Level sixteen is a good level for us," Young said, "provided you're as much of a computational hotshot as everyone seems to think you are."

"Meaning what?" Rush asked dubiously.

"Level sixteen has a monitoring station, from which point, I'm *hoping* that you can unlock a god damned elevator for us."

"Substantial computational difficulties aside, it sounds risky." He was fairly certain that elevators were generally taken offline in emergencies to prevent death via stationary, airless metal box.

"I'm not seeing a lot of risk-free options here." Young coughed, grimacing in pain.

"I suppose you're correct," Rush replied. "But my ability to unlock an elevator in a time-efficient manner is going to be contingent on the level of security—"

"Whatever," Young snapped. "If you can't do it I have a back-up plan, but it's not—it's not *ideal*, let's put it that way."

"You know what *else* isn't ideal? Some goddamned offsite system administrator monitoring this situation mistaking me for some sloppy Lucian Alliance black-hat and trapping us in an elevator in which we eventually suffocate, so what's your plan B?"

"Black hat?"

"Nevermind."

"Can't you just—"

"No," Rush snapped. "If Carter or Perry or someone equally competent has so much as *looked* at the computational security on this base then I'm not going fuck with it and magically recruit us an elevator in five minutes. It doesn't work like that, Young. This kind of thing requires time, which we do not have, so, I repeat, what's your plan B?"

Young looked at Vala.

Vala shook her head.

"They're bound to be in there," she said quietly. "How else could they have beaten us to fifteen?"

"In where?" Rush asked.

"In the walls," Vala said. "There's an access shaft that goes to the surface."

"Firefights on ladders in long narrow tubes are not a good time," Young said tightly.

"You sure you don't want to re-think the elevator plan?"

"Does the monitoring station have fucking external access," Rush whispered, "or is the entire base on a closed network?"

"I think there's external access," Young replied. "Does it matter?"

"Yes," Rush hissed. "Of course it matters. I'm not in the habit of carrying around security scanner applications on my person so I need to fucking *obtain* one."

"Keep your shirt on," Young growled.

Rush shot him a scathing look.

"At the very least," Vala whispered, "we can get a better picture of what's going on base-wide."

"Let's go," Young said.

Together they moved across the landing and into the dim, turbid air of level sixteen.

Chapter Fifteen

Inside the monitoring station on level sixteen, Young braced himself against the wall next to the door and focused pulling oxygen into his lungs. The smooth, cool plane of the cement behind his back, the strange, faintly acrid tang in the air, the quiet hiss of the appropriated breathing units that Vala had removed from the stunned LA personnel—all of it seemed too immediate. For that, he was grateful. It helped him ignore the perpetual, sustained agony of stress placed upon healing bone.

"Oh no," David breathed. "Oh Christ. Oh shit, oh fuck." Ash fell like snow, covering the rock, the metal, and settling over David's hair in a pale dusting. "They're coming."

"Well," Rush said, the word clipped and darkly amused. "This is not a good sign."

Young blinked and refocused on Rush, who was bent over what looked to be the most prominent computer out of the selection in the room. His hands were braced against the table, and his hair clung to his temples and the back of his neck in damp tendrils. The stark white of his shirt caught the blue glow of the emergency lights.

"What?" Young replied in a vicious whisper, readjusting his grip on his gun.

"Someone locked the console."

Vala was prowling the edges of the room, opening drawers, peering into supply cabinets, hunting for god knew what.

"Well, *unlock* it," Young growled, fighting the urge to shift his stance, pulling in a deep, slow breath.

Rush angled his head up, shook his hair back subtly and half-smiled. "Oh yes. Why didn't I fucking think of that? What would I do sans these practical insights of yours?"

"Rush—"

"Don't give me that, give me any fucking passwords that you have that you think are likely to work. Both of you. Now."

"Hate to break it to you, gorgeous," Vala said, coming forward with a roll of duct tape she had pulled out of the recesses of the supply cupboard, "but appearances to the contrary, I'm not yet a full-fledged member of this organization."

"Young," Rush said, snapping his fingers. "Come on. User names. Passwords. Right—" He trailed off abruptly, looking down at Vala, who had dropped into a crouch and had clamped her hands around Rush's calf just below the knee. "What are you doing?"

"Trying not to die," Vala said brightly, bringing her hands down in one smooth motion, causing a disruption to the white gas that settled thickly near the floor and was flaring a subtle red around Rush's ankles. "What are you doing?" She began taping around Rush's ankle, presumably to minimize whatever EM signal he was giving off.

Rush shook his head and looked back at Young. "Any time now."

"Rush, I can't just—"

"You can't *what*. You asked *me* to compromise security base-wide in a time efficient manner and you don't want to grant me expeditious access?"

Young clenched his jaw. The enormity of what he had asked Rush to do seemed to settle down over him.

"All you need to do is to free up an elevator," Young replied.

Rush fixed him with a dark, penetrating gaze. "And to do *that*," he replied, "I need control of *all systems*."

"All systems?" Young asked.

"Well, most. This was your idea," Rush reminded him.

"Username is y-o-u-n-e-v-4," he said spelling it out. "Password is ah—Emily, capital E."

"That is the worst fucking password I have ever had the misfortune of encountering," Rush said absently as the monitor unlocked.

"What's wrong with it?" Young snapped, thoughtlessly shifting his weight next to the locked door and gritting his teeth at the agonizing flare of pain that shot from his back down his leg.

"I don't have time to answer that question right now. We'll talk later," Rush replied, his eyes scanning over the monitors. He sank into the chair as Vala finished her taping job.

Vala positioned herself directly in front of the door, her zat out, her stance lateral, so that she could watch Rush and the door simultaneously. "Access to the live feeds wouldn't be a bad thing," she said in Rush's direction.

"Enjoy examining blank white screens, do you?" Rush shot back.

"I'm assuming that we have access to more than video," Vala whispered, flinging her hair back over her shoulder with a haughty swish of turbid air. "We can at least risk turning up the radio." Her eyes flicked over to Young.

He carefully dialed up the volume on the radio, listening to the chatter, trying to get a feel for what was going on, as he watched Rush click through windows at the

monitoring station. From what he could tell, it seemed that the worst of the firefight hadn't spread above level twenty-seven.

"How's it going over there?" Young asked, absolutely motionless against the wall, trying not to picture LA members converging on their single-exit room.

Rush pulled something that looked like an external hard-drive out of his back pocket and connected it to the computer. "Better than expected," he said shortly.

"What kind of timetable are we talking about here, Rush?"

"Do you have *any* kind of intellectual understanding of what I'm doing?"

"I gave you my password," Young half snarled. "What more do you need?"

"For administrative access to the entire SGC? A good deal more than the poorly chosen password of a single colonel, thankfully."

"I need a timetable."

"And for what, exactly, do you need a timetable? We're stuck here until either I gain system access or we're killed and/or abducted."

Young tried not to wince at the phrasing. He wasn't sure whether it was the idea that he'd just enabled a civilian with no common sense or training to speak of to 'gain access' to the mainframe of the world's most classified military complex, or the cavalier attitude about abduction and death that bothered him more.

"He's got a point," Vala said.

Young shot her a disapproving look.

She shrugged at him.

They waited, Young taking a turn using Vala's self-contained respirator. He tried not to count the seconds. Instead, he counted his breaths. After one hundred, he passed the unit back to her.

Around them, monitors came alive, flickering pale in the dim light.

"I'm in," Rush announced. "For the moment."

"Unlock an elevator," Young growled.

"Hmm," Rush said. "Curious."

"What's curious?" Vala whispered, edging forward slightly.

"The gate is no longer active," Rush replied.

Young turned up the chatter on his radio a bit more, wishing he had his earpiece.

"Well that's very interesting," Vala said in a tone that implied she did not find it *at all* interesting. "But—"

"Shh," Young said abruptly, holding up a hand, focusing in on his radio.

"I repeat—" someone said, voice crackling over the open channel along with the sound of gunfire. "They have a hostage—a civilian hostage and there's something wrong—he's emitting some kind of—visible light."

"Do you have an ID on the civilian?" Landry's growl was low and unmistakable.

"Volker. Dr. Dale Volker. Astrophysicist."

"The gate is activating," Rush cut in. "Someone is trying to dial out."

The radio channel exploded into chatter.

"Carter—Carter respond."

"They're dragging him forward."

"Carter."

"Well, stop them."

"Don't fire, in this mess targeting isn't worth *shit*."

"Sam. Sam, respond."

"They still hold the south wall of the gate room. They must know where the manual shut down is. They must know."

"Where is *Carter*?"

"Can you disable the gate?" Young asked Rush over the radio chatter. "Cut power from here?"

"With a window of seconds? No." Rush was scanning the screen.

"You're not going to even attempt it? That guy could be *you* in ten minutes. They—"

"Gate is active," he heard Mitchell call out over the radio. "Repeat, gate is active."

"Oh shut up, will you?" Rush snapped. Young was a bit uncertain as to whether Rush was talking to him, to the radio, or to the systems he was peeling through with the easy rhythm of his fingers against the keyboard.

"The iris just activated," Scott's voice crackled over the open channel.

"Did you do that?" Young asked.

"Yes," Rush replied testily, "of course I did."

"They've got another civilian," Mitchell said grimly over the radio. "Again, emitting some kind of—something."

"ID," Landry snapped.

"It's ah. It's Dr. Lam," Mitchel said, his tone clipped. "I repeat, hostage two is Dr. Lam."

There was a brief and unnatural silence on the open channel.

"Understood," Landry said.

"Can you tell how many there are?" Vala asked. "How many people are glowing?"

"Yes," Rush replied, "but not in a time efficient manner."

"Focus on the elevator," Young said. "We have to get out of here, and if the LA can't get through the gate—they'll be heading in our direction."

"Possibly," Rush said, "but they've got someone—" he trailed off, frowning.

"Someone *what*, Rush," Young growled. The man was going to drive him crazy.

"Someone's in the system trying to override my control. Based on what they're doing; I'd guess they're unfriendly rather than friendly."

"Great," Young said. "That's just *great*."

"What's the number on your ID badge?" Rush snapped.

A bolt of pain ran like an electric shock up and down his back as he shifted to unclip his ID and look at it.

"On the back," Rush said with a rising intonation, clearly impatient.

Young read the number off to him.

"Iris is *open*," he heard Jackson shout over the radio.

"Fuck," Rush hissed.

"Cam, *stop*," Jackson's voice peaked and crackled over the open channel.

Vala's shoulders visibly tensed.

"Shut that thing and keep it shut," Young snapped.

"I am going to make my continued involvement with the stargate program contingent upon you taking a computer literacy class," Rush snarled.

"Less McKay more Carter, Rush."

"Do you think that was understandable to me?" Rush asked, typing furiously, his eyes glued to the screen in front of him. "Because it was not. Nor was it a sentence. This is

not my typical area of expertise; I am a cryptographer, not a *hacker*, so kindly *stop speaking*."

"To your *left*, Colonel Mitchell," he heard Teal'c, shout over the radio, abrupt and hoarse.

"This is Scott, I'm taking heavy fire on twenty-seven—"

"Got you," Rush hissed.

"What—the iris, or the elevator?" Young asked tensely, not entirely sure which he'd prefer.

"Neither."

Young's teeth ached under the strain of his clenched jaw. "Rush—"

"I locked her out."

"Who?"

"My LA counterpart. I closed her access ports. Should hold her for maybe—ten minutes. Maybe less if she's a quick learner."

"Great. Now do something useful."

"The iris is shut," Mitchell's voice came over the radio, choked and faint. "I repeat. The iris is shut."

"You're welcome," Rush snapped at Young before he could say anything. "The central elevator is back online and keyed only to your ID card."

Young nodded.

"I would say there's a ninety-nine percent chance that they're waiting for us right outside this room," Vala whispered, edging towards Young. "There's been some quiet movement in the hall."

"Agreed," Young replied, "But I'm hoping there won't be many of them. They might not be looking specifically for him," Young said. "They're clearly trying to nab other people as well; they're probably taking anyone who's genetically tagged. They may not even know for sure that he's on the base."

Vala gave him a skeptical look.

"Right now," Young said, "it really doesn't matter. The longer we wait, the worse it will be."

He looked at Vala, and she looked back at him, the skeptical lift of her eyebrows falling, her expression fading for a moment into something serious and unmasked. She stepped closer to him, and when she spoke, her voice was low and didn't carry. "Give him your card," she murmured.

He nodded at her.

She smiled at him with all her typical brashness. Half-twisting to look at Rush, she whispered, "come on gorgeous, we don't have all day."

"I'm aware." Rush disconnected his hard drive, and returned it to his back pocket.

"Oh sure," Young said, coughing faintly in the misty air. "You remember your hard drive, but leave your damn signal scrambler god knows where."

Rush gave him a fractional shrug as he picked up his zat.

Young motioned Rush over against the wall next to him, putting himself between the scientist and the door. He unclipped his ID card and offered it to the other man.

Rush looked at it, but made no move to take it.

Young clipped it to the other man's shirt. "I'd say don't be stupid—"

"But talking to oneself isn't situationally appropriate," Rush finished, unclipping the ID in one crisp motion and curling his fingers around its edges with a faint grimace.

"If I tell you to go," Young said, "you go."

Rush nodded.

"When you get to the elevator, hit level one," he whispered, "but throw the emergency stop at level three, and force the doors."

Rush raised his eyebrows.

"Go left when you get off the elevators on three. That's west. You're going to look for the westernmost wall of the level."

"Are you fucking—"

"Shut up," Young said. "You'll be looking for a metal doorway over an access point. It's in a corridor, and it's unmarked. Inside is a ladder that stretches the entire vertical distance of the base. Climb up two levels. It'll put you about a quarter of a klick from the main road. Do *not* report to the evacuation point. Do *not* go back to your apartment. Ditch your phone." Young pulled out his pocketknife and passed it to Rush.

"Once you're out, cut out your transponder, but don't destroy it. Plant it somewhere, if

you can. Throw it down a goddamned ravine. Somewhere it will take hours to search." He gave Rush an appraising look. "Can you handle all of this?"

Rush stared at him coolly over the tops of his glasses. "It's not exactly conceptually difficult."

Young suspected that was as close to a 'yes' as he was likely to get from the man.

Young looked over at Vala. "You ready for this?"

Vala squared her shoulders, both hands on her zat, which was held out in front of her. She locked eyes with Young and nodded once, short and determined, her hair a dark curtain in the dim light.

Young reached out and, in one quick, twisting, painful motion, he unlocked the door and flung it wide.

Vala advanced immediately, firing without hesitation, her features lit up intermittently by the blue glare of her weapon. Above the sound of her discharging zat, Young heard the impact of a body against the floor.

He waited, one hand on his weapon, one hand on Rush's shoulder, holding the other man back.

He couldn't see anything around the frame of the door, but the trajectory of an incoming blast of an energy-based weapon broke Vala's firing rhythm and told him that they were arrayed directly opposite the door, if not lateral to it as well. He released the safety on his sidearm as Vala rebalanced and kicked open the closing door with enough force to knock back another member of the LA. Young fired, taking down a man who made the mistake of edging past Vala and around the frame of the door. The shot was at close range, the minor kickback of the gun ricocheting and amplifying down his injured leg. He followed Vala into the hazy air of the corridor, dragging Rush forward, past the dead LA member and out into the hallway.

"Don't look," Young said through gritted teeth, as they stepped over the body. His fingers were wrenched into the material of Rush's shirt, his breath coming in pained gasps as he tried to exert any kind of leverage with one good leg.

It took Rush only a few seconds to get his act together and step forward, taking some of Young's weight.

His breath burned in his lungs as they advanced incrementally, trying to break laterally in the direction of the elevators. The quarters were close and the visuals were poor and really the only thing that they had going for them was the fact that with the mist as

thin as it was, and with Rush's pants taped at the ankles, the identity of the person the LA wanted wasn't immediately apparent and so—

They weren't shooting to kill.

In his peripheral vision, Young saw Vala's silhouette flare as she took a hit to the shoulder from one of the energy-based weapons the LA carried. She staggered sideways with a muffled cry before she was tackled by the man who had clipped her.

Rush began to fire.

Young took careful aim at Vala's assailant as the LA operative forced her down into the mist, dragging back her hair as she fought him. She was clenching her hands inside her sleeves, trying to avoid any contact between her skin and the white, alien gas, but the LA member was on top of her, his knee driving down into her back, his hand over her neck, pressing her shoulders and then her face against the floor where the mist was the thickest.

Young's finger had tightened on the trigger when the sudden darkening in his peripheral vision split his attention as someone slammed into Rush bodily from the side in a clear attempt to bring the pair of them to the floor. Young shifted his center of gravity back and laterally onto his good leg, separating himself from Rush enough that the mathematician took most of the force of the impact. Rush went to his knees before Young was able to pull him up and out of the grip of the man who had tackled him.

Vala bit off a scream behind teeth that were clenched shut as the man pinning her wrenched her hair back, exposing her throat. Young shot the man just as he pulled his knife.

He and Rush advanced, and in a move that looked more instinctive than calculated, Rush kicked the body of the LA member off of Vala and reached down to help her up.

Young's eyes swept the corridor. The bodies of six LA soldiers lay on the ground, either dead or stunned.

The hallway was silent.

Next to him, Rush was vibrating with tension. Vala had straightened, her zat in her left hand, her right arm held tensely against her ribs. Through her mask, he could hear her breathing, ragged and fast. Young watched her do her own visual sweep of the corridor before bending down to retrieve another self-contained breathing unit from one of the fallen LA members.

Wordlessly, she held it out to Young.

He took it from her and quickly strapped it in place. "How bad?" he asked her, cocking his head toward her shoulder.

"Not bad. Let's go, shall we, boys?" Vala asked, her voice trembling slightly.

They started forward together, weapons out, creating turbid swirls over the mist-covered floor as they advanced in fits of nervous speed, accompanied by pained pauses to regroup. In short order, they reached the elevator, which Rush opened for them with a single, fluid swipe of Young's ID. Young had been half-expecting nothing to happen, but a tiny indicator light flashed green and the doors slid wide, revealing a darkened, empty interior. There were no lights inside, save for the faint glow of a display near the top that indicated the current floor.

"Well this looks fun," Vala said, her mask distorting the low melody of her voice.

Young shot Rush a sidelong look. The man didn't seem like he would be one for enclosed, lightless spaces, but the mathematician looked unperturbed.

Vala, on the other hand, was edgier than he'd ever seen her. Nevertheless, she stepped forward first, hitting the appropriate button before spinning, her hair a dark flare that caught the dim light from the corridor.

Young limped forward, supported by Rush.

"It's a good thing that no one here is *claustrophobic*," Vala said, as Young positioned himself with one hand on the elevator's emergency break. "Yes," Vala continued. "Very fortunate. It would be—" she faded out as the doors began to close, the light from the corridor narrowing relentlessly until they were plunged into darkness that seemed to press against his eyes. "This would be difficult for someone who really didn't like enclosed spaces. Don't you think?"

The only thing that existed in Young's visual field was the pale red number sixteen. He felt the subtle upward acceleration of the elevator as a painful pressure in his hip and back.

In the close opacity of the air, the sound of their breathing was very loud.

"It would be very *awkward* if, say, one of us had been previously tortured nearly to death and then buried alive," Vala continued, her voice breathless and high. "Just as an example."

"What the *fuck*?" Rush hissed, with a flinch that Young felt rather than saw.

"Vala," Young said, and even he couldn't tell if it was a warning or a reprimand or sympathy or concern or none of those things.

"But, fortunately, that happened to no one *here*," Vala said, her voice unsteady and disembodied in the darkness. "No one here," she repeated.

Young grimaced, his expression invisible in the darkness. "Vala," he said again.

"It was, if you want to know, a plot point in the movie *Kill Bill*, which I consider to be the pinnacle of cinematic achievement in your culture."

"What the hell is *wrong* with you?" Rush breathed.

"Take it easy," Young murmured, low and quiet.

"Say what you like, gorgeous, but despite claims to the contrary, I consider Quentin Tarantino to be an uncompromising—" she broke off abruptly, as if her vocal cords had betrayed her by closing unexpectedly, "—an uncompromising if misunderstood feminist."

"I'm really not certain how to respond to any of what you've just said," Rush replied. The edge was gone from his tone.

"We'll watch it together," Vala whispered into the dark.

"Sure," Young said. "Sounds like a plan."

No one spoke for a moment.

"So, Wednesdays are good for me," Vala said unsteadily. "I'll make cocktails."

"Great," Young said. "We're in."

"I think you're confusing your pronouns," Rush replied.

"Don't be a jerk," Young said.

"Everyone wants to watch movies with yours truly, gorgeous. I'm *terribly* charming. Just ask SG-1. Just ask anyone."

Rush sighed. "I'm moving to a different building."

Young hit the emergency stop on the elevator, and a grinding sound tore through the darkness, a sudden deceleration pressed on his inner ear, unbalancing him as it occurred in the absence of any visual input. He reoriented and stepped forward, his fingers searching in the darkness for the seam in the doors. He felt Rush do the same.

"You think that's going to solve any of your problems, hotshot?" Young asked, his hand grazing over Vala's as he dug his fingers into the crack in the metal.

"Solves my problem of fucking overbearing meddlesome neighbors that seem to take some kind of inappropriate satisfaction from coercing me into making them dinner," Rush said.

"I really don't remember it happening that way," Young said, gritting his teeth as he pulled at the doors despite the pain in his back and leg.

"You cook?" Vala asked breathlessly, as a sliver of light shone through the darkness between the slowly yielding doors. "Because I would not be adverse to *dinner* and a movie."

"No," Rush said, "I do not cook."

"I think he like—creates elaborate works of culinary genius or something," Young said, managing to wrest a few more inches out of the door.

"That's an adequate description, yes."

"Well, I would not mind eating a work of culinary genius with my movie," Vala said, stepping back to pull out her zat as Rush and Young managed to wrench the doors back entirely, revealing the offset edge of the third floor, about four and a half feet above where it should be. Vala stepped forward, scanning the portion of the hallway that she could see. Her eyes didn't leave the corridor as she whispered, "give us a boost, gorgeous?"

Rush interlaced his fingers and Vala stepped up, twisting to protect her injured right shoulder as she sprang out and up onto the third floor. She scanned the hallway and then dropped into a crouch, her good hand extended down.

"Go," Young said, shaking his head at Rush's still-interlocked fingers and lifted eyebrow.

"Don't give in to the allure of your own machismo, please," Rush snapped. "This is the only option that makes sense."

"Not a fan of the attitude," Young growled, but with a grimace, he shifted his weight onto his bad leg, grabbed Vala's hand, and let Rush boost him out of the elevator.

Rush scrambled out behind him, and they set off toward the western wall. The air was clear and the floor was quiet. With a swipe of Young's ID card, they swung open the thick metal of the access hatch to reveal the rungs of the ladder.

Vala leaned inside, looking up and down, her zat following the line of her sight before she pulled back.

"It looks clear," she whispered, "but I can't get a good visual of anything on the lower levels—the mist is too thick. It's sitting in a well-defined border, maybe seven or eight levels down."

"Seven levels?" Young asked. "That seems awfully—high."

"No air recirculation in the ridiculous escape shaft?" Rush asked.

"Guess not," Young replied quietly.

"Well," Rush hissed, "if the air recirculators don't operate in there," he pointed at the ladder with two fingers, "What the fuck is their chemical tag doing sitting at the bottom?"

Young wasn't sure if the question was rhetorical or not.

"Someone's was in there," Vala concluded. "The hatch was opened on at least one flooded level. Likely level seven."

"A logical assumption," Rush whispered. "But what I would *not* assume," he paused, his eyes flicking from Vala to Young and then back again, "is that there is no one currently in the shaft."

Young rubbed his jaw, and locked his facial expression. "Then we go quickly."

"Remind me why we can't just leave the base the normal way?" Rush hissed.

"Because then we can't avoid the security checkpoint," Young hissed back. "There's been a catastrophic security breach and we are not fucking advertising your location, Rush." He took a breath to steady himself, and then looked over at Vala. "You're on point," he said quietly. "I'll take our six. Do *not* wait for me," he said, looking at both of them. "Either of you."

Vala nodded.

"This is a terrible fucking idea," Rush whispered. "People actually *pay* you to navigate situations such as this?"

Young glared at him.

Vala stepped through first, hooking her zat to her belt in an economical motion. She crawled through the wall, wincing at the weight on her shoulder, balanced on the platform, and grabbed a rung of the ladder, and began pulling herself up, one-handed.

Young waited for Rush to follow her, then climbed through himself, pulling the hatch shut with his good leg.

The shaft was silent.

Below him, he could see the line of white opacity like the bottom layer in a shot glass.

He looked up, and began his climb.

Good hand, good leg.

Good hand, bad leg.

Good hand, good leg.

Good hand, bad leg.

It wasn't a rhythm because calling it a 'rhythm' would imply that it was something other than a lurching, painful advance, his bad side only coming even with his good side, never extending. His breath burned in his throat, the air from his stolen breathing apparatus dry and sterile.

"Oh no," Telford breathes. "Oh Christ. Oh shit. Oh fuck." Ash falls like snow, atop the rock, the metal. It settles over the dark of Telford's hair, a pale corolla. "They're coming."

The land is red. Like rust, or ancient blood. The air is choked, debris-flakes fall in windswept waves.

He had chosen this direction for two reasons.

One—he had hoped they wouldn't follow.

Two—if they did follow, there was still a chance that the Alliance wouldn't succeed. There was a chance that they would all die here.

"They're coming," Telford repeats, but his voice has calmed and hardened. "Where did you leave the ship?"

Young spits blood into the reddish dirt and swallows. "Where do you think?" he replies with a trace of real amusement in a smile that can look nothing but ghastly. His eyes flick upwards, toward the steep slope of the active volcano ahead of them.

Telford follows his gaze, shaking, bloodied, barely on his feet, but undefeated. He looks back down at Young, the corners of his mouth quirking upward. "You know, you're a priceless son of a bitch at times."

Young laughs and he feels the pain from his spine to his toes.

"Which way is it going to be?" Telford asks, not looking at him. "The hard way, or the hard way?"

"The hard way," Young grinds out. "It's always the hard way."

"Yeah," Telford says, bracing his shoulder against the twisted wreckage of their downed craft. "Good answer." He pulls out an alien first aid kit, but Young shakes his head.

"No," he says.

No use, is what he doesn't say.

Young's right hand, slick with sweat, slipped on the rung and he caught himself with his left hand. The jolt of pain down his injured side was only a half-step up from the constant agony that tore from his back all the way down his leg.

Above him, Rush looked down, pausing.

"Rush," Young growled, tipping his head back and getting a good view of the sole of the man's shoes. "Keep going."

Rush shook his hair back in a move he managed, even behind the mask of an alien breathing unit, to lace with irritation.

Young focused on moving upwards, one rung at a time, forced himself to keep pace with the two above him, step after painful step.

"I think Sanchez might have a crush on me," Telford says, dragging him, shoving him up the barren, rocky slope. "What are your thoughts—" he breaks off, coughing in the acrid air, destroying the cadence of his question, "—on this."

"You wish," Young says through blood, his free hand sliding over stone as fingernails scramble for purchase on loose rock.

"What do you mean I wish?" Telford asks.

"Everyone—" Young breaks off as he seizes up with a wave of pain, "wants to date a combat engineer."

"Yeah," Telford says, barely audible, barely visible through obscure air. "Short though. I don't know about the hair."

Young inhales slowly, trying to breathe past blood. "You're a dick. Anyone ever tell you that?"

"I save your life, and this is the thanks I get?"

"Still a dick," Young rasps.

The memory was so vivid, the acidity of the air so immediate, the pain of his injuries so pressing, that he didn't notice that Rush had stopped until his hand hit the other man's ankle. Again, he caught himself with his left hand, shutting his eyes against the jolt that ran down his side.

Above Rush, Vala unstrapped her zat, transferred it to the hand that she had hooked around the top rung of the ladder, and with a pained grimace, flung the top hatch open, letting in a blinding shaft of natural light. Young shut his eyes, but too late to prevent the searing negative of her outline from being imprinted on his retinas.

He shook his head and squinted up through already tearing eyes to see Vala clear the rim of the access tunnel. Rush followed her through, and Young made his way up behind them a few seconds later, pulling off his breathing apparatus, his lungs aching in the hot, dry air.

Vala stepped around him, steadying him as she passed, to swing shut the metal hatch through which they had emerged.

"Are you all right?" Rush asked, eyeing him dubiously.

"Yeah," Young said, his eyes scanning the trees as he pulled out his gun. "You?"

"Fine," Rush said shortly, breathing apparatus in one hand, zat in the other, he stepped in, taking some of Young's weight.

"Vala?"

"Fine," Vala replied, pulling off her own mask and stepping into place, clearly intending to take some of his weight, despite her shoulder injury. "Might I suggest we keep moving?"

Young waved her off. "Take point. Let's get out of the open before we cut out our transponders."

"I've had better days than this," Rush said conversationally as they limped forward beneath the merciless sun.

"Me too," Young said.

"Me three," Vala said quietly, "but I can tell you one thing that *may* cheer you up," she paused, her eyes sweeping the trees as they stepped into the shade.

"What's that?" Young said, his eyes flicking back to scan their six.

"It seems that in all the confusion of unscheduled offworld activations, Daniel's car keys have ended up in my jacket pocket."

For a moment neither Rush nor Young said anything.

"That seems—terribly convenient," Rush said.

"I never said it was coincidental," Vala replied, a bit stiffly.

"You *stole* Jackson's *keys*?" Young asked, feeling slightly affronted on the archeologist's behalf.

"I *borrowed* his keys," Vala corrected, her chin flicking upward, her eyes still watchful. "I have a habit of picking up useful things in uncertain times."

"I'm not sure how I feel about that kind of habit," Young said skeptically.

"Well," Rush said, "I think it's fucking brilliant."

"No surprise there," Young murmured.

"Thank you, gorgeous," Vala said primly.

The Sky Calls to Us

Sam Carter is alone.

Two corridors over, the sound of gunfire echoes off planar cement. Compression waves blur and blend and distort into a continuous auditory platform that her mind tries to bound and modulate into something that will end. The roar of a chemical rocket. The propagation of thunder over the long, flat geographies of her childhood. But the sound does not resolve. It continues.

Carter shuts her eyes against the turbid air and snaps them back open.

In front of her is a girl.

A young woman.

A girl.

She is dressed in the slimming leather of the Lucian Alliance that Vala used to favor. Her hair is dark and falls over her shoulders in a wave. It catches the light in such a way that Carter suspects that, under the sun, it might be red. Her skin is pale and her hands are delicate and her gaze flicks frequently from the screen to the keyboard.

Carter knows that shift of gaze and mind—the shift required to use an unknown system with a foreign interface.

She *knows* it.

Her hands tighten around her sidearm.

She thinks of Daniel.

She has a gas mask, but she hasn't yet put it on.

She has a radio, but the volume is turned down.

She has a choice, but it is really no choice at all.

Her fingers readjust on her weapon in a slow wave.

She thinks of Daniel in moments like these, poised at a local maximum, curves falling sharply away at either side, because this, this place right here, is where Daniel thrives. Where he balances, where he takes his time and where he walks through success after blazing success, though she knows he doesn't see it that way.

There are two men flanking the girl.

The woman.

They tower over her, their eyes roving past the terminal on which she's working, sweeping the hallways, scanning the ceiling, studying the floor—rapidly, nervously, and without direction from the girl. They lack coordination of effort. They lack alignment of purpose.

The air is filled with mist that hides the shock of Carter's blonde hair. It's always been a liability in the dark, but here, in the pale and turbid air, it is an advantage.

Carter is very still.

She ignores the urge to cough, building in the back of her throat.

She can take down the girl first, or she can take her down last.

The terminal under the LA operative's fingers is interfacing with the gate, which means that whatever their plan, whatever their goals, the *girl* is the asset. The girl is the *brains*. The girl is the key to the entire operation and taking her out is a tactical imperative.

In the back of her mind, the thought of Jack, holding down the control room, aches like a wound that will never heal. But one cannot lose something that one has never had.

Carter permits herself a final readjustment of her grip, another slow wave of the fingers over warm and waiting metal. Then, in one smooth sweep, Carter steps forward, raises her weapon, sights down the barrel, and fires. By the time she hears the report of that single round her gaze is already shifting to the second man, absorbing the kickback of the gun into a change in her stance as she fires again. Her gaze shifts to the girl, who has stepped back, her eyes wide and dark and startled.

"Hold it," Carter snaps.

The girl does not hold it. She is fast enough, startled enough, gutsy enough, to try and wrest a victory, even a Pyrrhic one, from her own incipient defeat. She draws her weapon.

They fire simultaneously.

Carter is already on the floor, head cracking against the cement before her brain processes what has happened.

It is always like this—the fall before the insight.

The pain in the back of her head and in her chest war for attention before her mind sorts them and bins them appropriately into something she can understand. She

inhales, gasping and shallow. She feels wetness already in the back of her throat. The warm, choking wave of blood.

She thinks of the girl, her delicate little counterpart, separated by space and time and motive.

Carter waits for the second shot, but it doesn't come.

She flips over, not looking down because she doesn't have to look. It's bad. She knows it's bad. She *feels* it's bad. One hand finds the wound and presses down. She brings her gun around with her free hand and aims again at the girl. Her motions are slow, but the girl's are slower.

Frightened eyes meet her own, and Carter is *certain*, looking at her lying sideways on the floor, that this is the first time the little Lucian Alliance hacker been shot. The woman's gun is on the floor, half-hidden by the white mist, but—

The weapon is still under her fingers, still pointed at Carter.

"Hey." It's a thick, wet whisper. Carter takes a slow, careful inhale. "What's your name?"

The girl says nothing, her breath coming like sobs but her eyes dry and wide and frightened.

The mist is thicker near the floor. It's hard to see. Hard to breathe. "My name," Carter says, the words riding on an incremental exhale, "is Sam."

"Carter," the girl mouths.

"Yes."

"I know you," the girl says, "through your systems."

Carter smiles, and tries not to show the red-stained white of her teeth. She knows how frightening that can look.

Her systems.

Her systems.

Her crackable, transparent, compromised systems that are in pieces in the air all around them.

Networks, with their traffic, their back doors—they are not her area.

Einstein-Rosen bridges. *Those* are her area.

"I have heard you," the girl says, "in your lab. In your 'briefings'."

Carter laughs once. Or maybe it's a sob. The goa'uld, the Lucian Alliance, the Trust, the NID—they have trickled like water into the cracks between SGC personnel and frozen there, expanding, fracturing, breaking wherever they find a seam. Wherever there is a weak point. It hadn't always been like this.

"I have seen you," the girl says, "on video feeds."

Carter thinks of Daniel.

"We have no texts," the girl says. "No writings on how one might communicate with machines. Only examples, gained with great difficulty."

She's self-taught.

The muscles at the back of Carter's throat constrict and then release.

"What is your name?" Carter asks again.

The gunfire is receding. If they are not found soon, neither of them will survive.

"Ginn," the girl says.

"Ginn," Carter repeats, wiping the blood away from her mouth, struggling to breathe in air that is becoming thicker. Whiter. More opaque.

The bowl is smooth under her hands. The light from the television flickers into the dark.

She shuts her eyes, and it feels, to her, like death.

She thinks of Daniel, she holds to him to prevent the mental misfiring that's coming to her oxygen-starved brain as an anoxic inevitability. The odds that she will die here are high. They are astronomical. It is a near certainty.

"You could stay," Carter says. "You could stay with *us*, if you help me."

Ginn's eyes flick over Carter, lingering on the wound in her chest, then up to the wall-mounted monitor above them. Finally, they lock gazes.

"You can't want this," Carter says, knowing she might be wrong, knowing that she barely understands Alliance culture, knowing it's not the right thing to say.

"We are not like you," Ginn replies, her expression twisting.

"Whatever it is," Carter says, pressing her lips together as she shifts her position, "that you want." She takes a shuddering breath, her eyes wet, her airways wet. "It's not this. It's not *this*. It *can't* be *this*."

Several seconds pass. Seconds that they do not have.

The bowl is smooth under her hands. The light from the television flickers into the dark as Mark elbows her and says, "Move over, Sam. Jeez."

Ginn says nothing.

Carter thinks of Daniel, so that when she asks, her voice is as gentle as she can make it. "Ginn," she whispers. "What was the plan?"

"To flood the building," the girl says raggedly. "To tag people and take them," she continued, "and then to shut down the air circulators, displacing the oxygen."

Carter shuts her eyes, her face contorting in misery. She is dying. She is *dying*. "And now?"

"We've dialed out," Ginn says, "but your people have shut the gate down."

Carter nods. "And the air re-circulators?"

"Set to go offline."

"When."

"Five minutes."

"Help me get them back," Carter whispers, begging her. Betting on nothing but the fact that, for Ginn, she's a talking wall carving. A teacher. A person who, even if indirectly, had taught her how to speak to machines. "Help me keep them on," she continues, trying not to give away the fact that *she can't stand*, that standing will kill her, that she will die *anyway*, lying here on the floor, finally defeated by something she was unable to fix, but only because she was betrayed by the organic requirements of her body rather than bested by a problem that she could not solve.

Never that.

Even after all this time.

She's waited so long.

"Someone has closed my access ports," Ginn whispers.

The bowl is smooth under her hands. The light from the television flickers into the dark as Mark elbows her and says, "Move over, Sam. Jeez."

She slides sideways on the couch, her eyes still on the screen. "Do you think it's true?" she asks her brother.

"Then let's open them," Carter says, the words forced out from between clenched teeth as she gets to her knees and then, impossibly, to her feet, one hand leaving a dark smear against the wall as she passes, her vision swimming.

Her body will fail. But it hasn't happened yet. And until it does, she will keep going.

"Get up," Carter says, through gritted teeth, looking at Ginn as her hands close around the edges of the keyboard that folds out of the wall. "Get up. Don't be afraid. Our medical personnel work miracles." She inhales, a shallow gasp, and looks at the screen.

Ginn is up, one hand on the wall, then moving to her chest to clamp down over her injury. She took Carter's shot right beneath her clavicle. She might live. She *might*.

Carter opens up the terminal, finds a secure port, and reconnects to the network. "Where?" It's all she can manage, but Ginn shows her the program.

Together they eviscerate it. They lock the air circulators on.

"What else?" Carter manages through gritted teeth, holding herself up.

She will not go back to the floor until her cardiovascular system puts her there.

She will die as she has always feared.

Alone.

Alone at a computer terminal.

Responsible for unknown losses.

Ignorant of the fate of her friends.

"The iris," Ginn says.

They restore control.

"What else?" Carter asks.

"The power relays on level twenty-eight," Ginn says.

They bring them back online.

"What else?" Carter asks.

"The air filtration system," Ginn says.

They restore full functionality.

"What else?" Carter asks.

"Nothing," Ginn says finally, doubled over, the word a sob. "Nothing."

Carter's hands release and her knees buckle. Ginn's hand is on her arm, but there's no support there, just a synchronous fall.

Despite the continued action of the air circulators, near the floor it is difficult to breathe. The air is nearly opaque.

"Why?" Carter whispers. She is not certain what she is asking.

"I told you," Ginn whispers, leaning against the wall, answering whatever question it is that she hears, "We are not like you. But I—" she swallows blood. "I know you," she says, coughing. "I *know* you."

Carter nods and reaches for her radio with numbing fingers. She cannot unclip it from her belt.

Ginn's fingers find it instead, and she pulls it free, offering it silently.

Carter dials up the volume and listens to the chatter.

"I can confirm the gate is down," Mitchell says, "but they still hold the gateroom."

"We've secured a group of hostiles on level fifteen." She doesn't recognize the voice.

"Carter," O'Neill says. "Carter, if you're out there, *respond*, god damn it."

"This is Carter," she says, depressing a button, choking on the liquid in her throat. "Man down. Level twenty-eight. I'm with a friendly. Repeat, I'm with a *friendly* in LA gear."

Her eyes slide shut and then open again.

Her chances are—not good.

Her chances have run out.

She thinks of Daniel.

She thinks that if he had been there, in the hallway, in the turbid air, maybe it wouldn't have turned out this way. Maybe he would have walked out into the corridor, hands extended, expression open, asking nicely, and the universe would have fallen into accord with his wishes.

She cannot breathe.

But maybe, if Daniel had been there, the air circulators would have gone offline, and everyone would have died.

She cannot breathe anymore. Perhaps it is time to stop trying so hard.

There is a fanciful theory.

"Do you think it's true?"

A fanciful, quantum mechanical theory.

"What?"

A theory which goes like this.

"That space is filled with a network of wormholes," she whispers, eyes glued to the screen.

The universe is probabilistic in nature.

"You're a dork," Mark whispers. "A little dork." But he's watching too.

Because it is probabilistic, at every point where outcomes are uncertain, all possible events occur, creating a branch points in the multiverse, the splitting of fate.

"You might emerge somewhere else in space. Somewhen else in time."

Samantha Carter therefore experiences all that is possible, even if she is not aware of it; her consciousness splitting and ending and tracking and reforming until it runs out through threading tributaries and the river of her life rejoins the cosmic ocean from which she came.

"Even if it is true," Mark whispers, the words ragged. "It doesn't change anything. Mom is still dead. Dad is still an ass."

She knows those other tributaries. She has seen them with her own eyes. Her hair long, her eyes devastated by grief, the wedding ring she has worn in other realities.

"Don't say that," she whispers, her vision wavering through the heat of childish tears as Mark pulls away, stalking out of the room, the screen door to the back porch slamming behind him. Alone, she curls around her bowl of popcorn, then sets it on the floor, her throat too constricted to swallow anything. She keeps her eyes open, keeps watching the bright wavering blur of the scientist on the screen.

Her breaths have turned shallower.

"I'm sorry," Ginn whispers.

"Me too," Carter replies.

Chapter Seventeen

Rush had been driving for half an hour without any sign of pursuit.

There was a slow burn in his right forearm in two different places. The sensation flared to prominence every time the unbuttoned cuff of his dress shirt grazed across the paired, shallow cuts where he had used Young's ostentatiously masculine pocketknife to remove his two subcutaneous transmitters. They had left him, along with his phone, in a parabolic arc, brought down by gravity, falling in a ballistic, glittering shower.

At the bottom of a nameless ravine, microprocessors had rained down from a cloudless sky.

The wind blew through his hair, hot and dry, as he accelerated and decelerated as dictated by the sinuous turns of the road that led northwest off route twenty-five. Even with Jackson's sunglasses, the light still shattered its way through his skull, growing into a headache as unmanageable as it was useless.

"Yeah so," Young said from the passenger's seat, "this makes The List."

The words had the mental feel of inappropriate capitalization.

"You don't strike me as a terribly gifted concatenator, but, by all means, explain yourself," Rush replied, unable to prevent the loosely associated idea of infix notation from twisting into his consciousness with the ease of any other mathematical concept that by its nature, construction, or connotation suggested a pair.

The Venn diagram.

The Cartesian product.

The focal points of an elliptical orbit.

The—

"List of worst getaway vehicles," Young said.

"This is a *list* that you have." It wasn't a question, it was more along the lines of a disdainful observation, but Young chose to interpret it as an interrogative.

"Yes," Young said, shutting his eyes as he shifted his position and exhaling in a hiss through clenched teeth. "Yes it is. And a 1978 Dodge Dart with *no air conditioning* in the height of summer in the intermountain west definitely qualifies as a shitty getaway vehicle. Or do you disagree?"

"I don't disagree. However, I suspect this is not a list that existed before we encountered clear evidence that Jackson takes cultural preservation a bit too seriously."

"And you would be wrong about that," Young replied.

"I'm unconvinced."

"What do you want—like, a literal list? That I physically wrote out? Prior to this moment?"

"Yes," Rush said, one hand coming to the side of head, as if such an action could do anything to derail the momentum of his headache.

"Well, it's always been a *mental* list," Young said, "so I don't know what to tell ya."

"That's fine," Rush said, amenably.

"How is that fine?" Young replied. "You just said—"

Rush accelerated out of a turn. "I will simply remain unconvinced."

Young sighed. "Do you know how much civilians make at the SGC?"

He wasn't certain what to make of Young's apparent non sequitur.

"Yes," Rush said dryly, "seeing as I *am* a civilian consultant."

"Well," Young replied through clenched teeth as he shifted in his seat, "then you know it's enough to buy a nicer car than a 1978 Dodge Dart. A Dodge *Dart*. Rush. Even you —"

"I don't understand your preoccupation with cars," Rush said, adjusting his rear-view mirror to get a quick view of Vala.

Her face was pale despite the heat, her good hand holding her injured arm to her side.

"Well, / don't understand your *lack* of preoccupation with cars," Young replied.

Rush said nothing, and glanced back again at Vala. She had been quiet during their scramble through the underbrush down the western slope of the base. She had been quiet through the shallow, subcutaneous slicing of transmitter removals, and quiet through their doubling back to the exterior of the security perimeter to join the cleared, nonessential personnel leaving the base in an orderly fashion.

"Vala, you still with us back there?" Young asked. He turned his head, but was clearly unable to twist in his seat to get a look at her.

"Oh absolutely, handsome," she replied, her voice inflecting with its usual flowing cadence. "I'm invincible, you know. It's just a flesh wound."

Rush glanced back at her again then looked over at Young.

Young raised his eyebrows.

Rush shook his head fractionally, then looked back at the bleached asphalt of the road that twisted away in front of him, up into the mountains.

"How's the shoulder?" Young asked, undeterred. "You bleeding at all?"

"Just a bit, handsome," Vala said, her voice wavering slightly. "Just a bit. It's mostly cauterized."

"When you get a chance," Young said quietly, his voice pitched low and directed toward Rush, "pull over."

Rush nodded.

"Let's go to Vegas," Vala said, without any of her usual energy.

Rush said nothing.

"Vegas?" Young replied, clearly humoring her as she tried to humor them. Which was pointless.

"Well, we have to go *somewhere*," Vala continued, with a determinedly flirtatious ring to her tone, "and I see no reason why it can't be Las Vegas."

"Um," Young said.

Rush could practically *feel* him trying to come up with a response, but was not particularly inclined to assist him in any way.

"I don't think we need to go that far," Young said. "We'll give them a few hours to get the situation back under control before we use a pay phone to check up on things."

"And if things—are *not* going well?" Vala asked.

"Then," Young said, "we make a new plan."

"We're trackable in this car," Vala said.

"I know," Young replied. "But we're conventionally trackable, as opposed to *unconventionally* trackable. Meaning that no one is going to be beaming us up to any cloaked ships without those transponders or the tags in our phones. Can highway patrol trace us? Yes. But I don't think highway patrol cares about us yet."

Rush drummed his fingers over the narrow torus of the steering wheel and tried not to feel the weight of Young's gaze. It was not at all apparent to him that 'the situation' at the SGC had ever been 'under control'. Certainly he had no validated metric by which such a thing might be assessed. Even if one could have previously made an optimistic assessment regarding information security on base, it appeared unlikely to him that control, computational or otherwise, could be maintained in the face of determined, repetitive assaults by the Lucian Alliance.

They *would* get what they wanted, given sufficient time and patience. It was inevitable.

Young was looking at him.

Rush did not look back.

"No one ever wants to go to Vegas," Vala said.

They hadn't told him.

They hadn't told him *any of it*.

"Aren't you like—an intergalactic jet setter or something?" Young asked. "Vegas is probably going to seem pretty tame. Just cheap lights, cheap alcohol, and a fountain here and there."

All of them had lied.

The math was secondary.

It was *secondary*.

"I've heard that in Vegas a game called 'poker' is frequently played," Vala said. "I'm very interested in learning the rules."

"Nice try," Young said. "Does that kind of thing work on Jackson?"

Rush drummed his fingers on the steering wheel.

The math was secondary?

It had always been secondary.

"More often than you might think," Vala replied, her voice tight with pain or regret or some other application layer emotional constraint.

He could feel a muscle in his cheek twitching.

If the math were to be considered secondary, what then would be primary?

"Hey," Young said. "Rush."

Genetics.

Obviously the genetics were primary.

That was never a good sign, when *genetics* were primary. To be wanted for one's mind required the functioning of said mind. To be wanted for one's genes, well—as far as he understood it—that did not necessarily require the same functionality, depending on the goals of the interested parties.

He drummed his fingers over the steering wheel in an aborted mockery of the descent of the chromatic scale.

"Rush," Young said.

This was what Jackson had known, and finally managed to communicate without obviating his status within and usefulness to the program. This is what Telford had known and had always concealed. Who else knew?

Lam knew. She must have, to show him his file.

Landry knew.

Mitchell knew, at least part of it.

Had Vala known?

Had Young?

"Rush," Young said again, louder this time.

"What." He broke the word off with so much viciousness that Young actually flinched.

Regardless of who knew about it, it seemed that he had some kind of genetic advantage or he was of genetic interest, but he had no idea what the sequelae of his Mendelian allotment was or was *supposed* to be.

"You need to hold it together," Young said quietly. "We're not out of this yet."

Who was 'JS'?

Jackson would know.

Hopefully Jackson hadn't just been killed by the Lucian Alliance.

"I realize that," Rush replied.

"We need to find a place to pull over and take a look at Vala's shoulder."

"Yes yes. I'm aware."

Young was still looking at him. "What were you doing in the infirmary?" he asked. "I thought you were meeting with Dr. Perry."

Rush's fingers drummed another asynchronous arpeggio over the wheel. He glanced in the rearview mirror. Vala was looking directly at him, her eyes serious and full of an import that he couldn't read other than to postulate that she had at least *some* level of knowledge regarding is current situation, but whether she was in possession of data of or metadata remained to be seen.

"Reading my medical file," Rush replied, fixing his eyes again on the road.

Young shifted again in his seat, grimacing.

"Anything interesting in there?"

Rush glanced back at Vala. She shook her head fractionally, her eyes shadowed and searing into him in something that was clearly meant to be a warning—but of what, against what—he couldn't say.

"Possibly," Rush said.

"Oh," Young said testily. "Possibly. Okay. That's great."

Rush exhaled, short and sharp. "I'm not obfuscating, I fucking said 'possibly' because I meant possibly."

For a moment, no one spoke.

"Gorgeous—" Vala began, but Young cut her off.

"What was in there?"

For a moment, Rush said nothing. He glanced over at Young, but the other man's expression was neutral and it was apparent to him that if he wanted additional information he was going to have to surrender something of what he'd already gained.

"It contained a genetic analysis," Rush said. "Specifically—" he broke off, one hand coming open against the rim of the steering wheel before closing again. "Specifically it contained information relating to the expression levels of three genes. ATA. LTA. NRA."

In the rearview mirror, Vala shut her eyes.

Young's gaze swung back to the road. "Three genes," he said, like he was turning the information over in his mind with the deliberation of a rock grinder. "*Three?*"

"Yes," Rush snapped. "It's a number. Perhaps you've heard of it. It comes after two and before four. I was hoping for something *useful*."

Young shot him an affronted look, which the other man had the gall to draw out for a few seconds, clearly taking some kind of visceral pleasure from methodical deliberation in the face of overt anticipation.

"Well," Young said finally, "that explains some things."

"Specify," Rush snapped.

"Why you're at the top of the LA's list. Why Jackson wants to send you to Atlantis. Why Sheppard and McKay want you there. Why they put you on a cryptography project that was already fully staffed by a team of math guys. Why you were so aggressively recruited even though you're—"

Young trailed off and Rush narrowed his eyes behind Jackson's sunglasses. "Even though I'm what?"

"Maybe like—" Young trailed off again. "Kind of—"

Rush said nothing.

"You're not really a team player and the SGC is a very team-based organization," Young finished.

Rush pried a hand away from the steering wheel for a moment to press it into the tense musculature at the base of his neck.

"What are they?" he asked finally.

"The genes?" Young replied.

"Yes," he said, hearing his own irritation hissing in the word but unable to rein it in and lock it down.

"I've never even heard of the last one. The other two—well, they're Ancient genes. What they do exactly, I don't know, but they're necessary to operate a lot of the Ancient tech we've found."

The import of that particular piece of information was enough to torque the trajectory of his thoughts into something so twisted by its own internal tension that he couldn't—

"The Ancients built a genetic requirement into their technology?"

For a moment the car was silent.

"You sound—upset," Young replied in that slow careful way that was fast becoming an indicator to Rush, and it occurred to him to wonder whether this prolongation speech patterns was merely correlative with his own emotional barometer or if there were some element of causation there.

He was driving.

He was *driving*.

He was driving and now was not the time for anything other than rigid methodology.

He was not upset.

"I'm not upset," he said. Smooth cadence. Still hands. Appropriate acceleration.

"Okay," Young said. "Good. Maybe we should talk about something else right now."

That was unacceptable.

"I don't see why the Ancients would impose a *genetic requirement* to the use of their technology," he said in a polite, reasonable tone.

"Maybe this is something to talk to Jackson about," Young said quietly, clearly trying to defer this conversation to a point in time at which they were not in a moving vehicle.

"He's going to be a lot better at—"

"I don't like what it *implies*," Rush said.

"It's not *all* their tech, obviously," Young said, clearly uncomfortable. "Look at the stargates. Anyone can walk through."

"Oh yes," Rush said dryly. "I'm sure the functionality of the gate network is fully understood."

The car was silent.

"So that's it?" Rush snapped, finally.

"Um—"

"That's all you know about these genes? That they're required for full functionality of Ancient technology? You've never looked into this at all?"

"It's not really my area," Young replied, "and even if it were—well, there's a *reason* they haven't told you, Rush."

Rush glanced back at Vala, reflected in the rearview mirror. Her eyes were dark and serious. "Don't look at me, gorgeous," she said. "They certainly don't let *me* into their top secret briefings."

He hooked a hand over his shoulder as he pulled out of a hairpin turn and accelerated up the incline ahead of them.

"Speed limits aren't just for the amusement of the Colorado department of transportation, you know," Young said edgily.

Rush eased up on the accelerator.

"Rush," Young said.

He found that holding the linear narrative of his thoughts was difficult given his overwhelming desire to wrest everything he could find out of the SGC's encrypted database. The ache in his hands for a keyboard was nearly impossible to bear.

"If I knew more," Young said, sounding earnest and unsettled, "I would tell you." His head half-turned back toward Vala. "We would tell you," he repeated, including her, forming some kind of tenuous verbal alliance in what Rush was certain was a calculated, tactical maneuver of undetermined purpose. He was also fairly certain it was in breach of whatever kind of security policy was in place at the SGC.

"Would you."

Implicit trust was everywhere—in peer-to-peer communications, within the tangled networks of social interaction and within the machines that modeled those same connections. Those same networks. Had he trusted the SGC with their air of pseudo-enlightened, relatively-rational, scientific, entrepreneurial, industrial, intergalactic, colonialism? He supposed that he had—if not explicitly then implicitly.

He smiled faintly and felt the twist in his own expression.

"Yeah," Young said. "I would. Look, I know it's been a lot to deal with, this past week—"

If he had trusted them, it was only insofar as he had seen no reason to overtly distrust them. That was, until Jackson's quiet disapproval had escalated into something that had turned a bit more apparent. Now, however, any implicit trust settings that had heretofore existed had been scrapped and overwritten.

"—with, you know, almost being abducted two times, and—"

It was staggering to him, *staggering* that the SGC thought they could keep anything from him. Nothing was kept from him. Not from *him*. Especially not something so material not only to his understanding of his own nature, but also to the understanding of the nature of the *gate*. If he could unlock the gate, did they think he would hesitate, even for a moment, to turn his considerable skills in information security straight at their systems?

"—not to mention passing out a couple of times—"

Did they think he feared any kind of repercussion from the SGC? Did they think he had *anything* to lose?

“—and the math stuff, which seems like it stresses you out maybe more than firefights, weird as that is—”

To be wanted for one's genetics was insulting. Keeping personal information from a cryptographer also seemed irritatingly short-sighted. The SGC had underestimated him in nearly every parameter by which they had assessed him. Previously, he might have let such a thing slide. Previously, he might have complied with the debriefing that Mitchell had threatened him with. Previously he might have—

He stared into the light, trying to burn his mind into temporary silence.

Previously he might have done many things differently.

“—are you even listening to me?”

He wasn't entirely sure how long Young had been talking.

“No,” Rush said.

“Great,” Young growled. “Some scenic overlook bullshit is coming up on your left. Pull over, will you?”

The late afternoon sun filtered down through irregular gaps in parched pine branches as Rush stopped the car. He pulled the keys out of the ignition with a fluid twist and opened the door. Dead needles crackled subtly underfoot as he stood. The view of the valley that spread below them was mostly obscured by intervening, needled greenery. Somewhere, far below, he could hear the dull roar of an obscured river.

Rush watched as Vala slipped out of the car, one hand tight on the metal of the frame. He struggled to focus on the *present*, struggled to keep his considerable anger, at the SGC from coalescing into any kind of definite plan. He slammed his door shut and started around the back of Jackson's car as Young got painfully to his feet.

Vala closed her car door and staggered, nearly losing her footing.

“Shit,” Young said, slamming his own door.

“Don't,” Rush snapped at the pair of them before anyone did anything unforgivably short-sighted.

He stepped behind Vala, who turned into his approach, her good arm sweeping around his shoulders. Instinctively, Rush brought his other arm around as she swung her legs up, the entire thing coming together with just the right amount of effort to look like an unorchestrated, well-executed attempt on *his* part to sweep Vala off her feet. Which had certainly *not* been what he'd intended at all. The end result of the entire thing was

that he was left holding her bridal-style, staring at Young with what he hoped was an impassive facial expression.

In short, this was a somewhat unusual state of affairs.

It was also one that *he* was only *partially* responsible for.

Young raised his eyebrows and angled his head in such a way that seemed to indicate he was impressed. That, or suspicious. Rush couldn't tell.

He looked down at Vala. Her eyes were closed, her forehead pressed against his shoulder.

"I'll see if Jackson's got a first aid kit," Young said. "Put her on the hood."

"Very dashing, gorgeous," Vala said into Rush's ear as he stepped forward, carrying her away from Young. "Very well executed. If I ever have to make a break off this planet, remind me to take you with me."

He raised his eyebrows at her. "Was there a point to this?" he asked, pitching his voice low, "or are you simply amusing yourself?"

She winked at him, but despite the levity of her tone and manner, there was an earnestness in her expression that she either could not or did not mask. "ATA," she whispered, "is projective and activates Ancient technology. LTA is receptive and allows low-level mental calibration between device and operator. Not sure about NRA. No one is."

He laid her down carefully on the hood of the car.

"Don't you trust Young?" His words were nearly silent.

She smiled faintly at him. "Trust is a bad habit. Facts are gifts."

He smiled back at her, watching as the raw twist to his own expression brought out something mirroring in her.

"Protect your sources, gorgeous," she whispered, "if you want to keep them."

He nodded shortly at her.

Young closed the trunk of the car.

"I suspect," she said, her smile evening out, "that *you* are a *treasure*."

Rush pulled back and straightened slightly, looking up as Young limped forward, waving the first aid kit in their direction. It rattled as unseen pieces within impacted the hard plastic casing.

"We're in luck," Young said. "Turns out Jackson has at least some common sense. That, or Mitchell put this in his car."

"Daniel can be quite practical at times," Vala said primly. "His reputation notwithstanding."

"Yeah," Young said, drawing even with Rush and setting the kit down on the warm metal of the hood near Vala's hip. "Well, he's got quite the rep built up by this point."

"Oh do tell," Vala said with a wince, as she helped Young gingerly ease her jacket down over her shoulder. "I need some gossip for the next team bonding night."

"Do you guys seriously have team bonding nights?" Young asked.

"Oh yes," Vala said, fully exposing the charred, sticky material of her dark undershirt.

Rush flinched as his mind processed only that what he was seeing was something that looked *wrong*, that looked deep and blackened and—

"Damn it," Young breathed.

Rush looked away, watching turbulent eddies revealed by small dust particles in the air that caught the pine-filtered light.

He looked back.

He had seen worse things.

"Yes," Vala continued, her chin angled up, her eyes fixed on the pines above them.

"Team bonding. Scrabble and beer."

"You should have *said* something," Young growled at her, his fingers hovering at the tattered edge of her shirt.

Rush reached for the first-aid kit, dragging it within reach.

"Can you believe that?" Vala asked. "Scrabble. Daniel always wins. Or he did until I made it a point to memorize all the two letter words."

"I thought you were *clipped*," Young said, his voice rising. "You *said* you were clipped. I —"

"I *was* clipped, handsome," Vala whispered, cutting him off with her gaze. "Just—'more clipped' as opposed to 'less clipped,' if you know what I mean."

"We could have left you," Young hissed. "We could have dropped you somewhere. Anywhere. But now we're in the middle of god damned *nowhere* with Jackson's shitty first aid kit. This is not something to fuck around with. What do you think you're doing?"

Rush scanned the contents of the kit, pulling out relevant items as he half-listened to Young and Vala go back in forth in an conflict that seemed, by its construction, to be partially comprised of a pissing contest that had sprung de novo out of Young's shocked assessment of Vala's shoulder. The other portion of their exchange seemed to be vociferous cover for the more delicate work of determining the trustworthiness of the other party.

"I'm doing," Vala said, her voice pitched low, but cutting through Young's culminating monologue, "what I judge to be best." She came up on her good elbow, lifting herself free of the hood of the car.

The implication behind her words hung heavy in the air between the three of them.

Both Vala and Young shifted their gazes to look over at him.

"Say it," Young said. "Go ahead and say it."

"It's better with *both* of us," Vala said quietly, her eyes shifting back toward Young.

Rush had no real means of assessing either of their motives. Not in any kind of objective way. It was painfully clear to him that he had very little leverage or knowledge of regarding his current situation. Such things could be remedied. With time.

He pulled a pair of scissors out of the first aid kit. They looked sharp.

"No mystery why you've still got probationary status," Young growled. "This was a *bad call*. Your shoulder looks like *shit*."

Rush stepped forward, tipped the scissors to angle them beneath the collar of Vala's dark undershirt. He locked eyes with her, and at a brief tip of her chin, he cut a straight line from her neck to the outer edge of her shoulder, the blades shearing easily through the thin cotton.

Vala made a strangled sound in the back of her throat, and flinched as he shifted the material of her shirt, exposing the burned and bleeding skin beneath.

"Apologies," Rush whispered, appalled by the damage that was revealed as he eased the dark material back to expose the injury.

"Let's tell Daniel about this," Vala gasped.

"Which part?" Rush asked dryly, watching Young study the sluggishly oozing injury with an apparently practiced eye. "The part where you stole his car keys, or the part where I cut your shirt off?"

"You are my favorite amongst all Earth men," Vala said, a catch in her voice. "Let's go to the supermarket together."

Young rolled his eyes. "Cut some of those open, will you?" He glanced at Rush and gestured toward the paper packets contained in the first aid kit. "Don't touch the gauze if you can help it."

"Is this a thing they do on your planet?" Rush asked, cutting open gauze packets. "Supermarkets?"

"First of all," Vala said, "who said anything about me not being from this planet?"

"It's been implied," Rush replied dryly. "Heavily. Many times. By multiple parties. Including you. On separate occasions."

"Second of all," Vala said, "Supermarkets are amazing, wonderful places, and this is coming from a woman who has erected more than one pleasure palace in her day."

Rush lifted his eyebrows.

"Okay," Young said grimly. "I'm going to clean this out, cover the whole thing with antibiotic gel, and put a relatively loose dressing on it."

"Sounds like a plan, handsome," Vala whispered, the muscles of her throat working as she swallowed, staring up at the sky as if trying to steel herself against what was coming. "Five minutes with a healing device when we get back to base is going to clear this thing right up."

"Not if you get some kind of infection."

"Right. Then it'll be more like fifteen," Vala replied.

"This is not something to mess around with," Young growled.

"So get on with it," Vala said sharply.

"You want something to bite on?" Young asked.

"No," Vala replied, her chin resolutely angled up.

"Shoulder and elbow," Young said quietly to Rush.

It took him only a moment to get Young's meaning.

"Also not necessary," Vala said icily.

"Yes," Young said. "It is. This is going to hurt like hell. You're not going to be able to hold still."

"No one," Vala said, "holds me down. No one."

Rush looked out into the shimmering, dry air—away from the car, away from Vala, from Young and stared into the blue scatter of the atmosphere. He swallowed, consciously. With difficulty. He felt the throb of his headache.

No one spoke, and he felt the weight of their attentions turn towards him.

"No," he said, not looking at either of them, but speaking to Vala. "Of course not." He offered her his right hand and she took it without hesitation, their fingers coming together in a slow enlacing that was as terrible and familiar as he'd known it would be. He did not look at her.

"I'm going to start," Young said quietly.

Vala said nothing, but through her grip he could *feel* the moment that Young began—her arm, her entire frame, stiffening as she pressed herself down onto the unforgiving surface of Jackson's car, the nails of her free hand sliding over the metal with a faint screech. Her fingers pressed into the back of his hand, cold and strong and painful.

Not looking was too familiar to be a tenable option.

He turned his head and saw the pained and subtle arch of her back, her clenched jaw, her fisted hand, and her hair, spread around her in a dark fan. "Breathe through it, kiddo," Young told her, and she inhaled, her nostrils flaring, her eyes tightly shut.

Looking wasn't tenable either, for other reasons.

"I've got the melted—" Young paused, his voice strained, "the *melted* shit out of it," Young said, his voice strained. "We're halfway there."

What was melted?

Parts of her shirt?

Her jacket?

The velcro backing for an insignia patch that she still lacked?

Rush focused on her shoulder, on the scrubbing actions of the brownish-orange disinfectant swabs Young was cleaning the wound with, tried to lock in on the purpose behind what was happening as he watched Young clean the blistered, charred, bloody wound in repeated, widening spirals. Once. Twice. Three times.

"Almost done," Young said, "you're doing good. Real good."

He couldn't look.

He couldn't *not* look.

Vala's free hand was at her mouth, her fisted fingers pressing against her lips. Her nails dug into the back of his hand.

Rush watched as Young covered the injury with some kind of antiseptic gel in a liberal, methodical series of intersecting lines squeezed from a small tube, before peeling back paper casings to deposit the gauze, without touching it, on top of his antiseptic network. "Taping," Young announced, as he pulled a piece of tape out and away from the roll with an unbearable tearing sound.

Vala turned her head away as Young pressed down gently on the injury fixing the gauze in place.

"Done," Young said.

The sound of Vala's shallow gasping in the quiet beneath the pines was nearly too much for Rush to bear. He wanted to step away from her, to step away from them both, to look out and away and into the light that was losing its brutal quality and lengthening into something less searing as more and more atmosphere stood between him and the sun. But he could not step away. She was still holding his hand.

"Vala," Young murmured.

She was not looking at them, her head was turned away and her hand was now at her eyes.

"Vala," Young said again, louder.

She took one more breath and then turned to look at them, her smile fragile and unfixed. "Plasma burns," she said, her eyes flicking between them. "Who knew?"

Young snorted and shook his head as he eased her jacket back up and over the dressing he'd placed on her shoulder. He bent a chemical cold pack with a quick twist of his fingers and handed it to Vala. "Hold that over your jacket. You want to dry swallow a painkiller?"

Vala nodded shortly and Young fished around in the first aid kit for a moment.

Rush made a halfhearted attempt to free his hand. Vala's fingers tightened around his for a moment and then released. She pulled her hand in towards her chest with a grimace and made a shaky attempt to sit under her own power. Young handed her a pair of reddish brown pills, and she swallowed them without water.

For a moment, no one spoke.

Rush could feel the pressure of his own anxiety, the pressure of everything that had happened, beginning to work its way into the open places in his mind.

"So," Young said, looking at them both as he leaned forward, bracing his hands against the car. "We're doing good."

Vala nodded, her eyes shut.

"Hotshot, you want to look around and see if Jackson's got a map stashed somewhere in there?" He tipped his head toward the car.

Rush looked at him.

"Any time now," Young said.

Young was pale, his skin glinting faintly with the sheen of sweat in the irregular streamers of sun that broke through the pines. It struck Rush abruptly that he had *no idea* what the other man's injuries were. That Young could be bleeding internally—could be hurt worse than Vala—could be hurt *much* worse than Vala was. It seemed a terrible oversight that he had never inquired as to the nature of Young's injuries, despite days of opportunity. He hadn't needed to know.

Now, however, he did.

"What's wrong with you?" Rush asked.

Young sighed and looked over at him. "Can you just—keep it together?" he asked, clearly exhausted. The other man hadn't answered his question; instead he'd addressed whatever it was he'd heard behind Rush's tone. It was a wonder the man could function *at all*, preoccupied as he was with motivation, with things that were implied, with the primitive, instinctive machinating of his own limbic system.

Rush recalibrated.

"Are you *hurt*?"

Young back at him, evidently doing his own recalibrating. Though it was possibly less of a 'recalibration' than a changing of filter sets. "No," Young said.

"Clearly inaccurate."

"Just—dial it down a notch, hotshot," Young said, raising one hand. "I'm fine."

Apparently he was going to have to be exquisitely explicit about what he wanted to know. "How were you initially injured?" Rush asked.

"Car crash," Young replied easily, but without looking at him. "A few pins, a few bolts, a few surgeries later and—"

"A *car crash*," Rush repeated.

Young sighed. "Fine. It was a low-class, propulsion-based, four-person, manually piloted, low-atmosphere alien vehicle that weighed about as much as a Ford Mustang. And it was shot down. So," Young looked over at him, hands still braced against the hood of Jackson's dart and shrugged with a weary sort of acceptance, "car crash. Broken hip, cracked pelvis, shattered vertebrae. Assorted soft tissue damage."

Rush waited.

"But it's all fine now," Young said. "Bolts and pins still holding—well, whatever it is that they hold."

Rush nodded.

Wordlessly, Vala fished around in the first aid kit and handed Young the unopened second packet of ibuprofen.

"Thanks," Young murmured, amused.

Maybe the man had an appreciation for understatement.

"So," Young said, looking at Rush, his shoulders shaking subtly with exhaustion or adrenaline. "Map?"

Rush stalked around the car, opened the passenger door, and began searching Jackson's glove compartment. He found an expired insurance card, an owners manual from the seventies, a collection of *rocks* of uncertain significance, a small plastic jar of chocolate-covered espresso beans, fourteen pens, a flashlight that didn't work, an expired package of Claritin, a *Pocket Guide to Sanskrit*, and finally, at the back, a map. He stood and spread it out on the roof of the car.

It became immediately apparent to him that it would not be helpful.

"Mmm," Young said, coming to stand beside him, eyes scanning the title of the map. "The Giza Plateau. Circa like, 1985. Great. Useful."

Rush handed him the chocolate covered espresso beans and the Sanskrit pocket dictionary and began a more thorough search of the car as Vala eased herself off the hood.

The backseat of Jackson's car contained several books, one of which appeared to be in Russian. Under the seat he found a second pair of sunglasses, which he placed on the hood of the car.

"Mmm," Vala said, looking at them approvingly from where she stood, trembling, one hip braced against the metal frame of the Dart. "Retro." She slipped them on with her good hand.

A search of the trunk yielded no map, but instead a set of items that looked like they could have come straight out of a disaster handbook prepared by a helpful federal agency.

He shut the trunk.

"No map?" Young asked.

"Indeed not," he replied. "Apparently, like the rest of us, Dr. Jackson has come to rely on his phone."

"Could one even drive to Egypt from here?" Vala asked, studying the map. "I wasn't under the impression that was possible."

"No," Young said. "No you can't."

"Then why would—" Vala began. "Never mind," she finished wryly.

Young ran a hand through his hair. "Right now we need water, about three more hours between us and the base, and a low profile pay phone. If we keep heading west, we should be able to avoid Denver. Which would be good."

Rush hooked his left hand over his shoulder, pressing fingers into the tortured muscle there.

"You good, hotshot?" Young asked.

Rush nodded.

"Let's go, then," Young murmured.

They returned to Jackson's mercilessly hot car, Young sliding into position beside him with a pained slowness that was as difficult to ignore as it was to watch. When both Vala and Young had fastened their seatbelts, Rush threw the car into reverse, backed away from the overlook, and sped north and west, accelerating into the setting sun, obliquely chasing the axial rotation of the Earth.

Chapter Eighteen

The day had long since faded down into the lonely dark of midnight in the Rocky Mountains. Pine-covered slopes stretched above and around the winding road—their grades sometimes steep, sometimes shallow, intermittently obscuring the pale cast that starlight and moonlight lent the asphalt.

Young's fingertips lingered over grooves in the door of Jackson's car where the glass of the window would fit, if it weren't rolled down within its metal recess. He tried to focus on the feel of the air, the sound of the car—on anything besides the weight of the dense, hot, alien thing that seemed to have worked itself into his left side and set up residence there, entwining in and around the steel pins that bolted his bones into a workable frame.

They had been driving for hours.

The ibuprofen had worn off some time ago.

It had been a questionable call to skirt Denver and continue north and west—to push so far so fast with Vala injured, with his back seizing up the point that he was effectively useless; but given that the LA had infiltrated to such an extent that they could access the computational networks of the base—given that they had allied themselves with the Trust—given they succeeded in their foothold attempt long enough to gain access to the full informational resources of the SGC—

If his imagined worst case scenario were indeed a reality, then to stop too soon, to make their location anywhere easily accessible would be to completely fuck up any chance that Rush had of making it out of this.

Young glanced over at the mathematician. The man was illuminated by the spectral green glow coming from the dashboard. The light reflected off the white of his shirt and glinted irregularly from the frames of his glasses. As Young watched, he shifted one hand away from the steering wheel to dig his fingers into his shoulder.

"Headache?" Young asked.

"Craig," Rush said.

"Head *injury*?" Young asked, with a calculated laziness, not attempting to follow whatever it was that Rush thought should be self-evident about his pronouncement.

"My name is *Everett*, by the way."

Rush sighed. "You're from Craig."

"If you are referring to the Elk-hunting capital of the world," Young replied, keeping his voice low, to avoid waking Vala, whom he suspected was asleep in the backseat, "then I regretfully inform you that not only are you wrong, but also that Craig is in northwest Colorado. Not Wyoming."

"Fuck."

Young snorted. "Plus, I know you got that one from a road sign not ten miles back, so—no points for style."

"There are points for style now?" Rush asked, his words a dry, exhausted blur in the dark of the car. "How can there be any kind of assessment of style when it comes to *guessing*? Guessing inherently lacks style."

"You have a thing against guessing?" Young asked, his gaze flicking away from the road, caught by the pale twin gleam of animal eyes in the dark. "How is that—even possible?"

"The only thing it has going for it is the fact that it's a methodological approach toward arriving at a correct outcome and therefore falls under the rubric of rational as opposed to irrational thought."

Young smiled faintly and closed his eyes, trying to banish the creeping dread he couldn't seem to shake down into the lower corners of his mind, where it could do him no harm. "It must be hard to be you," Young said, following the dark outlines of the pines that stood beyond the reach of their headlights. "On so many levels."

"Yes well," Rush shrugged. Young waited a moment for him to follow the words up with some kind of dryly-delivered indirect insult, but—nothing was forthcoming.

For a moment they were quiet, listening to the dull roar of the engine and of the sound of tires over dry asphalt.

"So," Young said, battling back against his own exhaustion, "what's your story, hotshot?"

"You keep asking. As if you expect some kind of pat answer."

"Why math?" Young tried.

"Why *not* math?" Rush countered.

Young looked out at the massing black of steep hillsides that surrounded the turns of the road.

"Because," Young said carefully, "it seems like you're the kind of guy who had options. Who has options. And the math seems to be driving you a little bit crazy. No offense."

Rush said nothing.

"You're not bad in a tight spot," Young said.

Rush said nothing.

"And you're good with—the tech stuff. Computers."

Rush smiled, the expression twisting subtly, as if it were being pulled out of him.

"You could go to Atlantis," Young said. "I wasn't sure before. But you could handle it. You could turn on their devices for them—help figure out what they do. Make your way onto a gate team, eventually. Co-chair a Mensa club on Saturdays with Sheppard or something."

"Sheppard," Rush repeated, his fingers drumming over the steering wheel. "What did you say his first name was?"

"John," Young said, rolling his eyes slightly at the non sequitur.

"Mmm," Rush said, his expression oddly intent.

"So what is it?" Young asked. "Why stay here, hunted by the Lucian Alliance, just to solve some problem? Some—series of problems? Why not just let go? Hang out on Atlantis, come back in a few years when some of this has died down?"

"No," Rush said shortly.

"Yeah, hotshot, I get it. I know. Consider me stonewalled. What I want to know is *why*."

"Even if I don't get all the way to a solution," Rush said, "I'll cut a decade off the solving time. Maybe more."

"Not an answer."

"It's one of the final, unexplored—"

"I don't need the funding pitch, Rush, I get that it's an important problem."

"You must know what it's like," Rush said quietly, "to look at a thing and to know that it will bring you nothing but misery. To know and to be unable, *unwilling* to turn away."

The light was red and diffuse as he sped over the rust-colored rock in his borrowed craft. Ahead of him, spreading out over the horizon in a dark glitter, was the First City of the First World of the Sixth House, tumbling over the landscape in an irregular, dense mass.

"You must recognize that choice is often nominal because there are things, classes of things, that one—cannot live with."

The air was hot, already carrying the tang of ash. The wind tore through his hair and whistled past the leather edges of his unfamiliar uniform. Fine grains of sand fell with a hiss on the transparent guard that offered limited protection from debris.

"Yeah," Young said, his fingers tightening on the metal of the window frame. "But in life, Rush. In *life*. These cyphers—the gate—whatever lies beyond it—" Young trailed off, trying to frame his idea in words that weren't cooperating. "You said it yourself. Until you open it—it's an academic exercise. The math itself can't make you face the kinds of choices you're talking about. It can't hold you here."

"And what do you imagine that you know about it?" Rush asked with a restive, reflexive movement; a quick flick of hand-to-mouth that suggested the specter of a cigarette before the closing of his fist swallowed the gesture.

"Just—walk away. I don't understand why you can't walk away from this."

"One does not walk away from mathematics," Rush whispered. The road twisted, throwing them into the shadow of an overhanging rock wall that blocked the little moonlight that illuminated the interior of the car. "It's a vocation."

Young looked out into the dark. "I think you should go to Atlantis," he said finally.

They completed the turn and the road spread out ahead of them, the moon giving the asphalt a faint silver glow outside the reach of their headlights.

They did not speak for another two hours.

It was just past oh two hundred hours when Young decided they'd put enough distance between themselves and the base. It was time to make a call to the SGC. They pulled into a nearly deserted rest stop off the freeway, which sported a gas station and a service plaza.

"Why *now*?" Rush asked, pulling the keys out of the ignition and squinting into the fluorescent light that spilled out of the nearly empty buildings and onto the dark pavement. "Why here?"

"Because," Young said grimly, "if things have gone south, we'll need to steal a car."

"What?" Rush hissed, exhaustion sapping some of his usual snap.

"Yup," Young said, keeping the word as matter-of-fact as he could make it. He turned as far as he was able in his seat, and raised his voice. "Vala, wake up."

"I wasn't sleeping, I'll have you know," she replied, her tone low and her diction clearly sleep-blurred.

"Good," Young replied, his eyes scanning the sidewalk in front of the gas station. "I'm going to find a payphone. Stay in the car and out of trouble. Both of you."

"Oh come now, handsome. We are possibly the *most* responsible combination of individuals that one could imagine." Vala leaned forward and finished her sentence in a whisper immediately adjacent to Young's ear.

"Why do I not find that reassuring?" Young growled, turning to meet her dark eyes. "Do me a favor and come up with a car-jacking plan? We might need one."

"With pleasure," she whispered, her voice dropping and slowing with a faux note of seduction. "But I'm not really dressed for a car-jacking. I could use a new shirt."

Young rolled his eyes and opened the door.

"Maybe one of those adorable blue ones that say I heart Colorado on it? Except it's a literal heart shape instead of the word heart? Well, I suppose it's not the shape of a *literal* heart, but you know what I mean. I'm using your symbolic conventions here. Anyway, that would be fabulous."

"Right," Young said, beginning to ease himself out of his seat.

"Size small," Vala added, half devious, half hopeful.

Young levered himself up and out of the door with the strength of his arms, trying not to put any weight on his left side before he was fully stable. He stood for a moment, feeling stiff muscles adjusting painfully to a new configuration.

"Need a hand?" Vala asked quietly from the open window.

"No," Young replied. "No, I'm good."

He supported himself along the hood of the car, his left hand pressing into warm metal as he tried to coax cramped muscles into loosening, into allowing him to move forward with any kind of efficiency. By the time he reached the payphones, a cold sweat had broken out on his forehead. He leaned against the scuffed and clouded plastic of the booth before fishing in his pocket for the appropriate change. It was lucky they'd been able to *find* a payphone. Not too many of these things around anymore. He deposited the coins with the subtle clinking of metal on metal. For less than a second he hesitated, phone suspended in midair. Then he began to dial.

He took a deep breath as he listened to the sound of ringing. There was the click of an opening connection and then—

"This is Mitchell." The words had a savage bite to them. Unmistakably angry, and unmistakably Cameron.

"Hey," Young said, guarded.

"Everett?" Mitchell asked.

"Yeah."

"Thank god."

For a moment there was silence between them. Then Young cleared his throat.

"What's the situation?"

"It's ah—" Mitchell replied, the sentence trailing off raggedly before it had a chance to get started. "It could be worse. The foothold's resolved, but—"

Young shut his eyes. "Who."

"Two new guys from SG-19. Lieutenant Thomas. And—" Mitchell broke off.

"Who," Young said again.

"Sam," Mitchell said, hoarse and short, as if Young had ripped it out of him.

A few seconds of silence passed between them before Mitchell continued.

"She's not—" Young could hear him inhale over the line. "She's still hanging on, but it looks bad."

"How bad?" Young asked.

"Real bad," Mitchell said shortly. "Real bad. One to the chest," he said, choking on the word. "Point blank."

Young gripped the side of the phone booth, and looked up, at the blurred line of stars that split like a dark mirror of the moonlit road.

"Cam," he said.

"We shouldn't talk on this line," Mitchell whispered.

"I know," Young said.

"Do you have her?" Mitchell asked. "Do you have them both? Please just fucking tell me you have her with you, Everett, because otherwise I *swear to god* I don't know what I'm going to tell Jackson if—"

"Yes," Young broke in. "Yes. She's with us."

"Good," Mitchell whispered.

"We're all okay," Young said.

"We shouldn't talk on this line," Mitchell said again.

"I know," Young replied.

"Stay off the grid for another twenty-four hours," Mitchell whispered. "As soon as you call in your code to dispatch, they'll have to log it, and then we have to worry about who knows what. Better for you guys to lie low."

"I know," Young said. "You'll let Landry know?"

"Yeah," Mitchell said, the word clipped.

"This isn't on you, Cam."

"Yeah."

"It isn't on you."

Mitchell said nothing.

"Cam."

"I know. Look, I've gotta go."

"Cam—"

The line went dead.

For a moment he stood, holding the phone pressed to his ear, looking up at the dark expanse of the sky, trying to determine how many of those stars were worlds where the Lucian Alliance held sway.

He wondered what had happened to Carolyn Lam.

Or to that astrophysicist. Young couldn't recall the man's name.

Were they still here, on this world, or were they halfway-across the galaxy, prisoners of the Alliance?

A dial tone sounded in his ear, and he was suddenly cognizant of the warm plastic of the phone, still in his hand.

He limped back to the car, fighting the familiar fight against the agony in his back and side. As he approached the Jackson's Dart, he could hear the strains of Vala's voice, low and indistinct behind the sound of wind and insects.

"—and when you run," Young heard her say as he approached, "you determine your path based on who's chasing you. If they want you alive, if they won't risk shooting at you, then run straight. If they want to kill you, vary your trajectory. This will slow you down, gorgeous, but predictability leaves you as good as dead on the other side of any weapon meant for accuracy over long ranges—"

She broke off as Young opened his car door.

He wrapped his fingers around warm metal and half-fell back into his seat, managing to swallow a reflexive groan at the tearing sensation at the abrupt movement.

"Are you all right?" Rush asked.

"I'm good," Young replied.

"I take it from the lack of T-shirt that a car-jacking is not required?" Vala asked, unable to completely hide the unease in her voice.

"No," Young said. "We're okay. Foothold situation is resolved, but we're not going to check in until tomorrow, just to be on the safe side."

"Good," Vala said, the strain clear in her voice. "Good. Because I would *hate* to resume my life of crime and give the members of a certain flagship team the satisfaction of—"

"Vala," Young said, and her name cut off the flow of words so abruptly and completely he knew she had been waiting for it.

Rush looked over at him sharply, his expression raw in the harsh glow of the fluorescent lights.

"Sam Carter was shot," Young said, twisting his body toward her to the point that he felt too-tense muscles threaten to snap under duress. His eyes were fixed on the darkness behind the driver's seat that was the limit of his sight.

"That can mean a lot of things," Vala replied, her voice steady. "It can—"

"She took a point blank round to the chest," Young continued. "It doesn't look good."

In his peripheral vision, he caught a blur of motion as Rush leaned forward, bracing his right hand against the steering wheel and driving the base of his palm into his eye socket.

"What about the rest of the team?" Vala asked. "What about—" she broke off.

"They're okay. It was Cam I talked to." Young shifted, releasing the painful, limited twist of his spine to look out the passenger-side window toward the highway that lay silent and untrafficked, hidden behind a wall of pine trees. The prospect of finding a place to stay seemed unreasonably daunting in the small, unfriendly hours of the morning.

He watched Rush reposition his hand, digging it into the back of his neck. "Headache?" Young asked.

Rush shifted his hand again to drag his finger through the air in a fluid approximation of a checkmark.

"We'll find somewhere to stay," Young said, "check in with dispatch in the morning."

"Right," Rush said, raw and nearly soundless.

Young was fairly certain that the other man had been aiming for something else—sarcasm, bitterness, stoicism, maybe a subtle combination of all three—anything but the unmistakable thread of defeat that ran through the word.

Out of sight, the steady hiss of tires against asphalt rose and faded away.

"Well," Vala said, the word starting small, but gaining momentum as she pulled it out. "Now that we don't have to live out our lives as fugitives, avoiding any kind of paper trail—I'm *certain* that Daniel would want us to use his credit card to buy coffee," Vala said, slapping her good hand against her leg with a desperately cheerful emphasis.

"Yeah?" Young said, letting her wring half a smile out of him. He locked eyes briefly with Rush.

"Yes, handsome. Daniel has *very* strong feelings about coffee and its availability to all persons. Coffee and Tylenol. Coffee and Tylenol and Scotch. Coffee and Tylenol and Scotch and T-shirts. And also snacks."

"How do you have his credit card?" Young asked. "I thought it was just his keys."

"Well. It's a fascinating story, actually," Vala said. "I've been watching *The X-files* lately—it has some inherent interest for me, you know, being as I am what would be considered an 'extra-terrestrial' to you earthlings, and let me tell you that this show is filled with a lot of practical lessons for the resident alien who wants to blend in, though I must say it mainly showcases examples of what *not* to do. Anyway, as I was saying, when I find myself in a situation that—"

"I'll buy the coffee," Young said.

"A soldier and a gentleman," Vala replied.

Despite the pessimistic slant of Young's thoughts, it took them less than an hour to procure all of the items on Vala's list, plus an unusually unappetizing assortment of processed food, minus an "I heart Colorado" t-shirt, and with the disappointing but prudent substitution of iced tea for Scotch before retracing their path back to the nearest motel, where they paid in cash for an anonymous room with a pair of double beds.

Vala wasted no time in seating herself on the bed furthest from the door and cracking open an iced tea, the bottle braced between her knees.

Rush went straight for the Tylenol.

Young took a seat on the bed, picked up a package of chips, and tried to remember how his day had begun.

"Are you going to stare at that, or eat it, handsome?"

"Neither," he said, tossing it aside. "You want me to take a look at your shoulder?"

"No," Vala said, closing her eyes in a protracted blink. "It's—enjoying its alone time right now."

Rush vanished into the bathroom, shutting the door with perhaps more force than was necessary. Almost immediately, Young heard the sound of a faucet, turned on to its maximum extent.

"Great," Young said, looking at the white-on-white where cheap paint of door met cheap paint of wall. He dug a hand into the knotted muscles of his back above his left hip. He was about to step forward, unwilling to let Rush work himself up behind closed doors, when Vala's hand closed over his forearm.

He looked down at her.

She shook her head.

"I don't think you realize—" Young began.

"I do," she said, cutting him off with a faint smile. "Of course I do." She pulled delicately on his arm, her intent unmistakable, the weight of it adding to the press of gravity.

He sat.

Something about her smile turned inward, a more personal curl. As if she could feel it on her face, she let her hair fall forward in a dark obscuring curtain.

"What?" he asked, half-smiling himself.

"Nothing, handsome. Nothing—you're just—very like Daniel in some ways."

"Like *Jackson*?" Young asked, not entirely certain whether to be offended or complimented.

"You look so scandalized," she whispered conspiratorially, the light shining off her hair as she flicked it over her shoulder. She handed him an iced tea.

"Well, no offense," Young said, "but I think you're pretty off base on that one."

"So certain of yourself," Vala said, her eyebrows lifting subtly.

Young twisted the top off a bottle of iced tea. "You're talking about what—" he asked, taking a sip and grimacing at the taste of aspartame, "—my objecting to your stealing Jackson's credit card? Or the fact that I'm not particularly inclined to leave an untrained civilian who just saw people killed, maybe for the first time, *ever*, to have a solo meltdown in the bathroom of a shitty motel?" His voice had dropped to a vehement whisper. "Because that kind of thing doesn't really seem that complicated, and I don't think you have to be anything like Jackson to feel that way. "

Her smile evened out, and took on a practiced cast as her eyes flicked down toward her hands and back up.

He had hurt her.

"Vala—"

She shook her head sharply. "He deserves five minutes, don't you think?" she asked. "He seems to be made of sterner stuff than most of you lot give him credit for."

"Maybe," Young said.

"And as far as the credit card goes, handsome, you'll have to forgive my less than absolute faith in the long-term viability and solvency of your organization, which, given the events of this afternoon, seems more precarious than ever. I prefer the security of a backup plan." The words were self-possessed and remote.

He looked at her.

She looked back at him, holding herself stiffly, her injured arm clasped to her chest, her lips compressed.

"You put on a good show," he said. "Really damn good."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," she whispered, her face and body held in total stillness.

"Yeah, you do," he murmured. "The whole: 'buy-me-a-t-shirt thing'. The whole 'let-me-tell-you-about-the-time-I-defrauded-a-guy-out-of-a-starship thing'. The credit cards and the shitty cocktails and the—"

"Excuse me?"

"Sorry. Crappy cocktails."

"Don't knock it 'til you try it, handsome." Her tone was light, but her eyes were restive. Wary. She tucked her legs beneath her, subtly pulling away from him.

"You like being underestimated. You prefer things that way."

Vala said nothing.

"I get it," Young said. "I do. It's a tactical advantage."

Vala continued to watch him, unnaturally still.

"But it's not a mistake *I'm* going to make," Young said carefully.

"That's what they all say, handsome," Vala said, fingering the ends of her hair. "Each in their own way."

"I don't trust you," Young said.

"I approve," Vala said. "Trust no one."

"Enough with *The X-files*, already," he said, giving her a faint smile. "I don't *distrust* you either."

"That opinion puts you in firm alignment with the entire bureaucracy of the SGC," she said a bit dryly. "Hence the probationary status." She gave the edge of her blackened jacket a rueful flick where an insignia patch would be.

He felt a pang of sympathy for her. "I want to ask you something."

"Fire away, handsome," she said.

"You were a host."

"Yes," Vala replied quietly.

"You've watched the establishment of empires. You've participated in the rise and fall of civilizations."

"Yes," she said, the word ragged.

"So what do you think?" Young asked. "Of us? Of this? Of *all* of this? What are our chances—with the Ori against us and the Lucian Alliance trying to beat us to unlocking the nine-chevron address?"

Vala looked down at the bedspread, strewn with brightly colored, unopened packages of food.

"What does this look like from *your* perspective?" he asked her.

"Did you know," she whispered, smiling at an unopened bag of pretzels, "that no one's ever asked me that? Not in all the time I've been here?"

Young said nothing.

"I think you're overextended," she whispered, "and besieged on all sides. But I think that you have always been this way, and that such an assessment isn't condemnation. Your rise to the status of a galactic power has been meteoric, and your fall may follow the same pattern. You risk much without unanimity of purpose and without global accord. As individuals, you're enamored of your conception of justice, but you temper this with humor."

"Do you think we'll survive this?" Young asked.

"As you are?" Vala whispered, looking him straight in the eye. "No."

He swallowed.

"I think Origin will come for your planet, and will conquer here."

"Great." He gave her a crooked smile.

"Sorry, handsome," Vala whispered, "But—you *did* ask."

"I did," Young replied, one hand coming open in a half-helpless gesture. "Why stay here, trying like hell to join SG-1, if that's what you really think?"

"Well, you never know," Vala said, abruptly grabbing the bag of pretzels she'd been contemplating and ripping it open with her teeth, purposefully doing her best to tear though the ominous air in the room at the same time. "You're a resourceful people. Plus—the intergalactic panache of SG-1 is quite notable. I figure there's got to be a way to capitalize on *that*, even if your civilization does fail. Maybe some kind of planetary protection fee that I can charge for my—"

Young snorted, letting her lighten the mood.

"What?"

"Nothing, Don Corleone."

"I take issue with that comparison," Vala said primly.

"How are you so good with Earth trivia?" Young asked. "Mitchell says that Teal'c *still* mixes his metaphors. He's been here for a *decade*."

"Well," Vala said, "it's all about attitude and interest sets. Speaking of which, what's *your* story, handsome?" she asked, crunching on a pretzel. "Hmm? What's with the whole—" she made a vague sweeping motion in his direction, clearly meant to take in his nebulous injuries. "Don't get me wrong, the whole 'wounded soldier' thing has its own very appealing mystique, but I get the feeling there's a good story wrapped up inside that stoic exterior."

"I am too tired and too sober to get into that," Young said, pressing the heel of his hand into his lower back.

"Let's be drinking buddies," Vala said, gingerly leaning back against the pillows. "Tonight, alas, we find ourselves at the mercy of Colorado liquor laws which prohibit the sale of spirits between the hours of midnight and seven A.M.—but this will not *always* be true."

"No way," Young said. "You'll just break my heart."

"Probably," Vala replied, "but that's pretty typical for me, I find."

"What I *mean*," Young clarified, eyeing the bathroom door, "is that you're just going to abandon me as a drinking partner once this whole SG-1 thing becomes official."

"Oh come now," Vala said smiling faintly. "I'm *known* for my loyalty."

"Right."

The water shut off in the bathroom, and almost as abruptly, the door opened and Rush paced into the room, with the edgy energy that seemed to resist a day and night of grueling, draining physical activity.

"And *then*," Vala said, drawing out the word dramatically, "the man just *dismissed me*. As if the idea of an attractive, independent, sexy female alien was just preposterous. Can you *believe* this?"

"Um, no?" Young said, trying not to appear too nonplussed by her clear attempt to distract Rush with whatever conversation she thought would be most suitable to such a purpose.

Rush eyed them both.

"Here gorgeous," Vala said, "have a pretzel." She held out the bag in his direction. "I was just telling Colonel Young about my meeting with a *very* important Hollywood screen writer last week. Apparently they're making *Wormhole X-Treme* into a feature-length film? Have you seen this show? It's *terribly* popular, and based on SG-1."

"No," Rush said shortly. "Furthermore, such a thing seems—imprudent."

"It's completely ridiculous," Young said, "but it's good plausible deniability for the Air Force."

"I have a bit of a crush on Grell the robot, I must admit," Vala said.

"You don't," Young said. "Everyone likes Dr. Levant. Literally everyone."

Vala shook the pretzels at Rush as he approached to reclaim his partially consumed iced tea.

"It's all lies, gorgeous," Vala said, "don't believe a word he's saying."

"I'm entirely uninterested, I assure you," Rush said dryly, accepting Vala's pretzel offer.

"Very discerning of you," Vala replied.

Rush sat on the edge of the bed, next to Vala, and pressed the heel of his hand into his right eye.

"I think we should all get some sleep," Young said.

"I *insist* that we share a bed, gorgeous," Vala said with a quick catch and release of the cuff of Rush's dress shirt. "*And* I insist that you tell Daniel."

Young woke only a few hours later, lying atop the covers of his still-made bed. He jerked to alertness with a reflexive, painful tensing of muscles, fighting his way free of troubled dreams that faded even as he struggled to hold onto the shreds that were most immediate.

An obsidian floor.

A woman's boot, crafted of black leather.

The lights were off, concealing the peeling paint and disintegrating carpet, but doing nothing for the chemical smell of bleach that wafted from the bathroom and mingled unpleasantly with the suggestion of cigarette smoke that had seeped into every porous surface in the room over years of intermittent occupancy.

Rush was awake. He was sitting at the small table positioned next to the window, using the dim light from the parking lot that filtered in through the partially opened blinds to write on a small notepad.

Young shut his eyes. Then he opened them again. He got up, fighting his way past the muscle spasm that clamped down on his freedom of movement. He dragged himself over to the table and dropped onto a hard seat, opposite Rush.

"Hey," Young whispered, trying not to wake Vala.

"Hello." The word was equally quiet, and Rush didn't look up from whatever it was that he was writing.

"It's four in the morning," Young said.

"Did you want anything in particular?" Rush asked, still not looking up.

"It's four in the morning," Young repeated. "You have to be exhausted."

The flow of the pen over the page paused briefly as Rush lifted his hand in a vaguely dismissive gesture.

Young sighed. "You want to talk about it?"

"Why?" Rush asked. "Do you have any insights to bring to bear on joint applications of entangling Hamiltonians?"

"I didn't mean the math. Is that even math?"

"From your perspective? Yes. Is it pure math? No."

"You were nearly abducted," Young pointed out. "Again."

"I'm aware of that," Rush replied.

"You saw people killed."

"I'm aware of that too."

"You found out you're genetically—special, or whatever."

"This is not news to me. I'm Scottish."

Young exhaled, short and frustrated and amused. He looked down at the surface of the table, absently dragging a brochure for some nearby attraction out from the shadowed place beneath the curtains where Rush had shoved it. He watched the pale white light that entered obliquely through the window reflect off its surface as he distorted it. He could feel Rush watching him. "No one," Young said without looking at him, "takes this kind of thing like you're taking it. No one."

"Evidence would indicate—"

"Unless," Young said, cutting him off. "Unless there's something else going on in their life or in their past that—contextualizes it. That puts it in perspective. Takes out its teeth."

Rush said nothing.

Young watched the delicate coordination of Rush's left thumb and ring finger as he subtly twisted his wedding band.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

Abruptly, Rush laid his hand flat against the wood of the table.

They locked eyes.

"Yes, well," Rush whispered, "we all carry our own metrics by which we judge the world."

"Yup," Young said quietly.

The Cold, Clear Light

It is half past one in the morning when Carolyn Lam stops in the hallway between her office and the crowded floor space of the SGC infirmary.

She is, briefly, alone.

The essential nature of the problem that faces her and its inevitable solution have hit her in the same instant. That is why she's paused here, one hand on the wall next to her, trying to tether the racing of her thoughts—the explosion of fear in her mind, and the simultaneous, savage triumph of her insight.

Sometimes, not every time, the opportunity to beat the cards that one has been dealt presents itself. Seeing such an opportunity, she cannot let it go. It's not who she is.

It has *never been* who she is.

She begins moving again, feeling a sense of satisfaction in the sharp strike of her heels on the floor, the feel of a file in her hands, the weight of her stethoscope around her neck, the presence of a checklist in her mind. She passes from the quiet of the hallway and plows straight into a huddle of personnel standing outside OR three. They scatter before her as she advances.

"We're not doing it here." She cuts over whatever they're arguing about. "Not here. The toxicology isn't back on this stuff in the air. It could be infectious, a cumulative neurotoxin, some kind of vector. We're not opening up surgical fields outside of isolation. This stuff is *not* coming into direct contact with tissue."

The opposition to her statement is immediate and unified.

"But—" someone begins, the comment swallowed by other voices that rise together and settle finally into: "Carter isn't going to hang on much longer, let alone the LA Jane Doe, and if Brightman is cleared to come down we have to move on this *now*—"

She doesn't slow, but she turns as she passes. "Pack it up," she says, lifting the hand that holds the file, pointing it toward OR 1. "Move it down the hall. We do it all the time."

"Not on this kind of timetable," shouts the scrub nurse.

"Pack it up," she says, implacable. "Move it down the hall."

"Dr. Lam," Johansen says, stepping forward, following her a few steps away from the pack of nurses and medics. "You're bleeding." The medic makes a delicate gesture toward her own forehead.

Lam reaches up to touch the mirroring place near her hairline. She's rewarded with a sudden, sharp sting. She can feel it then, the graze along her temple, the path of a bullet fired from Colonel Mitchell's gun. The blood has subtly matted her hair. She looks down at the collar of her white coat, shifting the fabric to get a better view.

It looks fine. No stains. It's stayed in her hair.

She'll handle it later.

"Thanks," Lam says.

"I'll can throw a stitch or five in it," Johansen calls after her.

"Sure," Lam shouts back, already nearly out of sight. "Thanks. Later."

It's not as though she's in danger of bleeding on anyone. It's clotted.

The main space of the infirmary is chaotic, the door to the corridor thrown wide, the air still misted. Bodies lie on gurneys, and her harried skeleton staff flit between them, occasionally break from a quick clip into a short dash. Military personnel swirl in an anxious, knotted mass near the doorway, bringing in the wounded, checking on their friends, offering help.

Near the wall, someone is screaming.

Plasma burns will do that.

"Carolyn," someone calls from the tangle in the doorway. "*Carolyn.*"

"Hey," she shouts, turning to the anxious mass of black uniforms that block the door.

"Make a *path*. All non-medical personnel without serious injuries can report to the med station one level up. If you're not sure whether you should be here, you shouldn't."

She reaches out to pull Brightman through the massing personnel at the door, and they form an island of stability in the flow of people around them, hands coming to forearms in a two-way grip.

"I've been waiting topside for six hours." Brightman's voice is high and strained. "They just cleared us. I ran down the stairs. MacKenzie was here when it happened. He'd been exposed to the stuff in the air, so they let him back in—I sent him to triage on twenty. He's psych, but it's better than nothing."

"Good," Lam says.

"I know it's bad," Brightman says. "But how bad?"

"Bad," Lam says, hearing the dread in her own voice. "Eighteen wounded. Of those, four are critical. Two GSWs and two with plasma burns. Unknown gas through the entire facility, with everyone exposed, including you, now. We've got Colonel Telford and SG-3 in secure lockdown, no critical injuries, but it looks like they were tortured, plus or minus coercive persuasion. I'm glad you're here."

"Like I was going to go home," Brightman says. "You need a surgeon."

"Yes," Lam says.

"Is everyone triaged?"

"Yes."

"Then give me the three second version. Who's first?"

"A Jane Doe in her twenties, past medical history unknown, presenting with a subclavicular GSW at point blank range on the left. She's unstable."

Brightman looks at Lam. Then she looks at the flow of people that weave in and around them and leans in. "Are—*all* the criticals Lucian Alliance?"

"No," Lam says.

"We're going to get pushback on this, Carolyn." Her words are quiet.

"I know," Lam replies, her voice brusque. She edges back, widening the distance between her and Brightman.

"Who's the other GSW?" Brightman asks.

"It doesn't matter," Lam says. "The LA operative was identified as a friendly. She's—"

"We're going to get *pushback* on this, Carolyn. Who's the other critical GSW?"

"Carter," Lam says. "Colonel Samantha Carter."

"Carolyn."

"This is on me," Lam says, feeling the weight of her own words. "I can keep Carter alive until you finish with the girl. I've kept her alive. I've kept her alive for eight hours. I'm telling you to start on the girl."

She is not military, and she does not give orders.

That doesn't mean Brightman doesn't have to take them.

Brightman nods.

"And I need ten minutes," Lam says. "Right now. Watch things for me. Plasma burn by the far wall needs morphine, Carter and the girl are unstable, wide bore lines open in both arms. Carter's bled through twelve units already. I placed a chest tube. Overhead page if she crashes. I'll come."

"Got it," Brightman says.

Carter *will* crash. Lam has to be back before she does.

She weaves her way between the personnel at the door, who ignored her orders to go elsewhere, until she reaches the hall. She walks, with a quick, clipped stride through the faintly misted air. After half a minute she has left the populated regions of the base. The halls are empty, cleared of everyone but the most essential personnel, and those already exposed to whatever is in the air. She removes her shoes and scoops them up by their straps with one hand.

She begins to run. Fast and soundless.

Later, they will see her on the security cameras.

Later, they will know why she ran.

Later doesn't matter to her.

Not yet.

Her breath burns in her lungs, and she can taste the acrid tang of the impure air in the back of her throat. Her eyes water as she passes through opaque collections of mist far from the ducts of the ventilation system, where the gas is still thick. It doesn't take her long to reach the Astrobiology Unit. She slips in through a door and goes to the far wall of the main lab, sorting through small, well-labeled drawers with hands and eyes until she finds what she is looking for.

She pulls out a small vial.

She darts over to one of the balances, pulls a plastic, disposable, weigh-boat from a drawer and carefully tips a precise amount of the silvery-gray liquid suspension into it. She transfers the minute amount she has measured into a second vial. She fills the second vial with ten milliliters of sterile saline. She replaces the remainder of the substance back into the slot in the drawers where it belongs: after naphthalene and before naquasone.

She shakes her vial as she runs back toward the infirmary.

Around the corner, she replaces her heels and she weaves back in through the crowd near the door.

She's pulled to a stop as someone catches her arm. She knows before she looks that it's Mitchell. Eight hours ago he'd pulled her out from under a dead man and down the gate ramp. She'll know him now anywhere. Forever. For the rest of her life.

"Dr. Lam. *Dr. Lam.*" His voice is hard. Her eyes flick from him to the huddle across the hall, where she can see Dr. Jackson and Teal'c, standing in silent, synchronous solidarity.

"She's alive," Lam says. "She's alive. I'm doing everything I can."

He doesn't let her go. His eyes are hard and wild, and his face is set, but his grip on her arm is gentle.

"Everything," she says again.

"Is she going to—" Mitchell can't finish.

She won't lie to him.

"You need to let me go," she says.

He lets her go.

She darts back into the infirmary. No one has paged her yet. She grabs an IV bag.

"Don't bother with that," Johansen says, materializing out of the fray at her elbow. "I can get it for you. What do you need?"

"I need you to grab the bicarb and the NAC, and the special sauce we backwards engineered from the stuff in the Ancient database and meet me in the ICU."

"Renal protection protocol?" Johansen asks, taking the IV bag from Lam.

"Absolutely," Lam replies, subtly inverting the suspension of naquadah in her pocket.

"Get the IV rigged up, but don't start it without me. I'll be right there."

"You got it," Johansen says, turning to make her way over to the supply cabinets. The light gleams off the gold in her hair.

Lam ducks back into the hallway where her office is located. She walks to a locked, opaque cabinet that is built straight into a load-bearing wall. She opens it and removes a small case. She shuts it again, and turns back, feeling the tingle of anticipation as she waits for that overhead page. For someone to call a code.

On Carter.

On *Carter*.

There are few people who are irreplaceable. Carter may be one of them.

She walks back into the main room, heading toward the ICU.

"Dr. Lam." A voice comes out of the organized chaos she's trying to skirt, the tangle of suffering that could pull her in and hold her for too long. *Any* amount of time is too long. But she knows that voice, that silhouette, and she turns.

"General," she says.

"Carolyn," he says, and she knows then that he is here to see *her*.

"I'm here for a status report on Colonel Carter," the general says.

It's a half-truth that they both feel, but she changes her direction, spinning on the axis of the naquadah in her pocket, because she feels she *owes* him this—she doesn't owe him much but she owes him this moment.

"I'm doing my best," she says. It's bland and truthful and perfect, a line from medical school that she's dressed herself in for years. The thing that she says when she has nothing else to say. Coming now, it as it does, to this man who is also her father—it sounds childish.

Or, perhaps, it simply makes her feel like a child.

"I know," he says. "I know that."

She can tell by his demeanor, by the shift of his gaze and stance, that his fear for her is easing while his fear for Carter grows.

"I still have hope," she says.

"It's bad," he says.

"It's bad," she confirms. "I've got to go. Sir."

He nods at her. She slips past him with her eyes down, hoping he won't remember this moment—the case in her hand, the way he could have reached out a hand and stopped her. But the thought is brief, and doesn't linger. She continues, building momentum as she goes, hitting the double doors, her mass and velocity focused in one hand. They fly inward, away from her, a perfectly symmetrical and rapid removal from her path. She passes Evans at the telemetry monitoring station and turns left, heading into one of the private rooms.

Johansen is waiting there, her eyes shadowed.

"We're ready," the medic says. "You want me to start this?" She taps the IV pole with one perfect nail, covered with pale pink polish that technically breaks regulation.

Instead of replying, Lam turns, returns to the door, and locks it. The door is made of glass. See-through, but bulletproof.

"Um," Johansen says.

Lam walks forward and lays the case she's carrying on the bed. She opens it to reveal the goa'uld healing device. She traces over it with her fingers, following its rounded contours. Then she looks back at Johansen.

"Are you—" the medic swallows. "Are you Tok'ra? Or are you— Were you ever—" she doesn't finish.

"No."

"There's no one on the base who was a former host," Johansen says, her voice tight, as if she's already guessed Lam's intentions. "We checked. We *checked*."

"That's correct." Lam reaches into her pocket and hands the woman the suspension of naquadah. "After we start the IV," she says, "We're going to do a slow push."

"Of naquadah?" Johansen asks, her hand closing unconsciously over Carter's calf. "You *can't*—"

"The IV isn't for Carter," Lam says. "It's for me."

Johansen freezes, her eyes locked on the subtle pattern in the weave of the white blanket that covers Carter.

Lam removes her white coat.

"This isn't what we do," Johansen says.

Lam unbuttons the cuff of her blouse.

"This isn't *right*."

Lam rolls up her sleeve.

"We don't *make trades*," Johansen finishes.

"That's true," Lam says, and holds out her arm.

Johansen hesitates for another fraction of a second, looking between Lam and Carter, who lies silent and pale against the sheets of the bed.

"Tamara," Lam says.

The medic puts up both her hands and looks away, as if she cannot bear the sound of her own name. She takes a lateral step and, for an instant, Lam thinks she will refuse. But the other woman reaches into a drawer and tears open an alcohol packet. She

begins to rub the crook of Lam's elbow in a slow, cool, outward spiral. She lets it the alcohol dry as she pulls out the needle and the short length of tubing.

"Don't look," the medic whispers. "Little pinch." The needle slides in effortlessly, and then Lam feels the pull as the metal is removed, leaving the flexible cannula in place. Johansen tapes it down beneath a square of gauze, securing it.

"Hook it up," Lam says.

Johansen attaches the tubing to the IV bag and opens the line. Lam feels the chilled saline snake through the thin plastic over her arm. She shivers.

"If it makes you feel better," Lam says, "self-experimentation is the historical norm in medicine."

"It doesn't," Johansen says. "We're doing a push of a heavy metal? This stuff could sclerose your veins on contact."

"There's at least enough research to know it won't do that," Lam says. "You think people haven't been looking into this as an option?"

"I'm pretty sure that if it were a good idea, we'd have done it already."

"I'm a test case," Lam says, picking up the healing device. "Let's do this."

She steps laterally, dragging the IV pole with her, positioning it next to the one at the right side of the bed, blending it into the little garden of machines that surround Carter, keeping her alive. She looks down at the other woman, still against the sheets, the shock of her blonde hair fanning across the pillow.

She has the urge to say something, but instead, she slips both hands through the strap of the back of the device. She has to grip it with her fingertips to keep her palm centered. She looks down at it. Feels its weight in her hand.

"I always wanted to try one of these things," Lam says, ruefully. And it's true. What doctor wouldn't? To cure disease with a wave of the hand? To power another person's healing with the energy of her own head and heart?

"Dr. Lam," Johansen whispers.

"She's not going to make it," Lam replies, looking straight into Johansen's troubled eyes. "Not without this."

"I know," Johansen says. "But—"

"Load up a syringe," Lam says.

Johansen, again, seems as though she might refuse. "This could kill you," the medic says. "It could stop your heart before you even get the chance to help her."

"Please," Lam says.

Johansen turns, pulls a syringe out of a cart, and draws up the Naquadah. She fits the needle to the IV.

"Ready?" Johansen asks.

"Yes," Lam says, her eyes flicking back and forth between Carter and the device in her hands.

She can *feel* the moment it enters her circulation. There is a burning in her arm, a strange taste in the back of her throat, and *damn it* she should have thought about the fact that this was going to trigger the chemoreceptors in her area postrema—

The nausea is overwhelming.

She watches the device in her hands.

"As soon as it lights up—" she's interrupted by a dry heave that she cannot suppress.

"Can you please—" she can't speak.

"Zofran?" Johansen asks.

Lam nods.

Her arm is hurting. Her arm has never hurt so much. *Nothing* has ever hurt so much. She clutches the edge of the bed.

She is afraid.

Her left hand comes to her chest, to her throat, to her eyes, back to her chest.

Her right arm is steady.

She can feel her heart hammering beneath her closed fist. She's gasping, her breath coming in short, shallow spurts and it's an effort to keep it coming at all, and she can't tell if it's because of the naquadah or because she is so *frightened* of what she is doing to herself, of the things this might do to her liver, her heart, her lungs, her kidneys, her nerves, her muscles, her brain, without a symbiote to process the toxin that's entering her bloodstream in a slow slide.

"Dr. Lam—" Johansen says, her voice high and strained and terrified.

Lam cannot speak.

She's breaking her oath.

She's doing harm.

Her left arm *hurts*. It burns on the surface and it aches deep down and it occurs to her that this could a direct effect of concentrated naquadah, or it could be pain referred from somewhere else. Her diaphragm. Her lung. Her heart.

She clutches the device, curls her fingers around it, willing it to light up. To *light up*, so this won't be a waste.

"Come on," she snarls at the thing in her hand, her determination clotting into total implacability. She's *not* going to die. Not before this thing in her hand glows red. It's not going to beat her.

Light up, god damn it, she thinks, envisioning a flare of bright, ready energy. *Light up, you bitch*.

Her teeth are clenched, she's half turned away from Carter, doubled over.

Johansen, standing close, continues her slow depression of a plastic plunger, whispering, "please please please please please—"

"Come on," Lam gasps, her eyes streaming, her mucus membranes burning, her fist pressed against her sternum, choking, *dying*. "Come on."

The device lights up.

With a savage intensity, she forces past her pain, brings her hand around, and focusing with intent on Carter. She clenches her jaw, she breathes through nasal passages that are on fire, she visualizes what she wants—bleeding to stop, tissue to regenerate—

She hears the sound of a needle hitting the sharps container, feels Johansen move away, and then return.

Lam snarls, her face twisting as she imposes *her* will on this alien thing in her hand that's *fighting her*. She's ignoring the signals from her own body, trying to focus on Carter, *only* on *Carter*, when she snaps down to another level of awareness, synchronizing with the device in a mental readjustment that's startling, complete, and satisfying.

Nothing hurts quite so much anymore.

The device feels warm and correct in her hand, accepting the modulations of current that define who she is and integrating with them seamlessly, amplifying her intent into something *so powerful* that the resulting radiation is actually visible in the air—a yellow glow between her right hand and Carter's body. She moves the device, feeling her

focus shift naturally as she does so from lung to descending aorta—from descending aorta to pericardium.

"Dr. Lam." She hears Johansen from far away, and cannot answer.

She cannot do everything. She cannot replace blood that has been lost. She cannot fully heal damaged tissue—already she feels the beginnings of internal scarring, sees the places it will lie as the thickening and contracture as collagen production outcompetes the division of myocytes and the branching of regenerating microvasculature.

"Dr. Lam."

She cannot answer.

She *feels* Carter reenter a sustainable path. Feels the cease in the leakage of blood out of her system. Feels the moment when she *knows* that the other woman will live.

Lam can't remove the bullet that's fragmented and deformed against the back of Carter's scapula, but now—now she knows that Carter will survive Brightman's extraction of the vicious, splintered LA round.

The blaze of her pure satisfaction turns something in the device.

She feels its focus shift.

She feels it reflect.

She looks now at herself, she moves her hand and mind, and she confronts her own options.

She sees the naquadah, depositing everywhere. Her vessels, her skin, her heart, her brain, her eyes, her lungs, her liver, her ovaries, the roots of her hair and the roots of her teeth.

She cannot get rid of it.

She cannot vanish it.

She cannot chelate it.

She cannot sequester it.

The only option left to her is redistribution.

She purges it from her nerves, pushes it back into her blood, forcing it all into one compartment that she must sacrifice, that she knew going in that she would likely be forced to surrender to pull Carter back from the brink.

When she is finished, the device shuts down.

She pushes back from Carter's bed, staggers a few steps, tears the lid off the biohazard container near the door, and empties the contents of her stomach. It's not much. She hasn't eaten for hours.

Johansen is next to her. She's dragged the IV pole across the floor to follow Lam's dash toward the door.

"Dr. Lam," Johansen whispers.

"I'm okay," Lam says, choking on her own tears, shaking against the wall.

"Are you?" Johansen whispers.

Lam nods, her jaw clamped shut.

"We should tell someone," Johansen says, her voice high and tight, her hands wrapped around Lam's right arm. "You could— We should— We have to—"

"We will," Lam says, thinking of the conversations she will be required to have over the course of the next few hours. "We will. But—later. I—fixed myself. I healed myself. Mostly. I—I triage out to somewhere near the bottom of the pile. Right now."

"Do you?" Johansen asks, her eyes wide and frightened.

Lam nods at her.

They both, out of an unspoken accord, look over at Carter. On the surface, nothing has changed. Their eyes flick to the monitors.

"Heart rate is down," Johansen says. "BP is up."

"She's not bleeding out anymore," Lam says, wiping her eyes.

They stand together, very close, not speaking, breathing heavily, as if they'd just outrun something terrible.

"What did you do?" Johansen whispers, swallowing.

"It worked," Lam whispers. "It worked."

"I meant to yourself," Johansen says.

"I don't know yet," Lam whispers, and it's partially true. "We'll find out."

Johansen shuts her eyes and nods.

Ten hours later, Carter is post-op and stable. Lam has changed her clothes, signed out her patient load to Brightman, and her report is in hand. She stands outside the

general's office, fingering the six careful stitches that Johansen had placed near her hairline.

"It almost doesn't feel worth it," Lam had said, dry and hollow, as the medic ran the line of suture along her temple. Johansen had stopped and looked away, setting sterile instruments down on a sterile tray, shaking hands pressed together, her lips compressed as she took a long slow breath. Lam had said, "Tamara, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that." And Johansen had looked up at the ceiling and then turned back to pick up her forceps and her needle driver.

Lam has a headache.

There is no secretary outside the general's office—the base is still cleared of nonessential personnel—so she knocks.

"Come in."

She steps inside, her fingers tracing the edge of the file she holds to her chest. She looks at the floor for a moment before she can look up at her father.

"The woman of the hour," he says in that aggressively friendly, sonorous command style he seems to prefer. Underneath it, she can hear his pride. Hear his relief. "The grapevine says Carter's going to make it. I hear the defector's going to make it too."

"Yup," she says, fear and irritation and a sense of accomplishment all warring in her mind.

"What can I do for you, Dr. Lam?" Landry asks.

"Any word on the nature of the gas they pumped through the gate?" Lam asks. She already knows the answer, but she needs to create the conversational space to accommodate all she is about to set before him.

"Not yet, which I guess is a good thing. The chromatography guys say it looks pretty inert, and, pending the final toxicology analysis, it should get turned over to the Gen Chem Unit later today."

"Great," Lam says. "Great."

She looks at him. He's smiling at her. She tries to smile back.

"I came to deliver my report."

"Really."

She does not usually deliver her reports in person.

"Yes sir," she says, releasing the file from her grip and extending it, letting it come to rest on his desk. "There's—there's something in there that you're not going to like."

"Oh?" he says, his eyebrows lifting. "Why don't you take a seat?"

She sits.

She thinks about the ways in which this news can be broken. Despite their fractious relationship, he deserves all the professionalism that she can bring to bear. She knows what he knows. She knows what he understands. She knows what he'll need as context.

"When Colonel Carter arrived in the infirmary," she begins quietly, "it was apparent to me that she was not going to survive her injuries. The damage to her left lung was extensive. She was bleeding into her pleural cavity and—she was also bleeding slowly into the membrane that surrounds her heart."

"But you fixed that," the general says, still expansive, but watchful now. Wary. "You and Brightman—you fixed that."

"Yes," Lam says. "We did. Colonel Carter is going to be fine." She looks down. She runs her hands over her skirt. "But in order to repair her injuries, we had to make use of a goa'uld healing device."

Her father looks straight at her. Straight at the little girl she thinks he'll always see. He's not prone to flashes of insights, but he's a fast, thorough, and methodical thinker. "Who used it?" he asks.

"Use of the device requires naquadah in the bloodstream," Lam says, "and there were no former hosts on the base at the time."

"Who *used it*, Carolyn."

She can feel the gathering tension in the air; the calm before the downpour. She is sure that by now, he must know what she is going to say. "My solution," she begins, "was to artificially create the conditions necessary for use of the healing device."

A nearly unbearable silence descends over them both. The general interlaces his fingers and leans forward marginally. "And how did you create those conditions?" he asks.

He is ready to hear the words, and she is ready to speak them.

"I injected myself with naquadah," she says.

"You WHAT?" He's forward, out of his chair, hands braced on the desk, unleashing everything he's held in check.

"I injected myself with naquadah," she says again, "and I used the device."

He's still standing, his knuckles turning white, uncertain what to say, fear and pride and anger warring over his features, trying to determine how to proceed, how he should proceed.

She can help him there.

"I recognize that there will be an inquiry," she says, her voice cool, reminding him that their professional relationship is a strong one, that it supersedes their troubled personal history. "I am aware that this decision could be classified as unprofessional, and potentially indicates impaired judgment. I am fully prepared to accept the consequences of my actions."

"You're *damn right* there's going to be—" He cuts himself off. "Carolyn—you need to get downstairs and you need to check yourself in under Brightman, under the new guy—whomever. You need someone to check you out thoroughly and you need to be monitored—"

"Dad," she says, startling herself, startling him.

When he comes back at her, the force behind his voice redoubled.

"I'll take you down there myself," he snarls. "Right now. You—"

"I've consulted with Brightman," Lam says calmly.

"And she released you?"

Her mouth feels dry. A strange, torqued and tortured thought flits through her mind—that moments like these were why she hadn't chosen pediatrics. "We have a clear picture of what's happening. Of what's going to happen."

He sits.

He says nothing.

"I'm showing early signs of acute renal failure," she says.

He says nothing.

"I will have a short, symptom-free window," she says. "But I need—this is something that should be handled by a larger facility. I've already called CS General and set up my own chelation protocol. Their renal service is top notch."

"When Vala gets back—"

"The healing device can't remove heavy metals from the body. I've already done what I could to mitigate the damage."

"What are you *saying*, Carolyn?"

"I'm saying that, best case scenario, the only collateral damage from this is that I lose both kidneys. Worst case scenario—" she pauses, unable to look at him. "Well, in medicine, the worst case scenario is pretty obvious."

He stares at the desk. At his hands. She hopes that he is not thinking of that moment, hours ago, when he stopped her in the infirmary on her way to see Carter.

She hopes that he is not thinking of her as a child.

"This was my decision," she says quietly. "I don't regret it."

He still doesn't speak, and she thinks maybe it's because he can't.

"And I'm handling it," she finishes.

He still doesn't speak, but he begins to move, his hands searching for something. He pulls keys out of his right front pocket. "You ready to go?" he asks. "I'll drive you."

"You can't drive me," she replies. "The base is still half-locked down, you're—"

"I'm *driving you*." He shouts it, and she flinches.

"Okay," she says quietly, one hand extended.

The phone rings.

The red phone.

For a moment, they both look at it.

"It's all right," she whispers.

The look he gives her is wrenching as he reaches out across the desk to capture her arm. His grip is tight, preventing her from leaving.

But—he has to pick up the phone, and they both know it.

Story of her life.

Story of *his*.

She understands.

She does.

"Mr. President," he says, his voice entirely at odds with the expression on his face.

Gently, she pulls away.

He lets her.

She nods at him once, then opens the door to the office and steps into the hallway, shutting it carefully behind her, shutting herself out of what is sure to be a difficult conversation. She looks up, and is startled to see Mitchell leaning against the opposite wall.

"Colonel Mitchell," she says quietly. She inclines her head towards the general's office. "He's on the phone. The red phone. Probably will be for while."

Her words don't seem to faze him. They don't seem to even register. She wonders if she's even spoken aloud.

"Hey," Mitchell says.

It occurs to her that perhaps he is not here to see General Landry.

"Hey," she replies. Her eyes sweep over him again, this time taking in the familiar black laptop bag that is slung over one shoulder. It's *her* bag.

"Brightman told me most of it," he says. "TJ—er, Johansen told me the rest."

"That's—" she's not sure what to say. "That's a HIPAA violation."

Mitchell gives her a small, pained smile. "Yeah. But—Brightman can't leave, and I can. She didn't want you to ah—to go all by yourself."

Mitchell has always been kind to her. He never compares her to her predecessor. To Janet Frasier, who was compassionate and composed and brilliant. Who adopted alien children, who threatened goa'uld, who could think her way out of parasite-induced psychosis. Who had died doing her job in the middle of a combat zone.

"I can manage," she says. "Thanks."

"I know," Mitchell says. "Come on, Dr. L." He starts forward with her bag, and she falls in with his momentum. "So there's an SG-1 tradition," Mitchell says, when it becomes apparent she's not going to argue with him.

"There seem to be a lot of them," Lam agrees.

"It goes like this," Mitchell says. "Every time one of the docs here pulls one of us back from the brink of death, SG-1 cooks them dinner."

"I've been here a year and a half," Lam says. "And I've never heard of any such tradition." She looks up at him, matching his uncertain smile. "I feel like I'm owed—at least four dinners by now."

"It's a *new* tradition," Mitchell says. "I'm starting it. We take requests. So think on it."

Lam considers the days ahead, considers the possibility that despite her efforts with the healing device, she may not have fully assessed or controlled the damage to her body. Considers that—best case scenario, over the next months she will be spending three hours per day three times per week hooked up to a dialysis machine while waiting for a renal transplant match that may never come.

"I will," she says. "But maybe *I* should be cooking *you* dinner. If it weren't for you—"

She trails off, unable to complete the sentence, unable to complete the thought, haunted by Dale Volker, who wasn't so lucky as she—who wasn't a general's daughter, who had been everyone's priority number two. She knows that the guilt she feels is misplaced, but knowing that doesn't make it any easier to grapple with.

It must be worse for Mitchell—who actually made the choice.

"Yeah," Mitchell says, and the word is rough.

"Thank you," she whispers, "for not letting them take me."

"You're welcome," he says quietly.

They don't speak again until they've emerged into the pale light of early morning. They shield their eyes against the glare that seems excessive as they traverse empty swaths of the parking lot to approach what can only be Mitchell's car—a blue Chevy Camaro.

"If there's anything you need," Mitchell says, "anything you want—just name it."

"Colonel," she begins, absently rubbing at the crook of her left elbow.

"Call me Cam," he says. "Everyone does. I mean, if you want—or."

"Cam then," she says. "If I don't get the chance—tell Colonel Carter—" she breaks off, unsure what to say that won't sound pathetic or pedantic or posturing. "Tell her that presented with the same choice, I'd do it again," she says simply.

"No regrets," he says, and she's not sure if it's a question or a statement.

"Nope," she says. "None."

They stop at his car. Mitchell pulls out his keys. He stands with his hand on the passenger-side door handle, on the verge of opening it for her.

"When you decided to do it," he says, "did you know? Did you know what would happen?"

"Yes," she says, leaning against his car, tipping her face up into the cold, clear light of early morning. "I knew."

Chapter Twenty

For the past week, it had haunted him.

Through their escape from the base, out of the mist and the directed electrical discharges, along the winding wilderness of route twenty-four and back again, during the interminable haze of a poorly organized two-day debriefing that had required nearly all of the mental discipline he could bring to bear to endure, through the sessions with Dr. Perry, developing a method for entangling a laptop with an Ancient control crystal—it had tormented him.

The genetic requirement.

The genetic *requirement*.

The more he considered it, the more it disquieted him.

He could feel, in the concept of it, something profoundly distasteful. Something antithetical to all that he was. Something he'd set himself against. Even now he pushed the idea away, this bounding of intellectual potential by and into a four-letter code, a digital yes or no sealed in an arrangement of nucleotides that ultimately would grant or withhold access in a chemical predestination worthy of John fuckin' Knox.

And this genetic requirement was designed to determine what, then, exactly?

Not whom he was, certainly. It could be no indicator of what he had achieved or accomplished.

It was an unreasoned response to a genetic allotment over which he had no control. A product of nothing but chance and natural selection.

He shut his eyes, and tried not to think of genetics.

If he could re-create himself, he would do it.

"—and really the main thing is to always be aware of your surroundings," Young was saying. "Everything else follows from that. You're clearly a quick thinker, which is helpful in terms of making spur of the moment decisions—like, do I wait or do I run, that kind of thing, though, the answer to that one is almost always run, just so you know."

Young was driving.

Young was driving and monologuing.

Young was driving and monologuing and Rush was doing his best not to have a migraine.

"That being said, there are some things that you're going to want to get in the habit of thinking about. Like the configuration of symbols that you need to dial home, for example. Not literally the address itself, which, obviously, is important *as well*; that goes without saying. I'm talking about the spatial arrangement of panels, in case you have to dial it quickly. If you're under fire, you really should dial the alpha site, especially now. Post-foothold situations they always tighten down the security protocols at homeworld command—"

Over the past few days it seemed that Young had been trying to condense the entire substance of a hypothetical—or maybe it was actual, Rush had no idea—military curriculum and deliver it to him in free-form, poorly organized, stream-of-consciousness lectures disguised as conversations.

"—you're not a soldier, and you also seem to have some kind of baseline mistrust for the chain of command for whatever reason, but you have to understand that in these kinds of situations, civilian or not, you're expected to follow orders. You're going to have to just suck it up and *do it*, Rush, even if you can't—"

He wasn't certain what the impetus was behind these information-poor, imperative-heavy, gesticulation-punctuated diatribes that Young seemed determined to subject him to.

"—necessarily rationalize to yourself why it might be important. You have to accept the fact that you're not trained for this kind of thing and you need to defer to the people who *are*, and trust that by virtue of their experience—"

He wasn't particularly keen on trust.

"—they have the insight necessary to make the right call."

As if there were any such thing as 'the right call.' Even if there were, how would one ever verify it?

"So when you're told to run, you run. You're told to dial the gate? You dial the gate."

Even behind his sunglasses, even behind the closed lids of his eyes, the sun was searing.

"Are you even listening to me?"

"No," Rush replied. "I'm trying to decide whether—in the unlikely event you found yourself in some kind of bizarre mathematics competition where *death* was a potential

outcome—whether or not my advice to you in that scenario would be better organized than yours to me, in this one."

Young was silent.

"The answer I think is yes," Rush replied. "Unsurprisingly."

"I recommended you to go into the field," Young growled. "I can always *unrecommend* you."

"Undermining your own judgment in the eyes of command?"

"Wouldn't be the first time."

Rush cracked his eyes open as he felt the familiar sequence of accelerations and decelerations that accompanied the turns that comprised the final approach to the base. "Meaning?" he asked.

"You don't have the security clearance for that one," Young replied.

"Ah," Rush replied delicately.

"Just—" Young said, "don't do anything stupid."

"A statistical improbability."

"Don't break the DHD."

"No promises."

"And don't get abducted," Young said.

Rush looked out into the merciless blaze of late morning sun. "I'll consider it."

Silence fell between them as Young pulled through the security checkpoint. They flashed their IDs in simultaneous, ipsilateral pressings of plastic to glass.

"This isn't the way things are usually done," Young said, as the guards waved them through.

"Oh no?" Rush asked, pitching his voice somewhere in between a true interrogative and something purely rhetorical. He looked up at the unrelenting blue of the sky as Young pulled into a parking spot.

Did it never rain here?

"No," Young said, killing the engine. He made no move to exit the car.

Rush looked over at him.

"This is *such* bullshit," Young whispered.

Rush raised his eyebrows, but said nothing.

"Sending you offworld with no training to speak of because to train you would be to create a record that could then be leaked? So instead they're letting a guy through the gate without clearance, with nothing on the books—nothing above board? It just doesn't feel right. There's shit you're supposed to do before you get cleared to go through the gate. Physical requirements. Mental requirements."

"I can't say I'm sorry to have missed the mandatory orientation," Rush replied, his hand, on the car door handle.

"Those forms, those checkboxes, that you skipped straight over? They exist for a reason, Rush."

"I'm sure." A quick flex of his wrist swung the car door out into a wall of heat. He turned to watch Young drag himself out, one hand wrapped around the top of the car, where the sun-absorbing black paint must have been uncomfortably hot.

Young stared him down behind sunglasses. "You're a lot of work."

Rush wasn't entirely sure what the other man meant by that. He slammed his car door shut.

They did not speak as they entered the base, nor as they rode the elevator down to level twenty-one, nor as Young led the way to the empty locker rooms. Young opened a locker that was clearly his own and pulled out a set of green fatigues.

"Get changed," Young said. "You can leave your stuff in there," he indicated the locker with a tilt of his head, his expression tight and fixed. "Then report to the gate room."

Rush felt the mental crack of a shattering assumption but did his best to betray nothing. He began unbuttoning his shirt. "You're not coming," he said.

"No," Young said, not looking at him.

"This was—" he paused. The idea of Young accompanying him had been nothing more the implied during the past week.

"I'm on light duty," Young said.

"Right," Rush said. "Of course."

"This mission's been compartmentalized," Young said, still looking away as Rush pulled the standard issue black t-shirt down over his head. "People pulled from different places and told the bare minimum. They're scrambling a special team for this. Finding the people with the least LA contact and the best skills—and putting them together into a group that's hopefully going to stay out of your way and not abduct you."

Rush sighed, sending his shoes into the bottom of Young's locker with a hollow clang.

"So who is nominally in charge of this thing?"

"Nominally?" Young echoed, with a faint note of disbelief in his voice.

Rush shrugged.

Young looked up at the ceiling. "I have no idea. All personnel decisions were General Landry's call, and have been kept classified. I've got a ten minute window to brief whomever it is that starts—" he looked at his watch, "about three minutes from now, so —"

"Right," Rush said, finishing with the pants and starting with the standard issue boots.

"See you later, then."

Young looked over at him. "Keep it together, hotshot."

Rush shot him a dark look. "Don't fucking undermine my credibility to whomever you brief."

The corner of Young's mouth quirked slightly. "Don't do anything stupid."

"Don't break your other leg."

"Shut up, *Rush*."

Rush did not look up from tying his boots, but he did pause to hold up three fingers.

"Remember what I told you about being aware of your surroundings. Whatever happens, make sure you don't lose track of your position relative to the gate. Always know how to dial home. Don't forget to send your GDO code, and for god's sake, don't *lose* your GDO."

Rush wondered if he had done anything specific to indicate profound incompetence to Young. The answer to that was probably yes. He suspected that no matter how many times he pulled Young out of an anoxic gas he was never going to live down the fact that he had developed heat exhaustion in his own apartment. "Yes yes." He finished tying his boots and pulled on the jacket, which seemed to come with pre-equipped pockets. It felt heavy as he settled it across his shoulders.

"Gate room," Young said. "Assembly time is in ten."

Rush nodded.

Young turned and left the locker room.

Rush spent a moment inventorying his pockets, which contained a device he assumed was a GDO, two silver-wrapped power bars, a compass, a set of small field binoculars,

a knife, a pen, three plastic bags labeled with a red and black biohazard symbol, and an extremely slim volume entitled, *Managing the Emerging Crisis: A Linguistic Approach*, edited by Dr. Daniel Jackson.

He opened the book, squinted at the minuscule type, and then pulled out his glasses. At the top of each page was an English phrase and below it were corresponding phrases in different languages with a phonetic guide to pronunciation:

Don't shoot!

Kree tol! (Goa'uld)

Non sagittent! (Ancient)

Ikke skyt! (Asgardian)

Rin nok! (Goa'uld, Tok'ra variant)

Ne pafas! (Noxian)

Ch'kan. [with falling intonation on last syllable] (Later Unas, P3X-888 regional variant)

Saehara avet! (Tollan)

Ahash? [hissed with rising intonation] (Wraith)

Fucking Jackson. The man was inescapable. Rush shut the book, pocketed it, and proceeded to the gate room.

He'd seen the gate only once, after he'd pulled apart its internal schematics on paper, in code, and in his mind.

He'd needed to see it.

He'd needed to know that it truly existed. That it was a material as well as a mental construct. That the lock was real. That it had a physical correlate.

He'd never seen it active.

When he arrived in the embarkation room, the gate dominated the space just as he remembered it—sitting perfectly centered at the base of a long vertical shaft that stretched above it, through the heart of Cheyenne Mountain. There was a robotic probe at the base of the ramp, being fussed over by two technicians. Near a crate of equipment, looking it over with a familiar stillness, was Amanda Perry.

"Please tell me they've concocted some way for you to come along," Rush said, coming up beside her.

The flicker of her eyelids and the fractional tilt of her head suggested he'd surprised her. He moved around to stand directly in her line of sight.

"I wish," she replied, her smile carrying none of the regret he could hear in her voice. "But I'll only be a radio wave away."

He nodded and sat down on a sturdy-looking plastic bin that was positioned next to Perry's delicate equipment. From between the padded slats of the crate, he could see the styrofoam kit containing custom designed, classical-to-quantum, USB-to-crystal interface.

"Nervous?" Perry asked.

"No," Rush said, looking over at the gate.

"Liar," Perry shot back, the amused quirk of her mouth robbing the word of any kind of bite.

Rush gave her a one-shouldered shrug.

"Well, we're as prepped as it's possible to be. You realize that if this works, you're advancing the field of quantum hacking well beyond the current field of quantum computing, which is not how these things are *supposed* to go."

"I do not 'hack'," Rush replied archly.

"Let's call it 'Q-hack'," Perry replied. "We could start a weekly interest group."

Rush raised his eyebrows at her.

"What?" Perry said. "The Historical Unit has a book club."

"I am not starting an—interest group."

"I think you might want to reconsider," Perry said. "Because word on the science grapevine is that in order for funding to the Icarus Project to continue, we're going to need to comply with a special request."

Rush narrowed his eyes. "We?"

"Well, if you're looking for accuracy, it's really only you."

"Meaning—"

"Meaning that there's been a suggestion slash order that you render the computational cyphers within the gate in such a way that they could be placed into a highly anticipated MMORPG."

"A what?" Rush asked her, trying to place the acronym.

"A computer game," Perry supplied. "For the masses."

He stared at her, not so much at a loss for words as at a loss for thoughts. Incontrovertible stupidity occasionally had that effect on him, especially when it came as a surprise.

"Could you—repeat that, possibly? I don't think I can have understood you correctly."

She gave him a sympathetic lift of the eyebrows. "A game," she repeated. "A massively multiplayer online role-playing game. This comes straight from Felger," she said, "and he's usually not wrong. At least, not about departmental gossip."

He stared at her.

"Like—that teenagers play?" She continued, when it became apparent that he wasn't going to say anything. She watched him uncertainly, as if she was trying to work out whether he was professionally traumatized or being purposefully obtuse.

Rush braced his hands against the crate that he was sitting on.

"When they're supposed to be doing other things? Say, math homework, as a hypothetical example?" she clarified.

"What could the *purpose* of such a request possibly be?"

"Harnessing the untapped genius of the proletariat? Crowd-sourcing the gamers? Obviating the entire field of academic cryptography? Irritating you to the point of psychological insolvency?" Perry listed.

Rush stared up into the black shaft above them.

"I had a feeling that this might be your reaction," Perry continued, her tone amused. "So I figured I'd give you a heads up before the powers that be corner you and—well. Proposition you."

"No," he said.

"I know," Perry replied.

"I can't—" he said, still staring at the ceiling but freeing up a hand to gesture vaguely at the walls.

"I know," Perry said.

"How could *anyone* possibly—"

"I know," Perry said.

"Why."

"You have my pity."

"I'd prefer your empathy, frankly."

"You might be in luck there," Perry said, a quick smile escaping her, "especially if you ask me nicely. But we could use more help if they succeed in pushing this on us. Hence, the interest group—it would be only an internal memo away from becoming a computational task force, if it comes to that."

"It's not going to come to that, because it's fucking ludicrous." He half turned away from her. He could feel a small muscle in his jaw beginning to twitch.

"Hey," Perry said. "Nick."

"It would require a computational model of the *entire cypher system*," he said. "It would require an interactive theorem prover that was integrated with graphical rendering of—whatever it is that they render in computer games. It would require automated proof checking. Do I *look* like a specialist in automated theorem proving?"

"I could see it," Perry said, with a dry smile.

"Do we even know whether the logical underpinnings should be monotonic?"

Perry shook her head marginally. "This is *not* the way to go," she said.

Rush tipped his head to look at her over the tops of his glasses? "Oh really? Because I'm fairly fucking certain that consequence relation is fairly fucking salient. But please. Enlighten me. How would *you* proceed?"

Perry smirked at him. "What I *mean*," she clarified, pausing to swallow, "is that this is not the way to go if you want to convince them that their request is ridiculous. Because it seems like you're already—"

"I'm not," Rush snapped. "I'm *not*. It's out of the question. Absolutely out. I'm not coding this into some—"

"Bleeding edge, top of the line, MMORPG?" Perry supplied.

"Into some *game*, so that some senator can find me a misunderstood underachiever as a personal assistant that I. Do. Not. Need."

"I get it," Perry said, the corner of her mouth quirked again, "but I'm not the one you're going to have to convince."

Rush nodded.

"I didn't mean to bring this up now," Perry said, her eyes flicking toward the dark arch of the gate. "I know you've got a lot going on, but I didn't want them to blindsides you and

have you get stuck with this because you were too surprised to—you know—calibrate your disdain up to levels that are lethal to this kind of bureaucratic crap."

"Yes well—" he shifted, tugging absently at his unfamiliar green jacket. "It really doesn't matter, because it's not even remotely feasible."

Perry looked at him with a skeptical sort of sympathy that he felt did not bode well for his ability to avoid capitulating to pointless assignments from senators.

"So—" she paused to clear her throat. "Are you ready for this?"

He shook his hair back, shoved his hands into his pockets. "Meaningless question," he replied.

"I suppose it is," she replied, dropping her eyes, "especially when you have a particular task you're required to accomplish. A specific problem to solve. But when considered in isolation, there's something about leaving the planet that seems—liberating. No matter the circumstances."

"Not if one is required to come back," Rush said, giving her a twisted smile.

She returned his smile uncertainly for a few seconds before speaking again. "I'll be here," she said, "if you have trouble with the entanglement and you need to play the phone-a-friend card."

"Thank you," he said.

They both turned their heads as a collection of gun-bedecked people walked into the room. Colonel Young was amongst them, conversing quietly with another man with dark, spiked hair wearing a black uniform of a subtly different cut than those Rush had seen around the base. There was another man dressed in black who scanned the room and zeroed in on Rush and Perry straight away with an intent, interested look. Three other people in green, all of whom were equally rifle-laden, brought up the rear.

"Oh my *god*," Perry whispered.

Rush looked at her, eyebrows raised.

"They are pulling out all the stops for you, my friend," she murmured. "That's *Rodney McKay*."

"Who's Rodney McKay?" Rush whispered back.

"Only the guy who built an intergalactic gate bridge between two galaxies, traversing the greatest intrastellar distance on record. Only the guy who is considered the preeminent expert on Ancient technology—including stellar drives, geodesic shielding principles, and zero-point energy. Only the guy who walked through an energy-based

life-form to manually throw an active naquadah generator through an open gate. Only the guy who managed to think his way out of a lethal genetic modification. That's all."

"Quite the resume," Rush replied.

"They must have come through Midway for you," Perry said absently.

He debated asking her what 'Midway' was, but instead he just said, "Ah."

Rush stood as they approached, and Perry directed her wheelchair back slightly.

"All right," Young said as they fanned out around him. "Guys, this is Dr. Nicholas Rush. Rush, this is Colonel John Sheppard," Young indicated the man to his right with a tip of his forehead.

"Hey," Sheppard said, giving him a vague and distinctly unmilitary wave of the hand.

"Sergeant Greer," Young continued, going around the circle, "Major Reaves, Airman Atienza, and," he paused, glancing over at the last remaining man, who could only be McKay, "your tech help."

"Oh very funny," McKay snapped, and stepped forward, his hand extended. "Dr. Rodney McKay," he said.

Rush shook his hand.

"I pictured you taller," McKay said, stepping back.

"I didn't picture you at all," Rush replied, raising his eyebrows.

"I envy you," Young's said to Sheppard. "I really do."

"Thanks," Sheppard said, the word a dry pull. "And now that we all know each other," he turned to look up at the control window overlooking the room, "you guys want to fire this thing up?" he shouted at the window above their heads, pointing at the stargate with his thumb.

"Why Atlantis personnel?" Rush asked Young, eyeing McKay with narrowed eyes as the scientist began chatting with Perry.

"Apparently this was Landry's plan all along. The LA doesn't have a foothold in the Pegasus Galaxy. Greer and Atienza just came up for team assignment through the internal military track, and Reaves is coming back from six months of extended maternity leave. All of them have had no demonstrable involvement with the LA."

"I see," Rush said.

"McKay's an ass, but he knows his stuff," Young said. "And Sheppard—well, Sheppard was a genius call on Landry's part." He glanced at Rush and then away again. "For a lot

of reasons. Just stick with him, do what he says, and you'll be fine. You'll like him. He's your kind of guy."

Rush looked over at Sheppard, who was speaking intently to the three other military personnel, directing his comments mainly toward Greer and Atienza with an occasional glance in Reaves' direction. He tried to discern anything in the man's demeanor that seemed particularly noteworthy, but came up with nothing.

"You look so skeptical," Young said.

"This is not an unusual state for me."

"I get that. Stay out of trouble, will you?" Young asked.

"I'll do my best," Rush replied coolly.

"All nonessential personnel, please clear the gateroom." The words frayed with a hint of static as they echoed faintly off the cement around them.

"That's me," Young said, a rueful edge to his tone. "Nonessential."

There wasn't anything Rush could say to that, but he watched Young walk away, following Amanda Perry out of the room.

He flinched slightly as chevrons lit up with clang of metal-on-metal and the gate began its nearly silent spin, angular speed coming up and rapidly stabilizing before halting again as the first chevron engaged. It spun back the other way before the second chevron locked. Its motion resembled nothing so much as a permutation-based lock—even the spin and stop of the ring suggested it. He found it nearly impossible to believe that so many people had seen this exact motion, so many people had used the gate as a door, and yet—and yet, no one had thought to look for the lock that *must* be there.

Another chevron slid into place.

'Must be there?'

He'd been reasoning inductively.

Another chevron locked.

Inductive or not, he'd been right.

Another chevron locked.

"Have you seen it in action before?" Sheppard asked, stepping into place next to him.

Another chevron locked.

"No," Rush replied.

"It's pretty dramatic," Sheppard said.

The seventh chevron locked and the nascent event horizon exploded outward in an unstable vortex tearing apart the air; chaotic, stochastic, irregular, and with a non-zero vorticity that made it look like nothing so much as a literal fluid as space warped to the point of tearing and then stabilized across an event horizon with a diameter that should have been a physical impossibility.

Rush studied it for a moment.

"It's blue," he said.

"Yeah," Sheppard replied. "Why wouldn't it be blue?"

"Because it's a one way tear in space time from which nothing should emerge, including light."

"McKay," Sheppard called over to the scientist, who was fiddling with something on the MALP. "Why is the event horizon blue?"

"Because that's the color of the cosmic ocean," McKay called back over his shoulder.

"Thanks, Carl," Sheppard replied dryly. "Seriously McKay, why blue?"

McKay looked up briefly. "Wait, like, *seriously* seriously? Are you actually asking me this?"

"Yeah," Sheppard said.

"You've been going through the gate for four and a half years, and it just *now* occurred to you to wonder why *it's blue*?" McKay stepped back from the MALP as it ascended the ramp and turned to look at them. "Oh," he said looking at Rush. "Right. New guy. The blue light is emitted from a unique force field that demolecularizes matter and queues it up for transmission. The fluctuations you see are a product of the 'real' event horizon influencing the field. You really should know this—aren't you the guy who looked at the internal schematics and managed to turn them into the mother of all MENSA challenges?"

"At no point was 'blue' specified," Rush replied.

"Well, here's a tip. Active force fields tend to emit, and this one is always active when the gate is on."

"Yes," Rush said. "I can see that."

"You've got to integrate this stuff on the fly," McKay said, snapping his fingers in Rush's general direction. "That's another tip. Theoretical to practical. Like that." He snapped his fingers a final time, looking not at Rush, but tracking the MALP as it vanished through the gate, then peering over a sergeant's shoulder at hand-held video interface.

Rush could feel a muscle in his jaw begin to subtly twitch.

"He's kind of—" Sheppard began, shifting his weight slightly. "An acquired taste."

"Surely you jest," Rush replied.

"He and this other guy, Zelenka—they run a journal club on Atlantis, devoted to computational complexity theory," Sheppard said, keeping his voice low.

Rush turned to look at him.

"Once a month," Sheppard said. "For about a year now. Nice paper, by the way."

"Read it, have you?"

"Yeah," Sheppard said, drumming the flingers of his left hand over the strap of his rifle in a slow pattern. "But don't out me."

"Are you talking about me?" McKay asked, shouldering one of the packs on the gateroom floor and coming toward them. "You have that look like you're—"

"Nope," Sheppard said lazily. "I was just telling Dr. Rush about his fan club on Atlantis."

"It's not a fan club," McKay said indignantly, his eyes flashing toward Rush and then away. "It's a *journal* club."

"Potato, potahto," Sheppard said.

"And it's not devoted to Rush. It's devoted to computational complexity theory."

"And in the fourteen meetings you guys have had, how many—"

"Look, he's very influential within the *field*," McKay snapped, interrupting Sheppard before the man managed to get his question out.

Rush stepped away from the pair of them, leaving them to the friendly flow of their cut and riposte. He moved laterally, away from the crated crystals and electronics, to stand at the base of the ramp directly opposite the open gate. He hadn't wasted much time picturing either the immensities of the distances that the gate network warped to nothing or the physical sensations of being warped himself. Such things had been and remained immaterial to his purposes. But because he had not spent any time anticipating this moment, he found himself taken aback at the physical appearance of the active gate, and the feeling that it elicited.

As if, already, simply by looking at it, a pressure valve had snapped open in his mind and the closed system in which he found himself had given way to an option that had always existed, even though he hadn't known it.

"It's not as bad as all that."

Rush glanced to his left to see one of the sergeants standing next to him, eyes fixed on the gate.

"I beg your pardon?" Rush asked him, letting his gaze flick to the man's jacket, where his surname was emblazoned.

"You're eyeing that thing up pretty good," Greer said. "I'm just letting you know that it's not that bad."

"I don't waste my time anticipating the inconsequential."

"For a science guy?" Greer asked, with a rhetorical acidity to his tone that Rush found more reassuring than vague platitudes, "that would be a first."

"Such a pronouncement would carry a bit more weight if you seemed at all experienced," Rush replied dryly. "How old are you?"

"Old enough," Greer said.

Overhead, the sound of General Landry's voice echoed through the speakers in the wall. "MALP telemetry is clear. You have a go."

"Reaves and Atienza, you're on point," Sheppard said, walking forward in step with McKay. "Greer, you're with McKay."

Sheppard moved to stand next to Rush as the other four positioned themselves in an economical sorting and started up the ramp. Ahead of them, the rest of the team cast dark outlines against the bright blue of the gate until one by one they vanished into emitted light.

Sheppard, who had been a half-step ahead of Rush as they ascended the ramp, stopped right on the threshold of the open gate. "It's only your first time your first time," he said.

Rush supposed that was true.

He extended a hand, his fingertips grazing the rippling barrier, disappearing from sight where they entered the blue of the event horizon. His nerves transmitted nothing but the sense of air that was still and isothermic relative to his skin. There was no point in either further ceremony or empirical testing.

With his eyes open, he stepped through the gate.

Chapter Twenty One

Young was looking for Jackson.

Ten minutes or so after Sheppard's team had departed, he was limping through the busy corridors of level twenty-one, trying not to think too much about Rush—*Rush* for god's sake—on a world halfway across the Milky Way, dismantling a DHD.

He felt—not exactly responsible for the man, but maybe—maybe concerned.

Maybe slightly responsible.

Maybe slightly responsible and slightly concerned.

After all, the guy hadn't even been able to turn on his own air conditioner.

Okay, so that assessment was a little bit unfair.

Also, McKay was probably the one actually taking apart the DHD.

Young hoped.

It would be fine. The planet was in friendly territory, the *Odyssey* was standing by for a remote beam-out if Rush broke the DHD, and Dr. Perry was on deck for science backup, not that the team would likely need it, since McKay would be onsite. Worst-case scenario, Carter had recovered to the point that Brightman had okayed her to leave the infirmary for half an hour if it came to that. Most reassuring of all, *Sheppard* was leading the mission. Young couldn't think of a better man for the job, with the possible exception of himself, which, apparently, hadn't been an option that Landry was going to entertain.

Young supposed he couldn't blame the man for that.

Sheppard though—Sheppard was *perfect*. He was enough of a closet intellectual that he could go toe to toe with any of the science staff if it suited him, which it usually didn't. The man had *the* most laid-back command style to ever survive an ascent up the SGC chain of command. But behind Sheppard's MENSA membership, his laissez-faire leadership style, and his SoCal veneer, was something hard-edged. Young had never seen him in action, *in real* action, but he'd heard enough water cooler talk to get a feel for the guy's rep. Telford had been the one who'd put it best: "*Brain of a nerd, heart of a surfer, enthusiasm of a kid, nerves of a test pilot, and soul of a stone cold badass.*" Yup. Sheppard was perfect.

Young turned off the hallway into the main floor space of the infirmary. The room was mostly empty, aside from the medic sitting at the intake desk. He angled left, avoiding the gatekeeper with a noncommittal wave before heading toward Teal'c and Jackson, who were standing on either side of Carter's gurney, watching her and Mitchell go at it over a chessboard.

Carter looked pretty good for a soldier who'd taken a round to the chest. She was sitting up, the fluorescent lights glinting off her hair. Mitchell was perched on the edge of her bed, hunched over the board.

"Oh, okay, so that?" Jackson said, grimacing, his arms crossed over his chest. "That—that was *not* a good move."

"God, Jackson," Mitchell snapped, not looking up from the board. "Stop backseat chess-driving."

"I don't think that's a thing," Jackson said. "Is that a thing?" He asked the room at large, his eyes scanning over Carter, Teal'c, and then settling on Young. He held Young's gaze for an interval that felt just slightly too long.

"Of course it's 'a thing'," Mitchell replied, "because you're doing it. Right now. Teal'c, help a brother out here?"

"I concur with Daniel Jackson. This is not your game."

"You guys are the *worst*."

Carter gave Young a wave and a wan smile while Mitchell considered the board with more intensity than really seemed necessary.

Young nodded at Teal'c and then leaned over Mitchell's shoulder to eye the board. It was mostly covered with black pieces. The majority of the white ones seemed to be in a neat row on Carter's side of the table.

"This is not looking good for you," Young observed.

Mitchell jumped and half-turned in his seat. "Oh sure," he said, when he had recovered his equilibrium, "kick a guy while he's down. I'm not hearing constructive criticism from any of you."

"Endeavor not to lose so many pieces," Teal'c said.

"Indeed," Jackson added, raising one eyebrow in an understated imitation of Teal'c.

"Come on guys," Carter said, her voice quiet and rasping slightly. "This isn't helping." She turned to Mitchell, raising both eyebrows. "It was your opener that sank you. You didn't set up a good pawn skeleton right at the outset."

"I *know*," Mitchell said, "but it's hard to set it up if you insist on taking it down all the dang day."

Carter's laugh turned almost instantly into a wince, her hand coming up to her chest.

"Sorry," Mitchell said, reaching forward, his hands hovering in the air in front of her. "Sorry."

"You guys are like—way too intense about everything," Young pointed out, while Carter recovered. "You realize this, right?"

They all stared at him.

"This is not 'intense'," Mitchell said, with the air of a man who had been deeply offended. "This is appropriate. You just don't have all the facts. Dr. Coombs challenged us to a chess tournament. SG-1 vs. the Infrared Spectroscopy Unit."

"And you *accepted*?" Young asked.

"Colonel Mitchell accepted," Teal'c clarified.

"You guys are toast," Young said, raising his eyebrows.

"I believe that is likely," Teal'c said.

"It's not 'likely'," Mitchell replied. "We're gonna win, thereby maintaining our street cred."

"I think a chess tournament with the ISU, which we will inevitably *lose*, will do nothing to maintain our 'street cred'," Jackson said. "In fact, I think even *accepting* the challenge is likely to have the opposite effect from the one you're envisioning. The ISU dresses up like Vulcans every Halloween. They have no 'street cred' to speak of."

"There is nothing wrong with Vulcans," Carter said primly, "but I, for one, refuse to submit to a team captained by Jay Felger."

"See?" Mitchell said, moving one of his only remaining pawns in a way that Young could see was not going to work out well for him. "That's what I'm talking about. Positive attitude."

"Checkmate," Carter said apologetically.

"Damn it," Mitchell snapped.

"We are so screwed," Jackson said.

"Indeed," Teal'c added.

"Any word on Dr. Lam?" Young asked into the ensuing silence.

The expression froze on Carter's face, and Mitchell flinched. Predictably, it was Jackson who answered, his tone light, his delivery casual. "She's doing okay. No problems with dialysis, no post-op complications so far following—ah, the bilateral kidney removal. She put herself back in the duty roster for the week after next."

"Landry took her back *out* of the duty roster," Mitchell added, "but she says she's doing fine."

Carter nodded, her eyes fixed on the end of the bed. "Any—" her voice broke and she took a sip of water. "Did she come up with any requests yet?"

"Requests?" Young asked.

"We're cooking her dinner," Jackson said.

Young flicked his gaze over to Mitchell, who was blushing so subtly that he doubted the rest of the man's team had noticed. "Oh *really*," Young asked. "And whose idea was that?"

Mitchell directed a glare at him that would have ignited the uniform of a lesser man. "It's a *tradition*," he clarified carefully.

"That you made up," Jackson said. "One week ago."

"I approve," Teal'c said.

"Me too," Carter added.

"I'm not saying that I don't approve," Jackson said, "but I *am* questioning the use of the word 'tradition.' I am also questioning the culinary abilities of this team."

"You guys should get Rush in on this," Young said.

"Good call," Mitchell replied.

Carter and Jackson leveled simultaneous stares first at Young, then at Mitchell. "Or not?" Young said.

"*Nicholas* Rush," Jackson said. "Your neighbor? *That* Rush?"

"That's the one," Young said. "He's damn handy in the kitchen."

"No," Jackson said. "*No*."

"Yes," Young said.

"I don't believe it. I don't think he eats anything except—well, I have no idea, actually. I just—I just don't think he eats," Jackson said.

"Oh come on," Carter replied. "Even for you that makes no sense."

"Nope," Jackson continued. "I've never seen it happen. And I'm *very* rational, thank you, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Um," Carter said, looking back at the chessboard. "Yeah. Sure."

Young shrugged. "He makes a really great fougasse and soupe au pistou. He's been into Provence for, like, five days now."

"No," Jackson said, his voice dropping.

"I don't get how you manage to convince this guy to make you dinner on a regular basis," Mitchell said.

"It's a constant struggle," Young said, "requiring a balance of insults, reverse psychology, appeals to pity, intermittent offers to order takeout Chinese for him, and then sometimes actually ordering it and trying to make him eat it."

"Proof," Jackson said. "I'm going to need proof."

"Take a picture next time," Mitchell said, stealing a chocolate covered espresso bean from the small pile that Jackson had left on Carter's bedside table. "You could start a blog."

"I feel like that would backfire," Young said, "if my goal is to *continue* getting dinner."

"I need this," Jackson said. "I need a picture."

"I'll do what I can," Young said, "but I am not jeopardizing my dinner for you. Ask Vala. She might be able to get one. He's cooking dinner for her sometime next week."

"For—*Vala*?" Jackson said. "But—why?"

"I think she might like him a little bit," Young said, shrugging.

"What?"

"We're watching *Kill Bill*. Not sure how that's going to go, but—"

"What do you mean she *likes* him?"

"Vala likes most people," Carter said, looking up at Jackson with eyes that were just a bit too wide to be entirely innocent.

"*Kill Bill*?" Mitchell said. "Man, but she has a thing for Quentin Tarantino. I don't get it. I really don't."

"But—" Jackson said, looking entirely out of his depth.

Mitchell began setting up the chessboard again. "Do you think if we invited him to this thing for Dr. Lam—"

"I think there's no way he'd show," Young said.

"What if *Vala* invited him?" Mitchell asked hopefully.

"Only if she managed to catch him when he wasn't paying attention."

"Dang," Mitchell said, stealing another one of Carter's espresso beans. "Ow," he added, as she smacked his hand.

"I believe that commissioning an outsider to cook dinner for Dr. Lam defeats the purpose of the tradition," Teal'c said.

"Outsider?" Young echoed, raising his eyebrows at Teal'c.

"True," Mitchell said, plowing over Young. "Come on guys, we'll be fine. Teal'c makes an awesome Jaffa dip. Chel'mek or something, right?"

"Hate to break it to you, but 'Chel'mek' consists of pulverized Doritos mixed with hot sauce, sour cream, and cilantro," Jackson said, with a bit more snark than was typical for him.

"*Teal'c*," Mitchell said, turning the man's name into a half-shout as he twisted in place to fix the Jaffa with a pointed stare. "Seriously. What. The hell."

"It is delicious, is it not?" Teal'c replied, unperturbed.

"Yes, but—*chel'mek*? I thought the stuff was Goa'uld."

"Following the founding of the IOA, United States Customs inserted a classified clause regarding the importation of offworld food products. I have been unable to bring food back through the gate for some time," Teal'c said.

"Well then—" Mitchell began.

"Chel'mek translates into something like 'the fire of awesomeness'," Jackson said, clearly amused. "Most correctly: 'a burning thing, in which the thing that is on fire is the thing that is awesome'."

"You guys are punking me," Mitchell said. "*Again*."

"Nope," Jackson said.

"Not this time," Teal'c confirmed.

Young did his best to keep a straight face as Mitchell leaned forward, bracing his elbows against the table in front of him and burying his head in his hands. "*Doritos*? But how is it so *delicious*?"

"You guys, stop," Carter said breathlessly. "*I can't laugh*."

"So, just to summarize," Jackson said, "we've got chel'mek, which we can pass off as a regional variant of a traditional Jaffa dish, the ability to burn cookies, and some kind of grilled meat as options, presuming that Mitchell can operate a grill. You can, can't you?"

"Yes," Mitchell said. "I can operate one and I have one."

"Don't forget the cocktails," Carter said, clearly making a concerted effort not to laugh. "We're *definitely* going to be having Mal Dorans."

"They should pair with the rest of the meal really nicely," Jackson said, "as all cocktails involving *salt* tend to do. They're like wine in that way."

"One day she's going to figure out that we don't like them," Carter whispered, her expression caught between amused and guilty.

"Nooooo," Jackson said, drawing out the word. "That day is never going to come. Not for *me*, not for *you*, not for any *of us*." He turned to glare at Young.

Young held his hands out in front of him, palms out.

"You are a tyrant," Mitchell said to Jackson. "A weird, autocratic, Prince of Geeks."

"I concur," Teal'c said.

"Ow," Sam said, one hand pressed over her sternum. "You guys."

"I'm not an autocrat," Jackson said, sounding scandalized.

"Where is Vala anyway?" Young asked.

"Probably improving her cultural lexicon," Jackson replied.

"So, watching *The X-files* then?" Mitchell asked.

"I'm not so sure," Carter said. "I think she has a new project. She was awfully secretive in the bookstore about two weeks back. I'm not sure what she was buying, but she clearly didn't want me to see it."

"Well, let's just hope it's not illegal," Mitchell said cheerfully, reassembling the pieces on the chessboard.

"Oh *god*," Jackson moaned.

"She has had only one illegal hobby," Teal'c said, "despite your many fears to the contrary."

"I don't think you can buy many illegal things in a *bookstore*, if it's any consolation," Young said.

"But *knowledge* of illegal things," Mitchell said, rotating the chessboard carefully and positioning it in Carter's easy reach, "that you *can* buy."

"Not helpful," Jackson snapped. "*Not helpful*, you guys."

"You need to chill out, Jackson," Mitchell said.

"Indeed," Teal'c agreed.

"Been telling him that for years," Carter said, crunching an espresso bean delicately between her teeth. "Vala's fine. Vala's great."

"Oh no," Jackson said. "No you don't. I'm not the only one who needs to 'chill out.' Who stayed on base without going home for two-weeks solid while trying to *phase-shift* her *lab bench*, hmm?"

"It wouldn't have been two weeks if someone hadn't spilled coffee in that array," Carter replied, frowning.

"Right," Jackson said. "And what happened with that? Did you ever figure out who it was?" he shot Mitchell a pointed look.

"Yeah, so maybe we *all* need to chill out," Mitchell said, glaring back at Jackson while Carter considered the board. "Not just *you*. Apparently."

"I am adequately chill," Teal'c said.

"Okay. Fair point. Everyone except for Teal'c just needs to chill."

Young had not made a trip to the infirmary with the express purpose of participating in the SG-1 Banter Hour, however easy they decided to make it. He managed to catch Jackson's eye in the momentary lull. It wasn't hard to do. Young suspected the other man had been waiting for it.

"Jackson," Young said. "I think I owe you a coffee."

"I think you do," Jackson agreed, his delivery light, but the acuity of his gaze tough to take.

"Let's take a walk," Young said.

"Sure," Jackson replied. "Sam, you want some more of that blue jello?"

"That would be great," she said. "Thanks."

"I would also like some jello," Teal'c added.

"Okay," Jackson said.

"Daaaniel," Mitchell said, as Jackson rounded the bed.

"I only have two hands," the archeologist replied.

"You *know* you're gonna do it, if you don't get sidetracked by a library book that lost its mom, that is," Mitchell said.

"No jello for you," Jackson pronounced.

"I got your back," Young said, slapping Mitchell on the shoulder as he turned toward the doorway.

"That's my man," Mitchell said, pointing after him, his eyes never leaving the chessboard.

Jackson and Young left the infirmary, the archaeologist naturally slowing his stride to match Young's pace as they proceeded toward the elevators. They didn't speak until they had reached the metal doors.

"How's the leg?" Jackson asked, as they stepped inside. "And the back?"

Young shrugged. "About as good as can be, I suppose," he said. "How's your stuff going?"

"It's been a bit lighter lately, other than, you know, the horrific foothold situation here and there. We scrapped a mission requiring Sam that was supposed to embark only a few hours after the LA showed up, so that's made things less busy. We've also been—" Jackson sighed. "Bogged down in some red tape."

"I heard about that," Young said, "if by 'red tape', you mean the planning stages of a certain feature film."

"Ugh," Jackson said, hitting the button for level twenty-two. "We do not speak its name."

"So I heard. I also heard, from multiple sources, that they're resurrecting Dr. Levant."

Jackson rolled his eyes. "They *promised me* that they'd killed him off once and for all. But noooo." He drew out the word with a sweeping hand gesture. "Mitchell is going to be insufferable when that thing comes out."

"Mitchell and half the base," Young said. "Vala's pretty psyched about it though."

"I know," Jackson said. "And I *know*."

The elevator doors swished open, and the archeologist pressed his hand against the metal to hold them in place, waving for Young to precede him.

"Thanks for—" Jackson began, as they started toward the mess. "Your report was—well. I read your report. You said some nice things about her."

Young raised his eyebrows.

"It's going to help out quite a bit. It already has. She doesn't know it yet, but—as of this morning, the paperwork's in motion to make her a full-on member of SG-1."

Young nodded, smiling faintly. "Good on her."

"Don't tell her though," Jackson continued. "We want to find the right moment to spring it, and we're going to wait until it's really official. She'll just talk my ear off about it if it's not set in stone when we give her the patch."

"My lips are sealed," Young replied.

For a moment they were silent as they navigated the busier corridor near the mess hall.

"Seriously, Jackson," Young began.

"Daniel," Jackson corrected him.

"Daniel," Young continued. "A Dodge *Dart*? From the seventies?"

"Late seventies," Jackson said, smiling faintly. "It runs fine."

"Except for the air conditioner."

"It builds character," Jackson said, cocking his head and fixing his gaze on the floor with a disarming half-smile.

"Right," Young said. "Sure."

They didn't speak again until they were seated, coffee in hand and an array of blue jello lined up at the end of the table, waiting to be delivered to the rest of SG-1, presuming they were able to defend it from passersby. The main lunch crowd was on its way out, and they managed to find a table near the back of the room, relatively distant from any occupied tables.

The mood between them changed subtly as Jackson traced the rim of his coffee cup with a fingernail, watching Young with an expression that was intelligent, guarded, and contained only a trace of his characteristic friendliness.

Young cleared his throat and did his best not to let the other man unnerve him.

"You wanted to talk," Jackson said evenly.

"I did," Young replied, but said nothing further.

"The fact that you're not actually *doing* any talking makes me think that you realize some of the delicacies of our current situation," Jackson said, wry and dry, examining the rim of his coffee cup.

Young hated this coy bullshit—talking about a thing without talking about it at all.

"Some of them," he replied cautiously. "Yes."

"Jack told me that he offered you Icarus," Jackson said.

"He did," Young replied. "And he gave me some extra time to think on it. A bit more time than was originally on the table, in light of—last week's developments. Telford back, but in no way cleared. The offer's still on the table—with a whole lot more caveats attached. I wanted to talk to you before I decided either way."

"How impolitic," Jackson said, giving him a small smile that didn't reach his eyes. "I'm sure they *loved* that."

"Landry wasn't crazy about it, no."

"Why talk to me?" Jackson asked cautiously.

"No particular reason," Young said. "You seem like a thoughtful guy. I hear you give good advice."

"It's been known to happen," Jackson said, his eyes scanning the room, lingering on the personnel who'd lasted this late into the lunch hour.

"You gave my neighbor a pretty good tip last week," Young said mildly.

Jackson's eyes snapped to Young's. "Yes," he admitted. "Yes I did. And what was your opinion of my advice?"

Young suppressed the urge to shift in his chair. He'd thought it was hard to stare down *Mitchell*. The man *had nothing* on Jackson. He took a sip of his coffee. "I'm not sure I know enough to have an informed opinion about whether it was a good idea or not," he said finally.

Jackson dropped his eyes back to his coffee cup, and Young had the feeling that—to the extent it was possible—he'd answered correctly.

"What's your role in all of this?" Young asked. "What's your angle?"

"My angle?" Jackson echoed with such perfect control of face and voice that it made Young's teeth ache in irritated sympathy.

They sat silently for a moment, poised on some kind of fulcrum, while Jackson decided whether to tip the conversation into informative territory.

Dangerous territory.

"Do you know," Jackson said quietly, "what you're asking?"

"No," Young replied. "Otherwise, I wouldn't *be* asking. But in this environment—" Young broke off. "I can understand why you might not want to answer."

Jackson continued to watch him, undecided. "Tell me why you're considering Jack's offer."

"For the same reason I've done *everything* I've done," Young said, rubbing his jaw. "I have no great aspiration to find out where this nine-chevron address goes, but I could get behind it the Icarus Project, especially if it made some kind of difference in the shit that's going on here. The LA. The Ori. Whether I do *this*, or something *else*, I'm not benching myself just because I broke my damn back."

"That's the vibe I get," Jackson said with a half-smile. He didn't continue.

"So there's all that," Young said, "and then, there's also the fact that I find my neighbor to be something of an interesting guy."

"He is," Jackson said. "Isn't he." It wasn't a question, and Young didn't answer it. Instead he watched Jackson, beginning to get a feel for what it was, exactly, that made the man one of the most sought-after diplomats in the galaxy.

"So, are we done with the job-interview part of this?" Young asked.

Jackson took another sip of coffee and did not answer.

"I'm not gonna throw you under a bus here, if that's what you're worried about."

"No," Jackson said finally, "I don't think you will."

"So," Young said. "What's your angle, Jackson? Because I'm sure you have one."

"My angle is that I've *been there*," Jackson said, low and intent, his control cutting out like he'd flipped a switch on it. He sat forward, eyes blazing, fingers pressing against the table. "I've been there."

"Where?" Young replied, leaning forward, mirroring the other man's posture.

"*Where*?" Jackson echoed. "What does that even *mean*. 'Where.' As if we're even speaking of locations that can be grounded in a limited, non-specialist conceptualization of spacetime. The act of leaving changes you. Even if you don't remember the nature of the change. Even if those memories are stripped from your mind."

"Jackson," Young ground out, gripping his coffee, leaning forward despite the pull in his back. "I'm terrible at this metaphorical bullshit. You have to nail down what you're talking about."

"*Ascension*," Jackson whispered, his expression twisting into something pained, his nails digging into the styrofoam of his now empty cup. "Ascension."

"What does Ascension have to do with Icarus?"

"It has everything, *everything* to do with Icarus," Jackson hissed, hands braced against the table, looking like he might be sick.

"Jackson," Young said, staring at him, feeling his heart rate increase for no other reason than the sense of strain he was picking up in the lines of the man's shoulders, in the shredding of a styrofoam cup beneath his hands. "Daniel."

"I can't," Jackson whispered. "I can't talk about—about what it is, exactly, that I think. Already, they're watching me. Both sides. All the time. Do you know what that's like?"

"What do you mean 'both sides'?" Young demanded. "What do you mean 'all the time'?"

"You think I'm worried about the SGC?" Jackson asked, a smile twisting its way out of his face. "You think I'm worried about pissing *Landry* off? God, I wish I were. I wish that was my life."

"So by both sides—" Young said, already feeling the weight of implied horror.

"The Ori," Jackson said, "and the Ancients."

Holy shit. Young took a deep breath, feeling the skin between his shoulder blades prickle with nerves. "Okay," he said, unwrapping one hand from around his coffee and opening it in Jackson's direction. "Okay. I get it. You're in a tight spot."

For a moment, they said nothing, Jackson pulling in ragged breaths while Young tried to relax the muscles in his back and leg. "What *can* you tell me?" Young asked.

"Practically?" Jackson asked, most of his composure back in place. "Less than I'd like. I prefer not to speculate too widely so as not to lay down too many cards in front of ostensibly omniscient parties. As far as the SGC is concerned? Officially? I'm cleared to tell you nothing. *Unofficially*—well. I can point out a few things. All classified, in isolation unimportant, but—considered together, maybe suggestive."

"Shoot," Young said.

"The Ancients," Jackson said, "are unwilling to help us, despite a direct, personal appeal. By me."

Young nodded.

"The Ori have a city," Jackson continued, dropping his voice to a whisper. "A city called *Celestis*. It's possible for humans to travel there. In fact, humans are taken there—to be made into Priors."

"No shit," Young said.

"I've seen it. I've been there."

The other man paused, and Young waited him out.

"When we discovered the nine-chevron address in the Ancient database," Jackson continued. "It contained a reference to another repository of Ancient knowledge, which, when cross-referenced, provided more detail on what's *at* the other end of this address."

"What kind of detail?"

"Only that one could travel there," Jackson whispered, "but that to truly access it, to *unlock* it—well. Certain benchmarks must be met."

"Benchmarks?" Young asked.

"*Physiological* benchmarks. On the road to ascension," Jackson whispered. "Or—on the road to something else. The road to Priory, perhaps. The text isn't clear."

Young stared at him.

"Ascension," Jackson whispered, "is not an inherently moral process. It can be twisted. The Ori have twisted it. Others have twisted it. There are no ethical safeguards, but there *are* biological limitations. Limits that some people are closer to breaking than others."

"Shit," Young whispered.

"Yes," Jackson replied. "You begin to see. Why specify these benchmarks, if this address simply leads to a *place*. A place like any other."

"So where do you think it leads?" Young whispered. "Somewhere else? Somewhere *like* Celestis? To Celestis itself?"

"I don't want to say," Jackson said, swallowing convulsively, looking at the ceiling, "what I think."

"But you think Rush might meet these benchmarks?" Young asked, gripping his coffee.

"We know he doesn't," Jackson said. "But we also know that he's closer than anyone else."

"But if he doesn't meet them—" Young trailed off in the face of Jackson's twisting expression.

Jackson said nothing.

Again, Young waited him out.

"There's a way," Jackson said finally. "A way he *could* meet them."

"Of course there is."

"He doesn't know it," Jackson whispered. "He doesn't know any of this. He might suspect some of it."

"He wants to *unlock* this shit."

"Yes," Jackson agreed. "Yes he does."

"You know how to do it," Young said. "You know the way to meet these benchmarks."

"I do," Jackson confirmed, "as does Colonel Telford, Colonel O'Neill, General Landry, and—Dr. Lam."

This was the crux of it, then. Young held himself very still as he spoke. "O'Neill said that you and Telford—that you were arguing about wall carvings."

Jackson looked away. "He said that? I've already told you too much. *No one* can find out about this; do you understand? This isn't a road that we want to walk, but there would be other parties who would be extremely interested in going down this road. Who are probably pursuing it now."

"The LA?" Young whispered. "You think that's why the LA wanted our personnel? So that they can try to—alter them?"

"Yes," Jackson hissed, leaning forward. "It's why they were recruited. Why Dr. Volker was recruited. Why Dr. Lam was pulled from the CDC—why *Rush* was brought here. There's a guy in ITS and a guy in linguistics who are entirely *useless*, but who are here for this reason. There's a medic, there's a sergeant, there's a molecular biologist—everyone we've found with *any* of the genes has been brought here."

"To protect them?" Young asked, "or to use them as a resource?"

"Even I don't know," Jackson whispered, "and I am—deeply involved in this project."

"And Rush is the number one draft pick," Young said. "So to speak."

"Yes," Jackson said.

"What would he have to do?" Young asked. "To meet these benchmarks? What would he—"

"Nothing," Jackson said. "He would have to do *nothing*. Because if anyone does this? It's going to be me." His tone was flat and brooked no argument.

This did not stop Young from arguing anyway. "Even if you don't have the genes for it?"

Jackson looked at him without speaking.

"Why *you*?" Young asked.

"They're pushing this because the situation with the Ori looks so bad. And this—" Jackson broke off, swallowing. "This is *not* his fault."

"But it's *yours*?" Young couldn't keep the skepticism out of his voice.

"Yes," Jackson said simply.

Young stared at him.

"It's not widely known, but yes. It is *my fault*," Jackson snapped. "It is entirely, *absolutely* my fault. And some miserable, genius cryptographer is not destroying himself over this just because he wants to," Jackson hissed. "Because it's convenient for everyone. And because David Telford is leading him straight into it."

Young swallowed and tried to overcome the urge to look away from the intense, glacial blaze of Jackson's eyes.

"So take Jack's offer," the other man said, "because I need someone in my corner on this."

"Having a hard time persuading O'Neill that it should be you?" Young asked evenly.

Jackson looked away and took a sip of his coffee.

"I'm not sure he's wrong," Young said mildly.

"Well, it shouldn't be *Rush*," Jackson said. "It shouldn't be *anyone*. You'll see. If you take the post. You'll see."

"Rush is throwing himself at this fucking problem," Young said. "If he finds out about this—option, or whatever it is, he's going to want it. He's going to actively seek it out."

Jackson looked away, out over the room.

"You know he will," Young persisted.

"He named it," Jackson said. "Did you know that?"

"Named what?"

"The project," Jackson whispered, still watching the room. "He named it Icarus."

"Kind of a terrible project name," Young said, running his thumb over his cup of coffee.

"Not very optimistic."

Jackson smiled, brief and small and terrible to look at. "I know, but I—I let it stand."

"For whom?" Young asked. "For him? Or—for you."

"For us both," Jackson said. "For both of us. But—I've already had my fall."

"Jesus, Jackson," Young said. "You always talk like this?"

"No. I only dial up the rhetoric when I need something," Jackson said. "Only when I need it *very badly*."

Young looked at him, considering.

"So step in," Jackson said, his tone low and fiery. "Take the number two position. Telford may not make it out the other side of the psych department depending on whether or not they find evidence of coercive persuasion. Even if he *does* make it out, even if he gets backing from the entire IOA to go forward on this—this *other* project—you'll be in a position to potentially stop it."

"Jackson," Young hissed, his voice cracking, "*listen* to yourself. I can't even acknowledge what you just said it's so fucking out of line. God *damn*."

Jackson pulled back, his jaw tight, his empty styrofoam cup pulling apart beneath his nails.

"You don't know," Jackson said. "You don't know what I know. You can't feel what I feel. It has to be me. It has to. I have to stop this."

"Stop talking," Young growled. "Right. Now."

Jackson stared intently into the air above his own clasped hands, unmoving.

Waiting.

Waiting for Young to make his move, to say his piece. To go to Mitchell, or to Landry, or fuck, maybe to MacKenzie. Maybe to the Psych Department.

"We are not *ever* talking about this again," Young said, pitching his voice low so that it wouldn't carry.

Jackson pushed back in his chair, but before he could get to his feet, Young reached out, his fingers snapping shut around the other man's wrist.

"After today," Young said. "Because *this* shit? This is *conspiracy*."

Jackson relaxed back into his seat, looking warily amused. "I prefer the term 'planning', personally," he said.

Young shot him a dark look. "First of all, what the hell are you thinking, doing this here?"

"I'm not exactly an inexperienced 'planner'." Jackson said.

Young shot him a dubious look.

"Ambient noise," Jackson said. "Low index of suspicion. You think I trust my apartment? You think I trust anywhere in this city? You think the people in this base are the worst people that could overhear this particular conversation? I'd rather be fired with a memory wipe as my severance pay than have the Trust find out about this."

Young rubbed a hand across his jaw. "They'd do that?"

"In this kind of climate? I'd be lucky if they let me go back to my former identity as America's most preeminent archeological hack," Jackson said, his amusement laced with bitterness this time.

"All right," Young whispered. "Is O'Neill backing you?"

"Only partially," Jackson replied.

"Meaning he doesn't want you doing whatever it is that's going to get you half-way to the Ascension finish-line?"

Jackson nodded.

"So is *anyone* on board with this plan of yours?"

"In its entirety?" Jackson asked. "No."

"Great," Young replied.

"We have to get Rush to go to Atlantis," Jackson said. "He is too perfect for this. They all see it. The fact that he's the one who's actively unlocking the gate? The fact that he'd *want* to do it? That he'd volunteer?"

"Have you considered the possibility that it *should* be him?" Young asked.

"No," Jackson hissed. "It shouldn't be anyone, but when it has to be someone? It's going to be me."

"I heard you the first ten times. But what if it *can't* be you?"

"They'll make an exception," Jackson said.

"Who, the Ancients?"

"They always make an exception. For me." Jackson looked down at his hands. "He needs to go to Atlantis. That's step one. Who do you think floated the idea of using Sheppard and McKay for this DHD thing he's insisting on?"

"That was a good move," Young said.

"We'll see," Jackson replied.

"I don't think you're going to get him to go," Young said. "Not willingly."

"No?" Jackson asked.

"Apparently math is a vocation these days."

"He said that?" Jackson asked, smiling faintly.

"No chance of me pulling that one out of my ass," Young said.

Jackson sighed.

"Look," Young said. "Jackson. Daniel. I get—" he opened his hands. "I get where you're coming from on this."

"No," Jackson replied. "I don't think you do."

"I do," Young said.

Jackson looked at him steadily, but didn't deny him a second time.

"But if this option is as bad as you say it is, then just—take it off the table. Entirely. I'm with you on keeping Rush and Lam and your linguist guy, and whomever else the hell away from anything that's going to overwrite personal biology, but I don't see why keeping them away from it has to put *you* in the firing line."

"Sooner or later," Jackson said, "someone is going to have to do *something*. Because we are going to lose this fight against the Ori. We are *already* losing it."

Young looked away.

"I have so many people," Jackson whispered, "Who are protecting me. Who *will* protect me from this—against my wishes. I need someone to back the others. Specifically, to back Rush."

"Why me?" Young asked.

"Because you're already doing it," Jackson replied.

He supposed he was.

"So you'll take the post?" Jackson asked.

"With this higher-plane-of-existence paranoia on top of institutional cloak and dagger bullshit, how can I say no?" Young said dryly.

"Good," Daniel replied, giving him a wan smile. He arranged the shredded remains of his coffee cup into a neat pile. "Good," he said again, and this time the word was easier, flowing into the tense space between them.

"Jackson," Young said quietly.

"This is the way it has to be," Jackson said. "This is the right thing."

"Is it?" Young asked.

"Yes," Jackson whispered. "Without a doubt."

"I'll tell Landry today," Young said.

"Then soon," Jackson said, "you'll see."

"Why trust me with all of this?" Young asked.

"You think this is all of it?"

"You know what I mean."

"Because you seem like a decent person," Jackson said.

"This place is full of decent people," Young replied. "Most of them more decent than I am."

"But none in the position to take over Icarus," Jackson said.

"You could have arranged that. I'm sure you had a hand in O'Neill's offer to me."

Jackson began to stack and unstack the shredded pieces of his coffee cup. "Don't read too much machinating into this," he said finally, pausing to look up at Young. "Or, if you do, put the machinating where it belongs. Jack likes you, and he doesn't particularly like Telford. I just happened to have the chance to talk to you in the window during which you were making your choice. *You* were the one who sought *me* out. In fact, I'm fairly certain that Landry attempted to time things so that I wouldn't have the chance to influence you, especially as they suspect me of tipping Rush off about his medical file. If everything had gone like it was supposed to, sans foothold situation, I would have been offworld on that cancelled mission and you would have had to make your decision in the span of forty-eight hours. And, I'm not sure about this, but—"

"I might have turned it down," Young finished.

"You might have," Jackson agreed.

Chapter Twenty Two

Rematerialization was something like being slapped.

In the face.

Shocked, perhaps, by a current of medium voltage.

He was cold.

Rush shook his head, trying to snap his mind into a functional state, trying to force a reconciliation between his last experiences and the sudden presentation of a variegated gray and green backdrop for air thick with the smell of rain. It took him a moment to parse the colors into what they were—sky and land.

"Sucks the first time, I know, but it gets better. I think your brain learns to forget the reintegration process after a few trips, kind of like how, in an ideal world, you don't remember a head injury? I probably should have mentioned that. My bad."

"What?" Rush asked, looking at Sheppard, who was standing in profile against a clouded sky.

"Atienza. Reaves. Fan out and do a sweep of the trees but keep line-of-site on the gate." Sheppard paused, scanning their surroundings, before looking at Rush. "You okay?" the other man asked.

"I'm fine," Rush replied, bringing one hand to his temple.

"You sure?" Sheppard asked, still looking at him.

"Yes," Rush said.

The gate shut off behind them with a sound like the rending of field lines.

The sky was a uniformity of clouds the color of ash that hung claustrophobically low over the tangled green vegetation. The gate was set in a clearing that gave way to a snarl of bracken that yielded with bad grace to a forest where the trees grew with a closeness he found unsettling.

"Come on," Sheppard said. "Standing on platforms against a sky like this is a great way to get shot."

Rush followed him down steps of dry, flecked stone, inlaid with goa'uld inscriptions that he couldn't translate.

"I thought this planet was classified as 'friendly'," Rush said.

"So is west Baltimore," Sheppard said, "but that doesn't mean I'm about to stand on a corner and wave my phone around."

"You from Baltimore, sir?" Greer asked, his eyes flicking back to Sheppard from the position he'd taken up between McKay and the tree line.

"Nah," Sheppard said, unclipping his radio. "California."

"He's been watching *The Wire*," McKay said, with a withering look in Sheppard's direction that seemed to slide right past the man. "Are we going to be doing actual science here, or just talking about all the Earth TV that we've missed?"

"Usually *both* of those things happen," Sheppard said mildly, as he twisted to watch Reaves and Atienza pass through the bracken with deliberate, thorough arcs.

Rush stepped laterally, moving into the blustery wind to approach the DHD with its concentric rings of depressible panels and its central red button. The dull, cloud-filtered light leant the device an unexpectedly dark solidity. A few feet away from it he stopped, one hand coming to hook over his left shoulder.

"Did they give you the standard briefing?" McKay asked, coming to stand beside Rush. "They must have—it's the only thing they ever think to give the consultants before going in. Going out. You know what I mean. I find it extremely odd that 'dialing the gate' seems to be the one, standardized thing they expect of the science staff. As if there's anything even remotely difficult about it. A trained monkey could do it. You know that's the entire reason they brought Dr. Jackson along on the first gate trip? Literally so he could push the buttons for them on the other side. Turned out, it wasn't actually that trivial, but that's another story, to be told another time. A time when you have more security clearance. Or, possibly, never. You should also consider losing the glasses and getting contacts. You'll find that helps a lot when it comes to being taken seriously by pretty much anyone with a gun, whether that party be friendly, or not so friendly. We all do it. Except for Zelenka. Radek Zelenka? He's something of an admirer of yours, and you might have heard of him—he did some minor work on applications of Savitch's Theorem, kind of a side project, you know, but he got a nice paper out of it, so, like I said, you might be familiar? Anyway, he hasn't lost the glasses and he rarely goes offworld. I'm pretty convinced this is more than correlative. So. Contacts or surgery, either way, lose the glasses. That's a tip. But to get back to my original point, despite idiocy inherent in the scientist-dials-the-gate mentality, there *is* something to be said for being able to dial quickly. Personally? I like to portion out the DHD like a unit circle and then pair each symbol with a degree in radians. Like,

chevron one, three-pi halves. Chevron two, pi over six. See? Makes it easy. That's another tip."

Rush said nothing.

The DHD looked like a violation of Ancient design aesthetic—a crystalline array locked into a primitive outer casement that was not simple, like the gate, but offensively simplistic instead, its symmetries distorted and destroyed by its oblique angle and its solid, directional base that dictated an avenue of approach to a device that was circular in shape and therefore suggested accessibility from all angles. Worst of all was the central depressible element—it was large, red, and utterly graceless. And yet—

"I know what you're thinking," McKay said, destroying his train of thought.

There was something about the device that seemed to torque his mind unpleasantly.

"It looks wrong," Rush said.

McKay stared at him in silence, the wind toying with the edges of his hair.

"Odyssey, this is Colonel John Sheppard," he heard from behind him. "How's it going up there?"

"What do you mean 'wrong'?" McKay asked. "Have you ever *seen* a real DHD? Before now?"

"Colonel Sheppard, this is Colonel Emerson," the radio crackled. "You're a long ways from home, John."

"No," Rush admitted.

"Eh, it's all relative," Sheppard said into the radio.

Rush and McKay simultaneously glanced at Sheppard, back at each other, and then abruptly away. "Seriously," McKay said. "How can it be *wrong*? It's a device that performs a function. By definition, if it's functioning as it should, it can't be wrong."

Rush ignored the other man, stepping forward to draw his fingertips delicately over the concentric rings of panels, right hand above, left hand below, in a brief, antiparallel sweep.

"Mmm hmm," McKay said with a strange, proprietary approval. "The most sophisticated chordophonic instrument in the universe."

Rush snapped his fingers back and leveled a glare at McKay.

The other man stared back at him, uncowed.

"Everything's quiet up here." Emerson voice hissed into static at the edges of his words as he responded to Sheppard. "There's a storm front moving up on your position from the southeast, but you should have a six hour window before the rain hits and maybe another two hours before it gets ugly."

"Thanks for the heads up," Sheppard said. "We'll be in touch."

Rush paced around the DHD, drawing away from McKay as Sheppard turned back to the pair of them.

"Wrong?" McKay said pointedly in Rush's direction.

"Wrong?" Sheppard echoed, *less* pointedly, in McKay's direction.

"He thinks it looks *wrong*," McKay said, exchanging a glance with Sheppard.

"What looks wrong?"

"The DHD," McKay clarified.

"Incomplete," Rush corrected, hooking his left hand over his shoulder. "And somehow—obfuscated."

"Okay," McKay said slowly. "Obfuscated. That's great. I'll just be over here, entangling your SGC-issue laptop with the control panel." The other man turned and began to carefully uncrate the equipment.

Sheppard came to stand next to Rush, saying nothing, his attention fixed on the DHD. After a few seconds, one hand came up to swipe through his dark hair and then returned to rest on his weapon, his fingers drumming over the strap. "Like a picture," he said, too quietly for McKay to hear, "hung at a slant. The DHDs in Pegasus—they're not like this."

"So I've heard," Rush replied, then stepped forward to help McKay.

Three hours later, Rush was lying on his back, losing thermal energy to the ground in some kind of relentless heat sink as he stared up into the crystalline lattice on the underside of the DHD. They had removed the exterior paneling that encircled half the base and he was now positioned, flashlight between teeth, buried up to his wrists in a hanging tangle of wires. The DHD itself *had* no wiring. The slowly building curtain of silver threads was emerging as Rush soldered Perry's leads to control crystals using a low-melt alien alloy.

"This is a pain in the *ass*," McKay shouted at him from a few feet away, tied to Rush's laptop as he mapped inputs to outputs and manually configured the entangling Hamiltonian while Rush linked up crystals in real time.

"Yes, well," Rush snarled, inarticulate around the small flashlight in between his teeth.

"You've got a cold joint at crystal six," McKay said.

"Fuck," Rush said.

"What was that?"

"I said *fuck*," Rush clarified.

"Ah," McKay said. "Hang on."

Rush couldn't see anything from his position beneath and half-inside the DHD, but he heard McKay raise his voice to call to whomever was within shouting distance at the moment. "Hey. New guy. *Other* new guy. Can we stop patrolling the abandoned planet long enough to actually get some work done before we're rained out? We need someone to hold a flashlight."

"Take it up with the colonel." It was Greer's voice.

"Which is 'crystal six'?" Rush asked McKay.

"No," McKay replied, "I'm flattered—but, you're not really my type. If I went for unkempt guys with accents, well, I'd already be taken."

Rush clenched his jaw, glared at the wiring above him, transferred his soldering iron to his left hand, and pulled his flashlight out of his mouth.

"Which crystal," he said with as much vitriol as it was possible to pack into his tone, "is. Crystal. Six."

For a brief moment there was silence.

"Ah—should be the one at four pi thirds," McKay replied.

Rush replaced the flashlight in his mouth with a dark look at the circuitry above him.

"McKay, do not harass the civilian consultants," he heard Sheppard say.

"Right. That's *your* job. Look. I cannot be held responsible for the communication difficulties that occur as a result of short-staffing this mission. We need another pair of hands."

A few seconds later Greer dropped down next to Rush. After examining the situation, the other man laid down on his back, pulled out his flashlight, and flipped it on.

Rush turned his head and spit out his own flashlight, keeping his eyes on the wire he was trying to affix to a crystal.

"You're soldering?" Greer asked.

"Yes," Rush said dryly.

"Overhead?" Greer asked.

"It's an atypical alloy. Low melting point."

"Doesn't do much for you if it gets in your eye," Greer replied, pulling out his sunglasses with one hand and slipping them on.

"Feel free to propose an equally efficient alternative," Rush said, fixing the interface between his wire and crystal six.

Greer said nothing.

"Yes," Rush said. "Quite."

"What's the point of this?" Greer asked.

"You have one job," Rush said. "Please do only that job."

"That's great," Greer muttered.

"Okay, we're up and configured," McKay called. "Go for the center and then we can start the spontaneous parametric down conversion."

Rush grabbed the last remaining wire and affixed it to the central crystal, melting the alien alloy in a solid joint. He had nearly finished when the entire array above him flared to life with a pleasant humming sound as crystals lit up in a rapid radial pattern.

Instinctively, he pulled his hands back. Greer flinched in surprise, then held the light steady.

"What did you do?" McKay shouted over the wind, sounding annoyed and alarmed in equal parts.

"McKaayy," Sheppard said, pulling out the other man's name into something vaguely threatening.

"It's okay," McKay said. "I think it's okay. This is probably what's supposed to happen. Probably. Actually, maybe you guys want to get out from under there, just in case."

"Greer," Sheppard snapped. "Out." In the same moment, Rush felt someone grab his ankles and drag him from under the DHD. Sheppard reached forward, snagged the front of Rush's jacket, and pulled him up and back in one smooth motion.

"This is a novel subroutine," McKay said. "A *novel* subroutine. When we set up our connection—it activated—well I'm not entirely sure what it activated, but the control crystal is communicating with something. Something that's not *us*."

"What *kind* of something?" Sheppard asked.

"Well If I *knew*, then I wouldn't have said 'something', would I?"

"McKay."

"We're not broadcasting indiscriminately, if that's what you're concerned about. This is targeted. I think. Ask the *Odyssey* to point their sensors at us and sweep the spectrum."

Rush stepped forward, watching the interface that Dr. Perry had designed for monitoring the activity of a crystalline array. He dropped into a crouch next to McKay to get a better look at the readout.

Sheppard pulled out his radio. "*Odyssey*, this is Sheppard, come in please."

"We read you, Sheppard. What do you need?"

"We're requesting that you point your sensors at us and sweep the entire EM band. McKay suspects we're sending a signal of some kind."

"Commencing scan," Emerson responded.

"Do you have any idea what this is likely to be?" Rush asked McKay, his eyes never leaving the stream of data on the screen.

"No," McKay said, sparing a quick glance at Rush before looking back at the periodic rise and fall of activity within the array. "Do you?"

"What made you choose the word 'communicating'?" Rush asked.

"There's a well defined protocol in place that allows DHDs to talk with one another in order to perform the correlative updates that correct for stellar drift," McKay said.

"We're seeing activation in some of those protocols. Not all—we didn't actually trigger a correlative update by interfacing this way, but we triggered something that's using a portion of the inherent communication hardware."

"Well, what are we *saying*?" Sheppard asked.

"Are you running the entanglement protocol?" Rush asked.

"I don't know, and no, not yet. Look," McKay said, breaking off the word viciously, one hand cutting through the air. "We are communicating via an *unknown means* with an unknown *device* that is external to the DHD. This *is possibly*, though not *necessarily*, bad. So let me think about this before something really awful happens and we—"

"It's the gate," Rush said.

Sheppard and McKay both turned to look at him.

"It's very likely the gate," Rush repeated. "Run the entanglement protocol."

"Okay, so, Mr. No-Evidence-Required isn't worried," McKay said. "I on the other hand—"

Sheppard's radio crackled, cutting off McKay. "Colonel, we're not picking up any EM signals in your immediate vicinity other than those inherent to your MALP and other earth-based electronics. If you're broadcasting anything, it's not getting far," Emerson said.

"Understood," Sheppard replied.

The three of them looked at one another. Unsurprisingly it was McKay who spoke first.

"Fine. So it's likely the gate that we're communicating with, based on what we actually set out to do and what the *Odyssey* is reporting, but I'm still not discounting the possibility that there's something else going on here. This absolutely has the feel of the initiation of some kind of Ancient algorithm that inevitably ends up with someone not having a good time. That person is usually me and—"

"The only way to gain any additional information is to run the entanglement protocol," Rush snapped.

"Hey. New guy. Here's another tip. Sometimes, when you do the wrong thing, Ancient devices *will* kill you."

Rush looked at Sheppard.

"It's true," Sheppard confirmed with a faint grimace and a swipe of his hand through his hair.

Rush looked up at the gray sky, uniformity giving way to variations in texture and color that suggested accompanying tropospheric turbulence away to the southeast.

The urge to be alone with this problem was overwhelming.

"Yes well, what would you suggest?" Rush asked, turning back to McKay with extreme effort.

"It's your call," Sheppard said to McKay. "But we probably won't get another crack at this, so—" Sheppard trailed off.

McKay sighed. "All right. *Fine*. But if I get forced into ascension, or poisoned, or transported back in time, or shifted out of phase, or infected with some weird alien

virus that wipes my memory, or exchange consciousness with someone in another galaxy, or—"

"Yeah, we get it," Sheppard said.

"I'm going to be *extremely unhappy*."

"Why don't / run the protocol?" Rush asked dryly.

"No." Sheppard and McKay responded, perfectly synchronous.

Rush raised his eyebrows and then looked at McKay, making a sweeping gesture toward the computer.

McKay grimaced, but turned back to the screen. He queued up the program that Rush and Perry had designed and sat there, his finger hovering over the keyboard uncertainly.

"You want *me* to do it?" Sheppard asked.

With an overly dramatic wince, and a quiet click, McKay initiated the program.

The protocol began to run with lines of code blurring over the open terminal window. Perry's crystal-to-computational adaptor lit up with a solid green light and a quiet whirl.

"You still you?" Sheppard asked.

"I think so," McKay said.

"What's your real first name?" Sheppard drawled.

"Very funny."

"How long—" McKay began, but stopped as the open laptop pinged quietly. "Efficient."

"We're entangled?" Sheppard asked.

"We are," McKay said. "You want to take a look at this?" he asked, inclining his head toward Rush.

Rush nodded and reached forward, not-so-subtly angling the laptop away from the other man. At a first approximation it became apparent that data was being sent by another party to the DHD, and then, after a brief interval, was being returned. He watched it for a moment. The dynamics and timing of the transmission was a simple, repeating pattern.

Receive, process, send.

Receive, process, send.

He initiated a second program—a modified network analyzer designed to capture, analyze and decompile communications into and out of a central control crystal. After a few seconds, his screen was filled with scrolling Ancient text detailing the transmission of data.

"Please tell me you're logging this," McKay said.

"Obviously," Rush replied.

They watched the flow of Ancient code for several minutes. After only a few rounds it became apparent to Rush that the device was receiving information, performing some kind of operation, and then sending data back to wherever the signal originated from.

"So," McKay said finally. "Presuming for a moment that you're correct and this is the gate that's sending this data to the DHD, which, for the record, is still one *hell* of an assumption, your theory is that if we can intersperse ourselves between the gate and the DHD and get the gate to recognize us as a separate entity that's sophisticated enough to achieve quantum entanglement, then it's just going to—what? Give you your chevron if you're not stupid enough to try and collapse the quantum state by actually *reading* what's encoded?"

"Possibly," Rush said, queuing up his zero knowledge protocol.

"And this is what, exactly?" McKay asked, eyeing the program.

"A ZKP," Rush said. "It should hide the means by which I'm obtaining data while giving me a defined avenue by which to present it to the authenticating party."

"Eh," McKay said, "we'll see."

"You don't think it will work?"

"It might," McKay replied. "There's one way to find out."

Rush initiated the program, which, as expected, inserted itself between the native protocols of the DHD and the gate.

His monitor flared with a new burst of data, followed by—nothing.

"Huh," McKay said.

Rush stared at the screen with narrowed eyes.

"I think maybe—it's waiting for you?" McKay murmured. "Run the last round of output through your program."

Rush sent the data back, only to have the process repeated. The same message he'd sent out had been sent back to him.

"Well," McKay said. "We've achieved manual control, so that's something. Always the first step in interfacing with an unknown technology, unless it's something like, oh, I don't know, the life support system for an underwater city, say, as a hypothetical example, where if you press the wrong button you kill everyone. There you want to be a bit more cautious. That's another tip. Always tread carefully around life support if you're not immediately going to die. But that doesn't really seem to be the case here, fortunately for us. Unfortunately for us we've got manual control of what amounts to basically the most boring game of telephone in this part of the galaxy, so unless you want to sit here until—"

Rush narrowed his eyes, his gaze fixed on the monitor. He was on the right track. He almost had it. He could feel the nearness of the solution, its component parts revolving and aligning in his mind, beginning to drop into place. He'd interfaced with the crystals in such a way as to trigger a novel protocol within the DHD. Likely the exact protocol he'd wanted. The one that would get the fifth chevron for him. He'd interspersed himself between the DHD and the gate and he'd successfully gotten the gate to interrogate him, and he'd successfully elicited the default behavior. He'd thought that would be enough.

"Wait," McKay said. "Wait just a second. I don't believe this."

The key was to look at the default behavior—which was, of course, *not* to yield the chevron.

"Even when I'm flippant, I'm brilliant," McKay said. "It is a game of telephone, it's *exactly* a game of telephone—"

It stood to reason that perhaps the gate was waiting for *him*. Waiting for him to do something other than simply send back the code, unmodified. Likely it was something that demonstrated that he had a conceptual understanding of the fundamental nature of quantum phenomenology. Decoherence. Quantum noise.

"Quantum error correction," Rush murmured. "It wants—not what it sends me, but the original encoded state, obtainable by correcting decoherence-induced errors which minutely corrupt each signal."

"Yes," McKay said. "Obviously. QEC. You may thank me later."

"For what?" Rush said absently.

"I—for—for what? I just—"

"I wasn't listening," Rush murmured, calling up his logs to manually compare two different versions of what had been sent to him. "Did you have some kind of conceptual breakthrough?"

"Telephone." McKay said. "The children's game? Cumulative error's most famous teachable moment?"

"If you say so," Rush replied.

McKay sighed. "Unbelievable. Can you code fast enough to pull the original quantum state out before the storm hits?"

"Of course I can," Rush replied.

An hour later the sky had darkened and the wind had picked up, whistling around corners of equipment and whispering through trees that surrounded their small clearing. Rush sat on the ground, his computer balanced atop a plastic crate next to the DHD, one hand hooked over his shoulder, trying to ignore McKay's superfluous science commentary.

"How we doing?" Sheppard asked, dropping into a crouch next to Rush.

"We're about to crack this thing wide open," McKay said, with evident satisfaction.

"Nice," Sheppard replied. "Because we've got maybe another hour before we're going to have to start to pack it in for weather reasons and either gate back or beam up."

"Queue it up when you're ready" McKay said, looking at Rush.

Rather than responding, Rush input his corrected version of the quantum state into the waiting program, and sent it.

"Any chance this might—" Sheppard began.

The DHD began to emit a sound.

And Loud.

Rush staggered back a pace.

McKay was speaking, Sheppard was shouting, both of them drowned out by the noise. A few paces away, Greer whirled, his weapon coming up in a motion that looked instinctive. Rush pressed his hands to his ears, trying to block out the sound as he leaned forward, watching McKay navigate Perry's computer system with one hand, the other clapped to the ear nearest the DHD.

"Shut it down, *shut it down*," Sheppard shouted, the words lost in in the sound.

The paneling of the DHD cracked apart, metal pieces opening and falling away into grass, depressible panels detaching and flaking away, exposing the crystal lattice within.

Sheppard grabbed Rush's jacket and began dragging him back.

The tonal frequency shifted into a progressively higher range.

Sheppard was shouting at McKay with so much force that Rush could *feel* the vibration of the words.

McKay shut the laptop and threw himself down behind a heavy plastic crate, motioning to Greer, shouting uselessly into the sound, his hands cutting through the air. Fast, repetitive, and emphatic.

Rush hit the ground, Sheppard on top of him as the tone became unbearable.

The only thing in his line of sight was Reaves, running toward their position from the tree line. Rush felt Sheppard shift, felt him motion toward her. She threw herself down, hands clapped to her head, beneath tangled vegetation.

Rush turned to look for the DHD, watching the red-white light that seemed to emanate from the center of a new structure that was emerging from the interior of the device, destroying that which had obscured it. It occurred to Rush then that perhaps this had not been what he was *supposed* to do—it seemed more like a *trap* than like *access*—until a possible purpose of the sound suggested itself.

The tone might serve as a warning.

It might also serve as a means to an end if that end was achieving a resonant frequency of a shatterable element.

If he was right about that, if he was *right*, and of course he *was*, then he should *look away*.

He looked away.

He shut his eyes.

The tone seemed to be both within his mind and without.

It ended with a clear, shattering sound—akin to the breaking of glass but not the same, the strength of the material giving the destruction a bell-like quality as Sheppard adjusted his position, his hands coming over Rush's head as a hissing rain of tiny, falling shards hit them, their uniforms, and the grass around them in a quiet, hissing shower.

Silence, loud with overtones aftertones of vanished sound.

Sheppard shifted and pulled away from him, the quiet scrape of cloth-on-cloth strange and unnaturally normal in both quality and decibel range.

Rush tried to feel the pain of embedded glass, the stinging of exposed skin, but nothing came.

"Hey," Sheppard said, low and quiet. "Rush."

He looked up.

The grass glittered irregularly with tiny fragments of reddish glass. He pulled a small piece from his hair and examined it. Its fracture planes had been blunted. It was the approximate size of a head of a pin.

He glanced at Sheppard, and then released a shaky breath.

"You were *not kidding* about breaking a DHD," Sheppard murmured, his gaze directed over towards the device. Louder, he called, "Everyone okay?"

He received a smattering of "Yes sirs," and "You mean other than the five years of my life I just sacrificed to pure panic?" from McKay.

Rush moved forward, approaching the device in step with Sheppard. The DHD was only vaguely recognizable—its dark paneling surrounded it on the ground like a discarded husk. The internal support structure stood with a lacy metal elegance wrapped around a glowing crystal matrix. Where two concentric circles of depressible panels had been, the blue glow of glyphs themselves remained—clear, illuminated, and connected to the metal ring that housed the crystals by graceful silver stems.

"Eat your heart out, Samantha Carter," McKay whispered into the quiet air.

Sheppard snorted.

"I'm guessing that this looks 'right' to you?" McKay said, turning in Rush's direction.

"Yes," Rush said absently, still studying the altered DHD. "But this is not—what I expected."

"When is it *ever*?" McKay said, pacing around the other side of the DHD in a radial pattern as he examined it. "But, on the plus side, Carter is going to be unspeakably, *unspeakably* envious when I tell her about this."

Rush reached forward to place a finger delicately against one of the glowing glyphs that corresponded to the first chevron he'd unlocked. The lights flared subtly, but there was no other change in the state of the device.

"Yeah," McKay said. "Definitely touch it. That's a great idea."

Rush pulled his hand back as McKay reopened the laptop.

Rush continued to look at the device.

The wind whistled through and over the crystalline array.

"You want a chevron, out of this thing, right?" Sheppard asked, coming to stand next to him.

"Right," Rush replied, reaching forward to trace the edge of a glyph. There was another flare of blue-white light.

"Sometimes," Sheppard said, "Ancient tech will give you what you want if you just, sort of—" he reached out, his fingers also brushing the edge of the metal, generating a radial sweep of lights. "Think about it. Not in words, but—conceptually."

"Hey," McKay snapped. "Lantean dream team. What are you doing?"

Rush thought of the chevrons that he had unlocked, thought of cyphers, thought of keys, thought of the concept of unlocking with a savage mental spike of determination and—

His vision was subsumed by white as the DHD lit up with a blinding flare.

The sky was high and pale and cloudless above a flat landscape of silver-green grass, which bent in sinuous patterns that extended as far as he could see—until the horizon put and end to the liquid sweep of wind-tormented stalks. The day was cold. The sunlight fell like the radiation it was, bleaching the upper surfaces of the long grass and transitioning dramatically to shadow in the places it could not touch.

The air felt thin, and oxygen-poor.

Sheppard stood beside him under the wide expanse of washed-out sky. They were positioned at the center of an open-air metal structure, which stood no taller than waist height. It was built like a radially symmetric maze into which the DHD fit like the centerpiece it had revealed itself to be. The metal glinted irregularly through the long grass with reflected light.

There was no sign of McKay or the others.

There was also no sign of a stargate.

"Well," Sheppard said, philosophic and resigned, "*this* is bad."

Ahead of them, a transparent projection flickered to life. It was the image of a woman, projected faintly from the DHD against the shifting stems of grass and the pale uniformity of sky.

Her hair was dark and her eyes were dark and she was dressed in white.

"Welcome home," she said.

Chapter Twenty Three

Five hours after a lunchtime conversation with Jackson and one hour post a meeting with Landry, the Acting Commander of the Icarus Project found himself in the archaeologist's office along with Vala and Mitchell, killing time while he waited for the next mission report from Sheppard. He was perched on a non-regulation, Ikea bookshelf, which seemed have been acquired for the express purpose of housing the stacks of paper that weren't able to fit on the archaeologist's desk.

"And *then* what she say?" Vala asked, the heels of her boots hitting the back of Jackson's desk with a quiet double clang.

"Why are you having this conversation here?" Jackson asked the ceiling.

Young wasn't entirely certain what any of them were doing there, truth be told. The esprit de corps of SG-1 was an event horizon of mutually-dependent, self-deprecating charm that was as exhausting as it was addictive. Once one passed a certain point, there seemed to be no escape.

"Well, she said that Friday 'would be good'," Mitchell replied.

"Yes but *how* did she say it?" Vala asked. "Did she seem *excited*? Did she—hang on just a tic here, let me get my documentation regarding American cultural practices. Daniel, darling, where did you—"

"I filed it for you," Jackson said mildly. Without looking up he pointed toward the right-hand side of his desk.

Vala followed his gaze, then shot Jackson a dark look as she fished a manila folder out of the trash. "You really need to work on your intrapersonal skills," Vala snapped.

"Did you seriously just say that?" Mitchell asked. "To *Jackson*? I mean—the guy is like —Mr. Cultural Sensitivity. I think he might have even written a book on the subject."

"What's the story with all these manuals of yours anyway?" Young asked. "There seem to be a lot of them. No offense, but—"

"Another thing of which we do. Not. Speak." Jackson shot Young a pointed look over the tops of his glasses.

"There's a little cave of minions somewhere that reads Jackson's field reports and then puts the books together," Mitchell said, stealing several peanut M&Ms from the open bag next to Vala while she flipped through the open folder in front of her.

"If by 'cave of minions' you mean the most advanced Linguistics Department in existence, then yes. Yes you are correct," Jackson said.

"All right boys," Vala said. "Here we go. Now. When Dr. Lam said that Friday 'would be good'," Vala paused to make air quotes, "did she a) mirror your posture, b) touch your arm, or c) look at the clock?"

"Um," Mitchell said. "None of the above?"

"Not a choice, good-looking. Let's stay focused here."

"I don't even know what we're *doing*," Mitchell said.

"You're getting a modified version of a Cosmo Quiz," Young informed him, digging his knuckles into the small of his back, trying to massage away the omnipresent ache.

"And you know this how?" Mitchell asked.

"Experience," Young replied.

"Okay," Mitchell said, drawing out the word. "I have decided not to ask you any follow up questions out of manly solidarity."

"Thanks," Young replied.

Mitchell turned back to Vala. "What she actually did was just look at me with a sort of neutral facial expression. Can that be a choice? What is this even a quiz for?"

"Hmm," Vala said, picking up a pencil. "We'll call that one a 'c'."

"I don't think you want it to be 'c'," Young advised him. "Try to negotiate for 'a'."

"Why is 'c' bad?" Mitchell asked. "Can I change it to the mirroring one?"

"Well that depends on how much you value accuracy," Vala replied, with a disapproving look over the top of the folder.

"But—"

"This is supposed to be a *work* day for me," Jackson said. "A day on which I do *work*."

"That's like saying 'today is a day I breathe air'," Mitchell replied. "Besides, everyone wants to find out if Everett's neighbor unlocks the mysteries of life, the universe, and everything."

"What you really mean is that everyone wants to buy John Sheppard a beer," Jackson said dryly.

"Sheppard," Mitchell said emphatically, "is an intergalactic baller. And *you* are *cranky*. What gives, Jackson?"

"I've explained it to you at least five times," Jackson said. "Namely it's you. Being here. Now."

"Today is a light day," Mitchell said. "Light. It means less work, more beer."

"Look, if I don't get through this regional variant of the Book of Origin pertaining specifically to prophetic mentions of the Orici—" he broke off as Vala flinched.

Mitchell froze, staring at Vala.

Jackson dropped his eyes, twisting a pencil between his fingers.

For a moment, no one spoke.

Young caught Mitchell's eye. The other man shook his head nearly imperceptibly.

"Yes, this all *very interesting*, darling, I'm sure," Vala said, recovering with a casual flip of her hair and the clang of her boots against the metal base of the desk, "but I'm doing some cultural research here, so if you don't mind—" she turned back to Mitchell. "Next question. On your first date, did you a) give her a hug on her doorstep, b) kiss her on the cheek, or c) kiss her on the lips."

"*What?*" Mitchell asked, clearly taken aback, his voice cracking. "We aren't *dating*. We're just *friends*. Respected colleagues. Chess buddies."

"Did you just say chess?" Jackson said mildly, shutting the file in front of him. "How interesting."

"Little slow on the uptake over there, darling," Vala said, twisting to look at Jackson.

Jackson held her gaze, managing to communicate something to her that Young could only guess at. Apology? Understanding? Empathy, perhaps.

"We. Are. Not. Dating," Mitchell said, casting a glare around the room.

"Yet," Young added.

"What do you mean *slow*?" Jackson asked, still looking at Vala.

"I hate you all," Mitchell said.

"I got you jello," Young pointed out, "and this is the thanks I get?"

"That was *hours ago*. Where's *Sam*. I'm going to—"

"Leave?" Jackson said. "Please do."

"We'll go with 'b'," Vala said.

"You should just discount the question," Young said, "if you're really after accuracy."

"What kind of quiz is this?" Mitchell asked.

"Next question," Vala said. "Your first compliment to her was that you a) liked an outfit she was wearing, b) thought a joke she told was funny, or c) you liked the way she smelled."

"Um, it was d), 'nice work on stopping that intergalactic plague'."

"Hmm," Vala said. "That's a tough one, but I'll say 'b,' because that seems the most intellectual. You have to be witty to tell a good joke."

"And to stop an intergalactic plague," Jackson said. "Very well reasoned. Though, I think it was the Priors that actually put a stop to the epidemic to which you're referring."

"There's no need to be cynical," Vala said.

"I am the least cynical person in existence," Jackson said. "It's a documented fact. Ask anyone."

"Why don't all y'all finish this thing for me," Mitchell said, "Let me know how it turns out. On second thought, don't let me know how it turns out."

"I think your tactical error was inviting Dr. Lam to a *team* dinner," Young said, "rather than just dinner."

"But then it seems like a date," Mitchell said. "And it's not a date. It's not, at all, a date." He looked around the room. "So just—drop it. We're doing something nice for someone who's done a lot for us, which is something we do all the time, thanks to Jackson being a complete pushover about everything in existence, except for intolerance so just—" Mitchell seemed to lose steam. "Just cut me a break here."

"Sure," Jackson said, smiling faintly as he looked back down at his book.

"No problem," Vala said, shutting the file, her boots clanging against Jackson's desk again. "And in that laudable spirit of camaraderie—"

"Nope," Mitchell said. "Whatever you're about to say—I'm good."

"I will act as your fashion consultant for the entire length of our dinner series."

"Thanks but no thanks," Mitchell said dubiously, "and since when is it a dinner *series*?"

"You think this adorably-cut SGC jacket is regulation?" Vala asked, hopping from the desk to twirl around once. "Think again."

"I've been meaning to ask you about that," Jackson began. "You know you can't alter standard—"

Jackson was cut off by the shrill, simultaneous ringing of the wall phone and his cell phone.

"Shall I—" Vala began, only to stop as another ring split the air.

"Well, *this* is not a good sign," Mitchell said, as he examined his own vibrating phone.

Young's cell phone began to buzz in his pocket. With a sinking feeling, he pulled it out. Caller ID showed it was SGC dispatch.

"Colonel Young," came Harriman's careful diction before an automated message began to play. "Please report to the SGC immediately. If onsite, please report to the briefing room on level twenty-seven. To confirm receipt of this message, please press one. To repeat this message, please press two. Should you be unable to comply with this message within a twenty-five minute window, please press three to connect with dispatch."

Young grimaced and hit the appropriate button on his phone, taking note of the time.

There was only one possible reason why dispatch would be paging him *and* SG-1.

He looked at Jackson.

Jackson was looking back at him.

"You too, handsome?" Vala asked quietly, fingering her own phone.

Young nodded.

Jackson rounded the desk and the four of them left the room together, making their way without speaking until they stepped into the elevator.

"It's not emergent," Vala said into the oppressive silence. "If it were, they would have paged overhead."

"Yeah," Mitchell said. "It could just be—" he trailed off. "It could just be that McKay broke his finger or something."

"I don't think so," Jackson said, glancing at Young.

"Yeah," Young said. "Me neither."

By the time they arrived at the briefing room, Young's back and leg were a collection of raw nerves that seemed intent on effecting an unnecessary and painful spasm of strained muscle for no further insult than a brisk walk over a stable surface. He did his best to ignore the sensation as he lowered himself into a chair across from Teal'c and next to Dr. Perry, both of whom had already arrived. Landry was in place at the head of the table, his hands clasped in front of him.

"They missed their check in," Landry said without preamble as they all found their seats. "Both Colonel Sheppard's team on the planet and the *Odyssey*."

"The *Odyssey*? Crap," Mitchell said, the word almost inaudible.

"Yes," Landry said, the word one long, gravelly pull. "Crap."

"We sending a MALP?" Mitchell asked.

"We are," Landry said. "They'll patch the feed through any minute now." He indicated the monitor mounted on the wall at the far end of the room.

"Even if they broke the DHD," Jackson said, "the *Odyssey* should be—"

"Reachable by subspace?" Landry said grimly. "I know. Harriman's been trying for the last fifteen minutes and we're getting nothing. Communications with *Prometheus* are uninterrupted, so it's not our array."

Young rubbed his jaw, trying to ignore the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Do we need to spring Sam for a consult?" Mitchell asked.

"Ideally yes," Landry said, "but not until we know more. Brightman was pretty clear on a strict half-hour window. In the meantime—Dr. Perry, do you have any thoughts that might shed some light on what the hell is going on?"

Perry cleared her throat, her eyes flicking quickly around the room before speaking. "Given what Dr. Rush was planning to do," she said, "the most likely outcome of a failed implementation of our entanglement protocol would be a software glitch that disabled the DHD. I have a difficult time imagining a scenario in which any such glitch would either directly or indirectly compromise the *Odyssey*'s communications array or other systems."

"Do your best," Landry growled. "Imagine. Because if this is not some kind of technical issue, then—" he leaned forward. "Then we are facing a level of infiltration by the Lucian Alliance that is beyond the scope my imagination."

Perry looked steadily at Landry. "As I stated, it's likely not a software glitch. But, barring that, there are several potential problems with the hardware of the DHD that could interfere with the communications array of an orbiting vessel, especially given that we're recently outfitted our ships with additional control crystals that are now integral parts of not only of the hyperdrive but also long range sensors, shields, and the subspace communications array. A massive EM pulse generated by the DHD could be enough to knock out any or all crystal-based arrays on the *Odyssey*, depending on the resonant frequencies of both the crystals and the shields."

"What would the consequences be for the *Odyssey*," Mitchell asked, "if, say, a DHD overload caused every crystal based control system on the ship to fail?"

Perry cleared her throat. "The ships aren't entirely crystal controlled, so it's likely they'd avoid a failure of life support. It's also likely they'd be able to replace component parts in time to avoid any kind of catastrophic outcome, provided they weren't in the midst of a firefight or in an unusually low planetary orbit when the failure occurred."

The monitor on the far wall flickered to life and they saw the live feed from the MALP in the gateroom displayed on the screen in shades of gray and the flickering blue of the open gate.

"Sir, are you getting this up there?" Harriman's voice projected out from the speakers beneath the screen.

"We are," Landry said. "You have a go."

They watched as the MALP approached the open wormhole, until the entire screen was swallowed in a field of rippling blue. There was a brief interruption of the signal and then—

The landscape was dark grays and deep greens. Trees lashed back and forth in the wind. Directly ahead of the camera, they could make out a shape, unfamiliar and glowing a silver-white in the darkness. Whoever was controlling the MALP centered the unfamiliar object and zoomed in.

"What is *that*?" Young asked, sitting forward, ignoring the twinge from his lower back.

No one answered.

"Hey." They heard McKay's come through over the static sound of gusting wind. "Hey. Thank *god*. I have no idea how they do this kind of thing in the Milky Way these days, apparently not very efficiently, but in Pegasus we send a MALP ten minutes after the first missed check in. Not *half an hour*." With a nausea-inducing twist, the MALP camera spun away from the glowing object and toward McKay. The scientist's face was pale, his hair soaked and plastered to his forehead.

"One," McKay snapped, "we triggered a novel subroutine in the DHD. Two, that subroutine either directly or indirectly, ugh, *vanished* both Dr. Rush and Colonel Sheppard, who were in contact with the DHD at the time. Three, simultaneous with the vanishing, the DHD-from-hell fired an EM pulse, rendering all of our equipment useless. Four, the fact that we've gotten no backup from the *Odyssey* leads me to believe that they are in similar straits because there's *no way* they're just not paying attention and missed a pulse of that magnitude. Five, we are currently on the lead

edge of a major storm with little survival gear to speak of. Six, we need Carter. Right now, no arguments, gear her up and send her through that gate."

For a moment, no one spoke.

"What kind of novel subroutine?" Perry asked.

"That thing was the DHD?" Vala said simultaneously. "It doesn't look like any DHD I've ever seen."

"Go back to point number two," Young snapped.

"What do you mean it *vanished* them?" Jackson asked. "Are you sure they haven't shifted phase? That kind of thing is always happening—"

"We should get out there," Mitchell said. "We should go now."

"Quiet," Landry shouted over all of them.

"Thank you," McKay said, with the air of a man who was skirting the edge of panic. "Now. I am *not* dealing with a committee made up of people who have no idea what the hell is going on here. Get me Carter. We have two high-ranking personnel missing and we have a rapidly closing window of action and I do *not* have time to explain myself to an entire ensemble who may or may not have had undergraduate level physics. So. I need Carter and I need at least one more SGC issued laptop in a water resistant case at a minimum. Thanks to the EM pulse, none of our equipment is working, which means I haven't been able to do *anything* and I've just been *waiting* for you to—"

"Carter was shot," Landry said.

"*What?*" McKay breathed, the word inaudible over a burst of static. "*When?* Why didn't anyone—"

"She's okay," Mitchell said. "Or, she will be, but we can't send her. We can get her on the line for a consult, for maybe half an hour or so."

"Do it," McKay said. "Set that up. I want Carter and Perry and *no one else* on the line. I'll let you get that organized while Reaves tells you what survival gear to ship through the gate."

"Can you dial out?" Young asked.

"I don't know," McKay said. "I haven't tried. Knowing the buffer system in this thing—" he glanced over his shoulder at the alien looking DHD, "there's a possibility that the outgoing matrix might be storing their patterns somehow. Bottom line? I don't know if they're still present here on the planet but shifted, or if they're dematerialized and held

inside the device, or if they've been displaced in space and or in time. Whatever happened to them, I'm sure it's somehow Sheppard's fault. I need that laptop now."

"You got it," Landry said. "That, and whatever else you need. SG-1 is going to be standing by and supervising the assembly of the gear for your team."

"That's something," McKay said. "Don't send anyone through until I've had a chance to run this by Carter."

"Gear up," Landry growled as he got to his feet. "Dr. Perry, you're upstairs with Carter in the infirmary. We'll get a feed up there."

Young pushed himself up, trying not to betray even a hint of weakness as he got to his feet. Landry caught his eye.

"You're not cleared," Landry said.

Young tightened his jaw.

"When mission parameters fall outside those explicitly delineated in SGC regs, the determination of 'light duty,' shall be at the discretion of the ranking officer overseeing the mission or project in question unless directly countermanded by a member of the SGC medical staff," Jackson said

"In what universe is the ranking officer not *me*, Jackson?" Landry growled.

"We could use him," Jackson said, shrugging, "and he's acting head of Icarus."

"Suit up," Landry snapped, "but make no mistake—the final call is mine."

"Yes sir," Young said.

As they left the room, Vala twisted to give Young a wink and Jackson a subtle 'okay sign,' which the other man waved away with an exasperated air. Once they were in the hallway, Young could feel the gravity of Jackson's gaze pulling him in. It was impossible to not to look at the other man. Their eyes snapped together with all the complementarity that a shared secret afforded.

"Thanks for backing me," Young said.

Jackson gave a nearly imperceptible nod.

Thirty-five minutes later, thanks to the reestablishment of contact with the *Odyssey* via maddeningly slow light-speed radio communications—passed from the *Odyssey* to the dubiously friendly Langarans who subsequently dialed the Alpha site—they had enough information to know that the ship had, as Perry had surmised, suffered a failure

of every crystal-based array on board. Repairs to the transporter and shields were already completed, and, following Carter's recommendation, Landry deemed it sufficiently safe risk gate travel to the planet. The general had also been convinced, given the degree to which the damage on the *Odyssey* had matched the hypothetical scenario outlined by Amanda Perry, that there was little evidence of Lucian Alliance involvement in the current situation.

The combination of all these factors had persuaded Landry to one—send a team, and two—to put Young in command of that team.

Young wasn't certain that anyone could really *command* SG-1—with its two colonels, its two aliens, and its machinating linguist with friends everywhere, including on other planes of existence. He tried not to think of himself as nothing more than a terrible substitute for Colonel Carter. He wasn't very successful, mainly because *he was* a terrible substitute for her, especially on a mission like this.

Nevertheless, with SG-1 flanking him, Young stepped through the gate into the midst of a storm. Rain struck the metal arch of the gate, rebounded off the stone underfoot and hissed through the trees that surrounded the small clearing. A faint tang of ozone was carried on the intermittent gusts of wind that seemed determined to unbalance him. He widened his stance on the rain-slicked rock of the platform and pulled out his radio.

"*Odyssey*, this is Colonel Young." He waited, feeling the rain soak through his hair over the span of a few seconds.

There was no response other than static, barely audible over the roar of wind through the forest.

"Their radio array is supposed to be back online," Young said, looking up into the swirling darkness of the storm.

"We're going to have to boost our signal to cut through this shit," Mitchell replied, holding a hand up to shield his eyes as he looked into the forbidding cloud-cover above them. "And speaking as a corn-fed, Midwestern, twister-veteran, I'd say this thing looks like it's about to get real bad, real fast."

"Twister?" Teal'c asked, zipping his jacket up to his chin.

"Have I got a film for you, muscles," Vala replied, as she tucked her already wet hair beneath the collar of her fatigues. "Something like *As Good as it Gets*, but with truly atrocious weather."

"It's the same thing as a tornado," Mitchell said to Teal'c. "Y'know. A violently rotating column of air? In contact with the ground?"

"Don't even say it," Jackson said, squinting up into the downpour. "And Teal'c, you've been on Earth for how long? Ten years? How is *Vala* better than you are with the cultural references? How is that even *possible*?"

"It's not a competition, darling," Vala said, rocked by a vicious blast of wind.

"I do not go out of my way to acquire Tau'ri slang," Teal'c said, his eyes narrowed, his gaze sweeping the tree line where low-hanging clouds seemed to generate their own darkness.

Young stepped down from the platform, treading carefully over slick stone to approach the team huddled in a fan around McKay. Around them, dead radios and McKay's original computer spread out like wind-stripped leaves. The three soldiers were valiantly trying to secure a tarp that would protect his new laptop from the worst of the gusting rain.

It was clearly a losing battle.

"Oh great," McKay shouted over the wind as they approached. "More soldiers, a linguist, and—someone who is just—way too hot to be a physicist," he finished, eyeing Vala.

"McKay," Carter snapped, her voice barely audible over the open channel.

"No offense," McKay said. "As you know, I consider you to be a statistical anomaly in a very, very hot package. What do you think of the current state of the outgoing matrix buffer? Please god, tell me you think it's intact."

Vala smiled a patently false smile that seemed to twist in a manner that struck Young as vaguely predatory. "Isn't this one a charmer?"

"So, are you?" McKay demanded, glancing at Vala before clicking between windows on his laptop, "A physicist, I mean?"

"No," Vala said cheerfully. "I'm just here to increase the aesthetics and decrease the ethics of the SGC's flagship team."

"Witty. So, a linguist then. You're also hot for a linguist, in case you were wondering," McKay replied absently.

Jackson subtly elbowed Vala, looking half annoyed, half-impressed, and wholly drenched.

Vala elbowed him back with quite a bit less subtlety, but she kept her eyes fixed on McKay as she said, "Funnily enough, I *wasn't*," with another faux friendly flash of teeth.

"McKay, you're going to need to stay focused," Carter said, her voice a static-frayed snap.

Overhead, there was a flash of lightning from somewhere deep in the clouds. Young looked up involuntarily, catching the last flickers of fading light. Almost immediately, thunder hit with a crack that faded to a long, menacing growl.

"This storm is pretty much on top of us," Mitchell said, catching Young's eye.

"I am. I am focused," McKay said, rapidly scrolling through data. "This is how I focus. You should know this about me by now and I think you do, you're just giving me a hard time so that Dr. Perry doesn't get the wrong idea about our complicated personal history but look, I don't just stare into space for two seconds and have intuitive insights that I'm one hundred percent sure are related to the fact that you're a woman. Perry's a woman. All this crystal-based stuff—it's like perfect for you guys. You ladies. Gals. Whatever. Not that I'm implying you're not intelligent, because, clearly, you are. In some areas possibly more so than I am, I'm just saying that our brains are different and —"

"Stop talking," Carter snapped. "You're shattering Dr. Perry's illusions about you by the second. And we have no personal history."

"Dr. Perry has—illusions about me?" McKay asked.

"Not anymore," Perry replied.

"Whatever," McKay said. "Anyway, tell General Landry thanks for the backup. This is extremely helpful. A little bit more helpful than a thirteen year old with an umbrella, just to put it in context for you. Doesn't America's most preeminent cryptographer have an *assistant* of some kind?"

"He works alone," Young growled.

"Well, the weird ones always do," McKay replied, looking back at his computer, wiping rain off the plastic cover that enclosed the monitor.

Young narrowed his eyes at McKay's precarious, weather-assailed setup. The man's laptop was clamped to a crate beneath the scientist's wrists and angled into the wind, half-closed. It was connected to a messy, delicate array currently held by Greer that glowed green and interfaced with the altered DHD via a tangle of wind-whipped wires.

The entire thing was a disaster waiting to happen.

Judging by McKay's nervous glances at the wiring, the other man knew it too.

"Listen up," Young shouted the roaring wind. "We need to do two things. One, weather-proof this array to the best of our ability, and two, reestablish local communications capabilities with the *Odyssey*. SG-1, you're on the array. Reaves and Atienza, stick with McKay. Greer and I will start unpacking the portable communications kit to see if we can't boost our radio signal through this mess." He gestured up at the clouds above them.

Greer fell in next to Young with a brief nod after handing whatever he was holding off to Vala.

"You done this before?" Young shouted over the wind as Teal'c handed him the kit containing the communications array. He motioned to Greer and then knelt next to one of the plastic crates with considerable difficulty, dropping slowly to his bad knee, keeping his back as straight as possible.

"No sir." Greer shouted back.

"No time like the present," Young said, blinking as a stinging spray of rain, rebounding from the crate between them, hit him straight in the face. "Crack it open, sergeant."

Greer released the metal clamps on the top of the case and flung the lid back as lightning crawled through the clouds above them in a flickering fan.

With a clattering sound, hail began to fall, pinging off the gate and DHD.

"I think we might need to get out of here," Mitchell called back toward Young, his head ducked low, his hands wrapped around the wires connected to the array as another round of thunder split the air above them. "As in, *away* from the *gate*. This thing is going to draw lightning like you wouldn't believe."

"No kidding," McKay shouted in Mitchell's direction before he turned to look at Young. "But we're not going to outrun the principles of electrostatics. And we may have people *still out here*. We are not dialing out from this gate until I am certain that they're not linked to it or in the buffer. We have to wait out the *Odyssey's* transport repairs."

Young raised a hand to indicate understanding and turned to Greer, who was brushing a layer of small hailstones off the open kit.

"Did your team get any details from Emerson about the weather before you lost contact?" Young asked.

Above them, there was another long roll of thunder.

"After a six hour window it was going to get ugly," Greer replied. "Colonel Sheppard wanted us out by gate or by ship—" the sergeant made a sweeping upward motion with his hand, that suggested beaming technology, "about an hour ago."

Young grimaced, blinking rain out of his eyes and looked down at the kit. "Power supply," he snapped, pointing out items in a rapid-fire clockwise list, "base, transmitter, signal booster, and receiver. Base," he said, as Greer pulled it from the kit, "Right here." He swept a patina of hailstones off the surface of the crate between them.

Without being told, Greer picked up the power supply and snapped it into the base of the unit before setting it down where Young had indicated, then correctly positioned the transmitter.

"You came up from where?" Young asked, as Greer subjected the signal booster to a brief, critical examination.

"Marine Corps," Greer said, clicking the booster into place as he pulled the receiver out of the kit.

"You don't say."

Overhead there was a flash of lightning that was almost immediately followed by a deafening clap of thunder. Young watched Greer glance up at the threatening, irregular light that flickered deep within the clouds before powering up the unit and handing the receiver to Young.

Young depressed a button on the transmitter and spoke into the device. "Odyssey, this is Colonel Young. Please tell me you're reading this."

"Colonel Young," he heard faintly over the static. He pressed the receiver to his ear. "This is Colonel Emerson—" a hiss of interference interrupted the signal before he was able to make out "—rrent status?"

"Two of the original team are missing," Young shouted into the array, feeling a strange prickling sensation at the back of his neck, "and we're having a tough time of it down here with the weather."

"Understood," Emerson replied. "—eric scans show—"

A flash of lightning too bright and too close seared Young's retinas even as it drew his gaze in a brilliant arc between sky and active gate. There was almost no interval between the light and the deafening clap of thunder that followed.

The gate shut down.

"Everyone away from the DHD," Young shouted. "Away from the gate." Already the team was pulling back, Atienza and Reaves doing their best to drag McKay away from his laptop.

"I need that computer," McKay shouted in Young's direction as they dragged him toward the tree line. "*I need* that computer."

Young straightened with a vicious pull in his back and forced himself to jog the few steps over toward McKay's laptop. He reached down, disconnected the cables with a snap, freed it from its clamp and shoved it at the scientist.

"We need a beam-out *now*," Mitchell shouted over the wind.

"They could *still be here*," McKay shouted back, tucking the laptop under his arm.

"Or they could be somewhere else," Mitchell said. "Make for the tree line," he continued. "Go. Go."

Young turned back toward Greer, only to find the sergeant already next to him, transmitter in hand.

"We need a beam-out now," Young said as he pulled the array from Greer's grip. "Odyssey, do you copy?"

"Yes," Emerson said, "But the transponders—" the signal faded to a hiss —"original team —" The man's voice was cut off by another brilliant streamer of lightning and deafening clap of thunder.

"Go," Mitchell shouted again over the drumming of the hail against leaves and plastic and metal, and over the strange, ominous buzz that seemed to emanate from the gate and DHD.

Young could feel his hair beginning to stand on end. He forced himself into a jog and then an unstable run over grass and through tangled undergrowth. "Odyssey," he shouted into the array. "We need a beam out."

"—only five transponders—do you copy? We read only *five transponders*."

"McKay," Young shouted, barely able to see the man ahead of him through the driving hail and rain. It was hard to keep his eyes open. "McKay."

The scientist slowed and Young caught up with him. "They don't have a lock on everyone," Young said as another strike of lightning connected, somewhere behind them with a deafening crack. "They've only got five of us."

"I'm amazed they have *anyone* through this—"

Another flash of lightning cut him off again. Young didn't see where this strike hit but he could smell the ozone, feel the charge in the air.

"Five," McKay shouted, his hand on Young's arm, "You're sure it was five?"

"Yes," Young replied as they made the tree line. "Yes."

"They're going to have to sweep for us," McKay shouted as they slipped beneath the dark violence of windswept branches. Around them, the trees groaned with the strain of the wind.

"No," Jackson said, his voice and silhouette unmistakable even in the dim light. "A sweep? No. *No*. Have you seen—"

"Shut up," McKay snapped. "Group together. Two concentric circles. Original team inside, new team outside."

"McKay—" Young began.

"Our embedded transponders were blown out in the same EM pulse that killed our radios and our computers. They're picking up the new team only."

"Do it," Young confirmed.

They formed up quickly, Young and SG-1 on the outside, surrounding the other four.

Young depressed the button on his array, but McKay, positioned opposite him, stopped him with a chilled hand around his wrist.

"John," McKay screamed into the storm. "If you're out there, get in the center of this circle."

Young spoke into the radio. "*Odyssey*, stand by to do a transport sweep that encompasses a radial area defined by the five signals you're locked onto. Give us as wide a margin as you can, on my mark."

For a span of seconds they waited.

Young held his breath as the trees roared around them, hoping that wherever Rush was, it was not here, in the midst of this storm.

McKay's fingers released Young's wrist.

"Mark," he said into the radio.

Chapter Twenty Four

"Welcome home."

John Sheppard swept a hand through his hair.

The projection of the woman flickered before them, pale against the shifting pastels of land and sky, her hair a washed-out approximation of darkness, her hands open. Sheppard's eyes moved restlessly away from her and out over the long, windblown grass. The sage-green of the leaves bent in turbulent eddies around the regular gleam of low-set metal that glimmered in a mostly-hidden radial pattern around their position. The grass, the sky, the occasional gray surface of a rock—all of it seemed bleached, as if every surface accessible to the harsh light of this world had been stripped of its color. The shadows beneath the grass and their own dark silhouettes were a deeper, sharper black than seemed appropriate.

There was something about the place that set his mind on edge.

Something in the elevated contrast between light and dark that seemed—unnatural.

Perhaps it was. Perhaps someone's virtual contrast needed tweaking.

Nothing should be ruled out.

"State the nature of your requirement," the woman said.

"I require you to state your nature," Rush replied, without looking to him for any kind of guidance, without waiting for clearance or advice, without considering what he said—but with a such a wry twist to an already deft turn of phrase that Sheppard couldn't help but admire the man's style.

In almost any other circumstance he would have let it go, let Rush push things forward, but—

He stepped in, his hand closing around the mathematician's arm just above the elbow. He didn't take his eyes away from the woman that hovered before them, and so he didn't miss the almost imperceptible lightening of her expression that Rush's comment had produced. It was so fleeting that he wasn't positive it had been real. But it might have been.

"Careful," Sheppard murmured, feeling the other man tense. "I'm not sure this is what it looks like."

"I am an adaptive recording," the woman said. "State the nature of your requirement."

Rush said nothing. He angled his head toward Sheppard.

The wind hissed through the grass.

After a moment, Sheppard asked the projection, "what did you mean when you said: 'welcome home'."

"This is one of several default greetings. State the nature of your requirement."

That sounded, perhaps, a little too convenient to be plausible. That, or McKay was rubbing off on him. He wished McKay were here.

"Where are we?" Sheppard asked.

"This is Altera," the woman replied.

At the sound of the word something snapped into place in his mind, a feeling of rightness and oneness and wholeness that he fought against embracing because he recognized it for what it was. An external influence. It had *to be*, because *his* home was California, where the sun was gold rather than white, and where the only thing that pressed against the mind was the vastness of the Pacific ocean.

Altera.

Altera.

The name rang through the air and through his thoughts like something to be warded off. Even if he hadn't known from the databases, from McKay, from Dr. Jackson's meticulous accounts of the Ori, he would have been able to feel the true identity of this place. It was inherent to the touch of the word on his thoughts. This had been their home, with its irradiating light and deep shadows; with its seas of grass where silver borders hinted at concealments he could only imagine.

Beside him, Rush stood as if he had been affixed to the ground, the muscles of his arm rock hard beneath Sheppard's grip. Could the mathematician feel it as well—whatever it was that pulled at his thoughts? Did Rush have the gene, or had the other man been pulled along with Sheppard's instinctive, projective intent to find the cypher?

There had been something else in his mind.

Something *beneath* the urge to find the cypher.

This—this could be his fault.

Sheppard had not been able to shake the nearly unbearable urge *go home* that seemed haunt him every time he left the city. Of course, he had been thinking of

Atlantis, but unless one was very specific in one's intent, Ancient technology had a way of warping the subconscious. As if it had its own desires. Almost certainly, it did.

It was best not to think of such things here. Best not to think of them now.

"Nice place," Sheppard said, looking up at the woman, "kind of underdeveloped."

"State the nature of your requirement."

"What are you concerned about, exactly?" Rush asked him, almost too quietly to be heard over the hissing of the wind through the grass.

Sheppard marginally loosened his grip on the other man's arm. "There's something about this place that seems—"

"Familiar," Rush said. The word had a lilting gravitas that was difficult to pull apart from the resonant echo it produced in his mind. A low-grade vibration that he'd always associated with Atlantis thrummed beneath and through the sound of Rush's voice. It would require only a half-turn of Sheppard's thoughts to bring him into an alignment that he'd *always resisted* but *only just*; a mental independence he suspected was partially his own and partially *allowed* by Atlantis itself. He wanted to communicate something of this to Rush, who already seemed a part of this planet or of its hidden technological architecture, but he couldn't think of a way to verbalize a warning.

Perhaps he was imagining the resonance between the planet and the other man's voice.

Did Rush even have the ATA gene? The LTA gene?

Maybe the mathematician couldn't feel any of this. Even Beckett, who was, who *had been*, a natural positive— "Let's keep in mind that we're not Ancients," Sheppard said, pulling the eyeteeth out of the thought before it could complete itself.

"Yes yes," Rush whispered back, "but we *are* looking for something." He tipped his head in the direction of the projection.

Sheppard nodded.

"We require a key," Rush said, raising his voice to be heard above the wind, "to the cypher that brought us here."

Cypher.

The word unfurled like a microcosm into all that it represented and much that it should not. His hand tightened again on Rush's arm—not in warning—but, this time, as a form of reality testing. Rush pulled away.

"Correct," the apparition replied. "You may proceed."

"Proceed where?" Sheppard asked.

"You have missed seeing," she said.

"Really."

Silence fell as they considered her words. The wind died away.

"I confess—this is not what I envisioned," Rush murmured.

"Eh. This kind of thing happens more often than you might think," Sheppard said, watching the woman with an expression that he hoped projected more neutrality than distrust. "Can you determine anything from the DHD?"

Rush vanished from his peripheral vision. Sheppard kept his eyes fixed on the image of the woman. She looked down at him with an unwavering intensity. He wasn't sure he could conclude anything about her nature from studying her. To him, their technology had never seemed anything but wholly alive.

Sheppard glanced back at Rush, who was examining the crystal array, glowing with a pale brilliance under the white light of the star. The other man's hands passed over metal and circuitry with a delicate drag-and-sweep that was intimate, proprietary, and difficult to watch. In the bones of his own hands he could feel a strange longing for the metallic grades and curves of Lantean controls—a physical manifestation of an incompleteness of soul.

There were times that he—

No.

There were never those times.

"They're going to think I abducted you," Sheppard said, the words as slow and dry as he could make them. He ran his fingers over the strap of his rifle, trying to dispel the strange and empty sensation in his hands that matched the directionless ache of his thoughts.

"*Did* you?" Rush spoke without looking at him.

Young had been pretty explicit regarding the warning signs of impending panic on the part of his neighbor. Sheppard was unclear as to how exploding DHDs followed by surprise space-and-or-time translocation did not seem to rank on Rush's list of things to panic about, but he wasn't inclined to question his good fortune; nor was he about to draw attention to an advantageous psychological oversight.

"Only a little," Sheppard said, feeling the truthful undertone of the words. "This is probably my fault."

He continued to watch the woman.

She continued to watch him.

"You think so, do you?" Rush asked, the question so dry that it nearly concealed its curiously understated arrogance.

Sheppard glanced back, briefly, but Rush did not seem to expect any kind of response.

When he was in the city, Atlantis existed always at the edges of his thoughts, a gentle resistance against the instinctive spread of his subconscious out and down through the corridors he walked. It waited with a patient receptivity for whatever he might need. It called to him with a subtle pressure while he stayed silent. Sheppard could feel this place as well—laid out against his mind—but beneath that same resistance was something much vaster, much darker, and much emptier than his city.

The city.

Atlantis was not *his*.

He glanced again at Rush.

He wished he had asked more questions during the too-short briefing at Homeworld Command, because nothing like *this* had seemed as if it had been on the table. He had an entire checklist of security protocols to follow and ten minutes of information on how to avoid upsetting the Earth's most preeminent cryptographer, all of which was only marginally helpful in assessing the threat level of his current situation.

He suspected that threat level was quite high.

"I can't determine much without a software interface," Rush said, one hand sweeping out in a graceful arc. "My experience with DHD circuitry is more theoretical than practical."

"Yeah," Sheppard said. "I get that."

The wind hissed through the grass.

The other man had one hand hooked over his shoulder and was staring out over the shifting green waves with his head subtly cocked—as if trying to ignore something.

"Can you—" Sheppard trailed off, unable to verbalize what he wanted to ask, one hand coming up from the strap of his weapon to gesture vaguely next to his temple. "Feel—"

"Yes," Rush said.

"Do you have the gene?" Sheppard asked.

"I have all of them."

They were quiet, watching the grass hiss around the metal structure that surrounded them.

"This might be kinda teleological for the middle of a mission-gone-wrong, but, do you have a feeling about whether this might be—" Sheppard hesitated on the cusp of the question, and then tipped over into the decision he'd already made. "Real?"

"I wish you hadn't asked that," Rush replied, one hand trailing through thigh-high streamers of grass. His fingers closed around a long, thin leaf, and he broke it free, as if testing the consistency of the world.

"Yeah, me too," Sheppard said.

"What makes you think it isn't?" Rush asked, examining his broken stem of grass.

"I'm getting a very—Ancient-techy-vibe from a planet that doesn't look like it has much of it to speak of."

"Is that what it is," Rush murmured, one hand coming to his temple.

"That's what it is," Sheppard confirmed, trying to avoid the raw edges of his own thoughts.

"Shall we proceed?" Rush asked.

Sheppard turned to look back at the DHD, glittering under the harsh light of the sun.

They could wait here for McKay to figure out what had happened, but as there was no way of determining where they were or when they were or whether they had been corporeally or only consciously transported, he didn't feel comfortable waiting for rescue. The other option was to attempt a reversal of the process that had brought them there. It was possible that by touching the DHD with intent, they would be able to transport themselves back. Of course, if they did that, they wouldn't have what they came for. The chances of successfully making it this far again were far from one hundred percent.

"Yeah," Sheppard said, "but don't *touch* anything."

"Fine," Rush replied, starting forward toward the radial perimeter of metal that was just visible over the tips of the grass.

Sheppard glanced once more at the still-watching figure of the woman before matching his stride to Rush's. He kept the distance between them to less than a yard

as they paced out the perimeter of the ring. There was only one opening in the low metallic wall.

"Are you sure you're up for this?" Sheppard asked.

"I'm certain." Rush spoke without looking at him.

Sheppard raised his eyebrows.

"I'm certain," Rush said again, looking at him.

"We go through together," Sheppard said, taking Rush's arm. "On three."

"What, exactly, do you think is going to happen?" Rush's words had a disdainful edge, but there was an undertone of unease beneath them that the man couldn't entirely conceal.

"Let's just say that I'm going to be surprised if we end up standing in a patch of grass beyond this ring, feeling stupid," Sheppard said grimly. "Think about the cypher key, and nothing else."

Rush nodded.

"One."

He eyed the metal barrier, aware of it pressing against his mind with disquieting expectancy, as if it could *feel* his presence. Beside him, Rush shifted, one hand coming to his temple.

"Two."

He focused on the cypher, on its key, the concepts unfolding in his mind with more detail that should have been possible. He held onto them, linking them to a visceral desire for opening that could not be entirely his own.

"Three."

Atop images of unlocking he layered in an instinctive directive to *stay with Rush* as he stepped forward into a flash of white.

Room 1, attempt 1

Sheppard opened his eyes to find himself next to Rush in a long, narrow, windowless room. Planes of silver gleamed under blue-white lights that flared at the junction between the ceiling and the walls. They stood within the bounds of a semi-circle inlaid

into the floor, flush with the wall at their back. Directly opposite them, at a distance of approximately fifty feet, was a door.

He no longer had his gun.

"Don't move," Sheppard said, one hand extended in front of Rush.

His nerves tingled in warning, offsetting the mental draw of the opposite door.

There was only one way out.

Glowing Ancient text threaded its way in an irregular pattern over the floor between where they stood and the room's only exit. A single phrase, repeated over and over again.

"Yearning hurts, and what release may come of it feels like death," Rush read.

Sheppard's hands reached instinctively for the strap of his rifle, but there was nothing there.

"Great," he said, shoving his hands into his pockets as he studied the script to confirm Rush's translation. "That doesn't sound ominous."

Rush looked over at him, his expression locked. "Your gun is missing."

"Yup," Sheppard said. "I noticed that."

They looked at the far door.

"I think this is one of those—prove yourself kind of things," Sheppard said. "This happens sometimes with Ancient tech. Usually—" He broke off, wishing intently for McKay. "Usually they just reject you if you fail. They don't kill you."

"Usually?" Rush echoed.

"Yeah," Sheppard said. "Usually." For a moment they looked across the floor in silence.

"But we're committed now, so—"

Rush nodded.

Together they stepped forward, out of the inscribed circle. The sides of the room flared an immediate, brilliant blue as force fields snapped into existence along both lateral walls.

"Aw crap," Sheppard said, shifting his stance rocking forward onto the balls of his feet.

"Go. Go."

The two fields began to close in on them.

He pushed off, feeling himself gather speed over the course of just a few strides. He shoved Rush ahead of him, but the mathematician was fast—faster than *he* was as they tore through the long, narrow room. The breath burned in the back of his throat. Even as he pushed himself for every last increment of speed he knew that this could *not* be the answer. Whatever the choice had been, they had chosen incorrectly because they *would not make it* to the far door before the fields met. Rush slowed, likely coming to the same realization.

The fields were already so close that Sheppard could feel the static charge on his skin, see the blue-white glow in his peripheral vision. He reached forward to grab the back of Rush's jacket and did the only thing he could think of that might help, which was to press his mind into the waiting presence that bordered on his thoughts and shout into that unknown, voracious mental space.

Stop stop stop stop stop stop stop—

But it was Rush who stopped, his hands coming up as the fields moved in.

Together they fell as energy crashed down on either side of them, waves of electricity that his own internal biological circuitry could do nothing in the face of—not even scream—when his heart stopped and his nerves lit up and his conscious mind was slapped straight out of existence.

He fell.

He gasped for air.

His heart hammered out a terrified rhythm against his ribs, against his throat.

His hands twisted into the grass that surrounded him, into the material of someone else's uniform as he blinked, trying to ground himself against the remembered shock of death by electrical discharge.

He looked down.

"Rush," he said. "*Rush.*" The other man was beneath him, his eyes open, his expression horrified. Sheppard climbed off him and pulled him into a sitting position and they sat for a moment in the shadows cast by the long grass near the base of the metal wall.

"We should try it again," Rush whispered.

"Nope," Sheppard replied, struggling to keep his voice even. "No way. We're outta here. Someone else, who isn't an international, intergalactic, intellectual resource, can get the magical chevron. Mitchell loves this kind of thing. Right up his alley." He

pushed himself to his feet, feeling his muscles rebel against his weight, shaking under him as he stood. He reached down and pulled Rush up. Together they walked back to the center of the metal circle and to the DHD that waited there.

Had been waiting there.

The wind hissed through the grass around them.

"Should have seen *that* one coming," Sheppard said, the words coming slowly as he tried to brace himself against his own rising fear and against the omnipresent pull of Ancient technology that soaked the edges of his thoughts.

"Was it *ever* there?" Rush asked, a hysterical edge to his words, "or was it *shown* to us? How much of this is happening? How much of this is a computational application of—fucking ontological phenomenology?"

Sheppard shot Rush a sharp look.

You have to derail him before he gets going, Young had said.

What he was about to say wasn't exactly Sheppard's usual style, but this was turning out to be a not-so-usual kind of day. "There are three possibilities that I can see," he replied, stitching his words together with all the casualness he could muster post death-by-force-field. "One—all of this is virtual, meaning we're completely, even now, decoupled from our physical bodies. Two—some of this is virtual, meaning that we were transported here, we're currently—" he paused to clap a hand over Rush's shoulder, "corporeal, but when we stepped through the barrier, we had a virtual experience. Three—*none* of it is virtual and we physically died in there but got some kind of reset, maybe a temporal one."

Rush took a deep breath, reassured by substantive analysis.

"At the very least," Sheppard said, "there's more to this planet than meets the eye. But we had a sense for that already."

"Yes," Rush said. "True. And, for our purposes, the exact nature of our circumstances isn't necessarily relevant."

"I wouldn't mind knowing," Sheppard said dryly, "but I think we just—have to make it through this thing."

"Agreed," Rush said quietly, looking back at the gap in the wall.

Room 1, attempt 3

"Well I don't see that we have much of a choice," Rush snapped, one hand on his hip, the other hooked over his shoulder. "There's clearly no way to outrun the fields. We've tried it twice now, and frankly, it's not exactly an elegant solution."

"And your solution *is*?" Sheppard countered. "What if I weren't here?"

"Who knows how that would affect things?" Rush said. "If we can't even assume this place *exists*, then I don't think we can assume it's the same for every participant or set of participants."

Sheppard shot him a dark look but bent low, bridging his hands. Rush stepped into his grip and then onto his back, his fingertips contacting the wall for stability as Sheppard straightened slowly, allowing the other man to get a look at the shallow recess housing the lighting that ran the perimeter of the room.

"See anything?" Sheppard asked, his palms flat against silver metal. He was careful to keep them within the bounds of the semicircle in which they stood.

"Lights," Rush said dryly. "I'm going to—"

There was a snap of an electrical discharge. Rush was knocked back with enough force to pull Sheppard over. They hit the floor at the same time, the mathematician's head impacting against the metal with a sickening crack.

The fields flared to life.

"Rush," Sheppard hissed urgently.

There was no response.

His peripheral vision was a menacing wall of blue.

His heart hammered wildly in the face of anticipated agony. The sound of the approaching fields already prying up a primitive terror from the back of his mind. He knelt next to Rush, pressed one hand to the floor, one hand to the mathematician's forehead, and focused on halting the progression of the fields using nothing but his thoughts.

It would have worked on Atlantis.

He wasn't sure why it wasn't working here.

Rush shifted and opened his eyes.

"Put your hand on the floor," Sheppard said, speaking quickly and clearly. "Close your eyes, touch the floor, and try to force them back."

A menacing hum progressively rose in pitch and intensity.

He shut his eyes and concentrated.

Room 1, attempt 5

He stood next to Rush, a subtle tremor in his muscles that he could not suppress.

"Do you think," Rush said, his voice uneven, "that there's a limit?"

"To what?" Sheppard asked, shifting his weight to minimize the shaking of exhausted muscles.

"To how many times we're able to attempt this?"

"Yeah," Sheppard replied. "Yeah, I think there might be. It—ah. It *feels* like there might be." He looked over at Rush, pale in the blue light of the room. "Let's—" his throat contracted, swallowing the rest of his sentence. "Let's sit down." He couldn't control his own descent to the floor, and Rush didn't fare much better. They both dropped against the wall, knees giving out within the confines of the inlaid semicircle of metal.

"Is this a—typical day for you?" Rush asked.

"Usually I try to avoid dying before lunch."

Rush smiled faintly.

"You're taking this pretty well," Sheppard said.

"Whatever Young told you—" Rush said, one hand coming up to press against his eye socket, "is almost certainly wrong."

Sheppard shrugged. "He said you were pretty scrappy."

"Scrappy."

"Direct quote," Sheppard replied.

Rush managed to pack an impressive amount of derision into his sigh.

For a moment, they were quiet as Sheppard looked at the opposite door, feeling it pull against his thoughts.

"Running isn't fast enough," Sheppard said. "Thinking doesn't work, messing with the walls was a no go." He looked at the script on the floor. "How good is your Ancient?"

"Only passable," Rush said, leaning forward to look at the repeating phrase that glowed along the floor, "and highly skewed toward technical vocabulary and constructions. Yours?"

Sheppard made an equivocal hand gesture as he leaned forward to study the line of text. "Desiderium," he said, looking at the flowing script. "'Yearning,' was what you went with, but it could also be also maybe 'want,' or 'desire'. Then we have 'vulneo', which is—" Sheppard broke off as his shoulder twitched involuntarily, "a bit of an odd choice."

"Maybe not," Rush said slowly. "It's used in a technical sense to indicate the distress or warping of field lines."

Sheppard sat forward. "This is it. This has to be it." He looked over at Rush. "The letters proceed directly from this circle to the far door. They must warp the oncoming field."

"I don't think so," Rush replied, shaking his head once.

"Why not?" Sheppard asked.

"Explain to me, mechanistically, how such a thing might work," Rush said, shifting to lean against the back wall and shutting his eyes. "The letters form a continuous path between here and the far door. That's not warping a field. That's breaking it. Besides, the field is visible and its approach is uniform."

"You're making enough assumptions regarding field boundaries that I still think it's worth a shot," Sheppard said.

Rush cracked an eye at him. "I've met enough colonels to know that you're atypical."

"Don't out me," Sheppard said, hauling himself to his feet before extending a hand to help Rush up. "It would crush McKay."

"In that case," Rush replied, "I'm sorely tempted."

Before he could think too much about it, Sheppard stepped out of the semicircle, planting each foot along the line of text like he was walking a sinuous tightrope, struggling to keep his balance as the field advanced with a terrifying buzz.

He could sense Rush following him.

They were closer to the left lateral wall this time and he could feel the presence of the approaching energy warming the side of his face, his hand. It rushed into his peripheral vision like wave.

He held himself steady.

He kept walking, foot by halting foot, fighting the temptation to flinch as it bore down on them.

"This is *not* going to work," Rush said.

"Probably not, no—"

The field slammed into him, sending him to the floor with a slap that was subsumed in a shriek of agony as it passed over him, stopping his heart and stopping his—

Room 1, attempt 6

They sat against the wall, shivering in reaction, looking toward the opposite door.

"I was sure that was it," Sheppard whispered, shutting his eyes. "How could that not be it?"

"Yearning hurts, and what release may come of it feels like death," Rush said.

"That's just *mean*," Sheppard said, one hand pressed flat against his chest, looking at the string of words trailing across the floor.

"There must be an alternate translation," Rush said.

"I hate puns," Sheppard said. "So much."

"I concur," Rush said. "I find them intellectually punishing."

"I see what you did there." Sheppard closed his eyes, right hand fisted in his jacket over his sternum, as if that could do anything for the fluttering feeling in his chest.

"Release is a noun," Rush broke off, shivering. "Related to discharge."

"Yeah," Sheppard said, his eyes half-closed. "Discharge. *Avoiding* discharge would be nice. I would be in favor of that."

"Stay there," Rush said. "I want to try something."

Sheppard's eyes flew open just in time to see that Rush had gotten to his feet and stepped forward.

The walls lit up with their blue-white glow and immediately began to advance. Rush stepped back inside the confines of the circle.

"Rush," Sheppard hissed, not even bothering to stand

"There *must* be a way to avoid it," Rush said. "This is the only remaining possibility."

The fields advanced, bearing down on them with a familiar crescendo that Sheppard was *sure* would be haunting his dreams for nights to come, presuming he got out of here alive. He watched the approaching walls of brilliant blue, wishing for the familiar solidity of McKay's panicked, earnest arrogance with enough intensity to close his throat.

The fields skirted the inlaid semicircle on the floor and crashed into each other, energy passing through energy, splitting into greens and yellows in shifting irregular patterns.

"Well this is fair fucking embarrassing," Rush said, surveying the glowing interior of the room.

"Oh yeah," Sheppard said dryly, still sitting, his back against the wall. "Humiliating."

Rush glanced down at him.

"You don't think this is still going to kill us once we step out there?" Sheppard asked, giving the words a slow pull, trying to calm the racing of his own heart. "I don't see how our situation has improved."

"Oh, I'm sure the extant energy field is still capable of killing us, but I think now you're correct about the path through the room," Rush continued. "The two overlaid fields must be destructively interfering, and I suspect they do so in a predictable way."

"Great," Sheppard said, taking Rush's proffered hand. "Let's get out of here."

They wended their way along the sinuous track of letters, passing through air made thick with the glow of energy that fluctuated around them, tugging at their hair and sparking in their clothes, but they made it to the opposite door. Sheppard grabbed Rush's arm, and hit the door controls.

Beyond the opening was a terrifying blackness.

They stepped forward together.

Room 2, attempt 1

For a long moment neither of them spoke.

The room was circular, with unadorned walls. Sheppard reached behind himself to press a hand against the featureless wall at his back. Already he felt sick, past fatigue, his muscles unwilling to support him against gravity, against the pressure on his mind, against the sight of a triple-bladed weapon suspended over a blue column. From the look of the thing, it was meant to be worn like a glove and wielded like a knife.

There were times that he didn't understand them.

The Ancients.

They had created beautiful things. Things that welcomed listeners into symphonic energies. things that could subsume a limiting sense of self into a universal harmony. It was a mistake to think them benevolent because they had created something that could *call* to him. They were capable of callousness, of violence in absentia. Their technology had always been demanding—never to *him*—but to McKay, to Beckett, to O'Neill, to Jackson, to all of those that got in its way. It demanded a rigor of purpose that matched a people who adhered so strongly to their code of conduct that they would sanction their own destruction.

"Maybe it's not what it looks like," Rush whispered.

"Oh," Sheppard said, feeling his face twist with the word. "I think it is."

There was no exit to the room.

"I don't understand this," Rush said, and the words were nearly soundless.

"It's a test," Sheppard replied, still looking at the weapon.

"Of *what*," Rush asked, high pitched, "the ability to solve problems by trial and error? By *dying*? What kind of metric—"

"Resolution," Sheppard said.

"This isn't a *test*," Rush hissed with a venomous edge that Sheppard found oddly comforting. "It's a *criterion*. A benchmark. Like the genes. Who are *they* to judge the rest of existence?"

"The guys with the keys, I guess," Sheppard said, giving him a wan smile. He crossed the room and walked around the weapon, examining it from all sides. It was made of a delicate, silver metal. The grip consisted of a contoured bar, meant to be held in a

closed fist. Above the back of the hand, three scythe-like blades radiated out from a metal guard.

He was certain that as soon as he picked it up, he was going to have to fight something.

This was going to be messy.

This was going to be slow.

This was going to be—incredibly awful.

He looked over at Rush, who stood opposite him.

"I'm probably not going to make it," Sheppard said, the words like flint on flint. "Not the first time."

"Please make an effort," Rush replied.

Sheppard gave him a wan smile and reached forward, threading his fingers through the weapon's grip. He snatched it out of its suspension field with a clean, quiet tone.

"Left," Rush shouted, and Sheppard turned, bringing his right hand up and around in a fast, instinctive arc.

Blade met blade with a clanging sound. He stumbled backward, so startled that he nearly dropped the weapon. His opponent was dressed in black—unfamiliar clothes in an unfamiliar cut. But—

He was facing himself.

He was facing *himself*—well rested, unsurprised, and artificial.

Sheppard pulled in a slow breath, trying to calm his nerves.

"I don't suppose we could—talk about this?" he suggested, as Rush edged around the perimeter of the room, lateral quiet step after lateral quiet step.

"And what kind of resolution would that give you?" his double asked, as they began to circle one another. "This isn't a talking room. This isn't really a talking *planet*. John."

They closed with a brief flurry of blows and blades before separating again.

"Yeah," Sheppard said, breathing heavily, trying to ignore his own fatigue, resolutely keeping his eyes off Rush. He spat blood onto the floor of the room. "I'm getting that."

With considerably more coordinated viciousness than was customary for mathematicians, Rush tackled Sheppard's opponent.

Or—he *would* have, had the man not passed straight through the projection and slammed into the central dais, unable to engage.

Sheppard, tracking the other man's fall, brought his guard up too slowly to counter his double's move.

The blades passed straight across his throat.

He didn't *feel* it at first, he wasn't *aware* of falling, the only thing that existed was the instinctive press of hand to neck, the graying of his vision, the attempt to fix something that couldn't *be* fixed, as warm liquid spilled between his fingers.

He couldn't breathe.

The last thing he heard was the slow drag of a metal blade across the floor.

Sheppard sat up, gasping, beneath a twilight sky. His hands flew to his throat, feeling the burning echo of the triplicate sweep of metal as he clamped his jaw shut on everything that wanted to come out of his mouth. He took a deep breath. Then another. It hadn't been real. It had been a *simulation*. The Sakari seed carrier on the ocean of Atlantis. Not real. Not *real*. He could breathe. He'd always been able to breathe, in all likelihood.

"Rush," he called, but it wasn't anything more than a hoarse whisper. His left hand remained closed around his neck, his right hand pushed him to his knees. "Rush," he called.

No answer.

"*Rush*," he screamed, feeling the word tear past raw vocal chords.

It was dark and it was cold and maybe Rush was *dead*, maybe they *both* were, had been *all along*—

A hand fell on his shoulder and he jerked, every muscle in his body contracting in reaction as Rush dropped down next to him in the long grass, an opaque, trembling silhouette against the pale red of the sun, setting behind a thin atmosphere.

"Hey," Sheppard said, trying for casual but failing. Failing.

He looked again at the sun, and wondered how long it had taken Rush to—

"Next time," Sheppard said. "Next time I'll do it."

"*Next* time," Rush replied in a choked whisper, "*I'm* going first."

Sheppard stood, back to the wall, watching, nearly unable to stand, but equally unable to stand the idea of collapsing to the floor.

"Rush," he said.

"And what kind of person does that make you," the black-clad version of the mathematician hissed, "if you can even call yourself that. You're the worst kind of ideologue. Unfeeling. Uncharitable."

"I thought this wasn't a *talking room*, asshole," Sheppard snapped.

"Incapable of anything but the basest of human sentiment. It would have been better if she had *never met you*," Rush's alternate hissed.

"Rush," Sheppard said. "*Close* with him. Get it over with. Don't listen."

"You made her miserable. You *tortured* her. She followed you, and for *what*. To die in a place she never wanted, separated from everything that was important to her—"

"Rush," Sheppard said. "Don't listen."

"Left, at the end, with nothing but you, absorbed in yourself, absorbed in the *mathematics*—"

"Don't listen," Sheppard whispered.

Room 2, attempt 5

His breath burned his throat. He stumbled, fell, and turned it into a sloppy roll as he evaded another swipe of the blade.

"Do you think of Elizabeth?" his double asked, as casual as Sheppard might have been, sparring with Teyla beneath silver filigreed windows, "or do you think of her as an 'it'? Is that how you justify it to yourself?"

Sheppard felt the bite of the blade across his right shoulder as he tried to get under his opponent's guard.

"You sent her to her death," his double said, his eyes hard, his tone almost friendly.

Sheppard tackled him, bringing the blade up too slowly to make contact. He was flipped onto his back, his head cracking against the metal floor.

"But it was worse than that, you know. Worse than death."

Sheppard swiped upward with the blades, felt them connect and lock as fingers closed over his throat.

"Because she won't die out there in the vastness of space. Can a machine go mad?"

He couldn't breathe.

"Unable to move. Unable to hear herself speak in a vacuum."

Sheppard clutched at the fingers around his throat and tried to free his trapped blades.

"Isolated. Forever. Kept conscious by a power source that will last for eons."

His vision was graying.

"Eternal torment," he heard himself whisper. "When it should have been *you*."

Icy fingers closed over his right hand, pressing up, interlacing with his own.

The pressure around his throat eased abruptly and he breathed in, looking up at the blurring of his own face, as his opponent became a blurred, directionless blend of himself and Rush. The pressure on his throat began to ease.

Rush was kneeling next to him.

It was Rush who twisted their grip.

Rush who braced himself against the floor.

Rush who held on as Sheppard slashed up and across and into a sickening, realistic resistance that faded at last to empty air.

The blade itself vanished as they both collapsed back, entirely spent.

Sheppard brought a hand to his throat, trying to breathe past spasming vocal chords, trying to find the energy to sit up, to face whatever awaited them, trying to think of something to say to Rush that could mitigate *anything* about their current situation.

Of course, there was nothing.

"We probably should have thought of that earlier," Sheppard said, his voice uneven.

"Probably," Rush whispered.

For a long moment they were silent, lying on the metal floor.

"Sheppard," Rush said.

"Yeah."

"The vacuum of space is approximately four degrees Kelvin."

Sheppard turned over onto his side to look at Rush. "Yeah."

"At that temperature, processor speed would likely slow to almost nothing."

Sheppard brought his hands to his face, turned his face into the floor. When he could speak, he said, "doesn't that make it *worse*?"

"No," Rush said. "It makes it better. Her—subjective experience prior to system failure would be—shorter."

"Yeah okay," Sheppard said, breathing raggedly until he was able to follow up with, "thanks."

Sheppard took a deep breath, and then another, before pulling himself to his knees. He looked over at Rush. The mathematician was looking back at him, pale under blue lighting, his eyes haunted and dark, a muscle twitching in his cheek.

"I'm *sure*," Sheppard said, "that whoever she was, she—"

"Don't," Rush said.

Sheppard dropped his eyes. His throat spasmed, and he brought a hand up to his neck, his fingers resting over unbroken skin. "Just so you know," he said, his eyes flicking toward the gaping black of a door that had appeared in the far wall, "you're pretty—underrated by command."

"I am," Rush said, leaning back against the wall, "*unsurprised* by this information."

"What's the deal with you and Everett?" Sheppard asked, trying to work up enough self-control to smile, but failing. "He seems to have a warped perspective on ah—" he waved a hand in Rush's direction. "Everything."

"I developed heat exhaustion in my own apartment," Rush admitted.

"Huh," Sheppard said.

He shut his eyes. After a few minutes, he opened them again.

"Come to Atlantis, maybe. You'd like it."

"No," Rush said whispered hoarsely. "I wouldn't."

"You would."

"They disgust me," Rush said.

"Who?"

"The Ancients."

Sheppard said nothing.

"They circumscribe intelligence with genetics. They fail to intercede when it is ethically demanded. They create places like this one. Even now I can feel it pulling on my mind, courtesy of some quirk of convergent evolution." Rush drove the heel of his hand against his eye socket.

"That's—not who they are," Sheppard whispered.

"How can you be certain?"

Sheppard's fingers brushed against his own temple. He shook his head. "Walk away then. Go back to reinventing human math for humans."

Rush looked away.

"Yeah," Sheppard said, forcing himself to his feet. "Not as easy as it sounds. I hear ya." He overbalanced, but caught himself on the central pillar in the room. "Come on. Let's go get killed. One more round and we'll split a power bar."

"Fantastic," Rush said, allowing Sheppard to help him to his feet.

Room 3, attempt 1

"This is *ridiculous*," Rush said, looking at the colored projection arrayed in front of them, a continuous, fluctuating swirl of color that stretched from floor to ceiling.

"This looks very—math-y." Sheppard said.

"It's a zeta function."

"And how—*lethal* would you say zeta functions generally are?" Sheppard asked, leaning against the back wall.

"They've destroyed many an aspiring academic career," Rush replied dryly. "I'm going to be *extremely annoyed* if this requires proving the Riemann hypothesis."

"Me too," Sheppard said, sliding to the floor, feeling like his legs were made of water. "You know, when SG1 has to take these kinds of pan-skill-set tests they end up having to—" Sheppard waved a hand, "demonstrate that they understand the concept of *pi* and fight *knights* with *broadwords*. And we get hit with evil doppelgängers and then a Millennium Prize problem?"

Rush looked back at him. "Pi. *Pi*? Are you fucking serious?"

"Yeah. Want that power bar?"

Rush turned around and stepped back, sliding fluidly down the wall to sit, shoulder-to-shoulder with Sheppard.

Sheppard unzipped a pocket and fished around. His fingers closed around a chocolate bar. He pulled it out, opened it, snapped it in half, and handed a piece over to Rush.

"This isn't a power bar," Rush pointed out.

"In the Rodney McKay universe it is," Sheppard replied. "Ugh I would *kill* to have that guy here right about now. He'll talk your ear off, but he's got a way with pulling it out of the fire."

Rush shrugged and started in on his chocolate. "It must be adaptive."

"What?" Sheppard said.

"This test. Trial."

Sheppard had to file a wild edge off the smile that comment elicited.

"We," Rush said his hand opening to gesture at the multicolored representation of the complex plane facing them, "are a truly *nightmarish* combination."

"Try to be stupider," Sheppard whispered.

"Try to be less lethal," Rush whispered back. "Think about fucking kittens or something next time."

"Oh you *know* that one would turn out badly," Sheppard said.

Rush smiled, brief and twisted.

"So how does the Riemann hypothesis kill you?" Sheppard asked, taking another bite of chocolate. "Do you think."

"Oh," Rush replied, "In some horrific, topological way I'm sure."

"Great," Sheppard said. "I hope it lasts a long time."

"Maybe we can just—pass through at the critical line."

"The critical line being—"

" $\text{Re}(s)=1/2$," Rush said, his hand tracking through the air in a vertical line to their right. "In the complex plane."

"Nice," Sheppard said.

For a moment they were silent while they finished McKay's chocolate bar.

"Fucking pi," Rush said. "I don't believe it."

Room 4, Attempt 3

"If you already know the candle light is fire," Rush shouted over the hiss of blue flame, "Then—what?"

Sheppard struggled to breathe in the searing, oxygen-poor air, pressing his hands to his head, trying to dredge something, *anything* up from his subconscious, from the place Atlantis occupied when he sat in the chair—

"*Farinam decocta fuerit pridem*," Sheppard screamed at the walls, aligning his voice and mind. "*Farinam decocta fuerit pridem, farina decocta fuerit pridem, farina decocta fuerit —*"

Room 5, Attempt 5

"How many of these rooms," Sheppard said hoarsely, "do you think there might be."

"You would know better than I would," Rush replied, in a cracked whisper.

"I've just—I've never heard of a one of these trials lasting so *long*."

"When we began—I assumed that there would either be seven rooms," Rush said his eyes shut, "Or ten."

"Why?"

"The gate," Rush whispered, without opening his eyes.

"Okay," Sheppard said. "Any second now. I'm going to get up, and—"

"No," Rush said. "I'll do it. I almost had it last time. There's a trick to it. I think I can get us through."

Sheppard nodded.

Rush stood, one hand on the wall, then squared his shoulders and stepped out of the semi-circle on the floor.

There was a faint buzzing sound as voltage began to run through the walls.

Rush cocked his head, as if listening. The air in front of him exploded into an intricate, familiar pattern of light. The mathematician raised his hands, palms outward, and, with a twitch of alignment that torqued the edges of Sheppard's thoughts, he mentally reproduced the pattern with a differential activation of the low level force field generated over the room. Quickly, Rush stepped laterally moving into a dead spot in the room before the next pattern flashed.

Flash, reproduce, reposition.

Flash, reproduce, reposition.

It iterated eight times before a door appeared in the opposite wall.

"Nice," Sheppard said, getting to his feet, half staggering forward.

The mathematician shut his eyes, pressing both hands to his temples.

"Rush," Sheppard said. "*Rush*."

"I can't—" the man doubled over. In the dim, blue-white light Sheppard could see that he was sweating even though the ambient temperature was cool. His hair clung to his temples in delicate tendrils.

"What's wrong?" Sheppard asked, his hands closing around Rush's arms. "Talk to me."

"You don't hear it?" Rush gasped. "I can't shut it out. I can't shut it out."

"There's nothing *to hear*," Sheppard said, trying to snap him free of whatever the latest test had left in his mind.

"Of course there is," Rush said, "how do you think I predicted the positioning for each iteration? There were eight rounds but we'd only *seen five*. It was tonal. It *is* tonal, the end of each round predicting the next—" he broke off, his jaw clamping shut.

"I would know," Sheppard said. "I would *hear* it—"

"You don't *know* that," Rush said, replied breathless. "You don't have all of them."

"Rush."

"D minor," Rush whispered, his hands coming over his eyes as he tried to twist away from Sheppard.

"Rush," Sheppard shouted. "Look at me."

Rush looked at him, his eyes wild and dark.

"Oh screw *this*," Sheppard whispered, and yanked the other man across the floor and through the gaping doorway into blackness.

Room 6, attempt 1

They fell into the next room, straight out of the protective inlay of the semi-circle and into dark water.

Sheppard inhaled in poorly considered surprise. His vocal chords spasmed shut as brackish water hit his airway. He struggled for the surface, fighting his way back to the platform, trying to drag Rush with him, trying to gain any kind of purchase on smooth metal before he realized—

Something was actively *pulling him down*.

Next to him Rush struggled furiously. Sheppard tried to twist away from whatever it was that had a grip on his ankle, his calf, his waist, but he could feel his movements slowing, could feel himself lose his orientation as he was pulled further away from the faint blue light of the surface.

A roaring began, deep and low in his ears.

He kicked wildly, with decreasing coordination, trying to free himself, his hands tearing uselessly through the dark.

His lungs ached.

He—

The stars spread out above him, dense and thick and unfamiliar. Sheppard coughed, turning onto his side, trying to retch up the memory of dark water. He pulled in small sips of air around the constriction in his throat.

His clothes and hair were dry.

"Rush." He tried to speak, but he could barely breathe, and no sound carried. He pushed himself to his hands and knees, reaching forward into the dark, his hands closing on the familiar texture of BDU's in the dark.

Rush wasn't moving.

"Rush," he tried speaking again with more success this time. He clicked on his flashlight. He swept it over the other man briefly before giving the mathematician a subtle shake.

"Hey," Sheppard said.

Rush's eyes were open.

"Hey," Sheppard said again.

Rush looked at him.

"It will be—" Sheppard couldn't finish.

"Yes," Rush whispered. "Yes I know."

Room 6, attempt 3

The room was dark, barely illuminated by a rim of blue lights in a recessed hollow some distance above their heads. It was cold. Beyond their protected semicircle stretched a plane of black, lethal water.

"You know," Sheppard said, "I was thinking."

Rush looked at him without saying anything.

"We've died—a *lot* of times."

"Yes," Rush agreed.

"I feel sort of uninhibited," Sheppard said. "I mean, dying is kinda all in fortnight's work for me, but this is a whole—a whole different level."

"I really—I don't understand how or *why* you people do all it is that you do," Rush said.

"*Oh*. That. Well, me neither, really. I flipped a coin. Join the gate program—yes or no? But that's all in the past. Would you want to get coffee sometime, maybe?"

"You *flipped a coin*?" Rush asked.

"Yah. What about *coffee* though?" Sheppard asked, hearing the slur in his own words as he watched dim light flicker over the rippled surface of the water. "Yes/no? After this? One time, and then maybe again, on an ongoing basis? I'll buy."

"What?" Rush asked, the word nothing more than the faint snap of its final consonant.

"Or not—no pressure. Forget it. That would be weird. Would it be weird? I hate leaving Atlantis. I'm never leaving again, actually. Except maybe to have coffee with you. You let me know. It's not friendship coffee, though," Sheppard clarified. "Or, it's

not *not* friendship coffee, but it's a little bit more like dating coffee. As a prelude to dating chess. Date Chess?"

"I'll consider it," Rush said.

"Technically, I'm not supposed to hit on the civilian consultants that I accidentally transport through space and time, but I've died about sixteen times today and I've always wanted to date a Fields Medalist."

"Colonel Young told me I'd like you," Rush said, looking as amused as one could look in the face of probable, incipient drowning. "He was absolutely correct."

Sheppard smiled faintly at the ceiling. "Any time now, Rodney," he whispered. "Rescue us any time."

"How, from a fire that never sinks or sets, would you escape?" Rush read the faintly glowing text that wrapped around the perimeter of the ceiling for the third time.

"I feel like that one's just—mean-spirited," Sheppard replied, shivering.

"Agreed," Rush whispered.

"Are there any science-y disambiguations of 'fire'?"

"Stellar fusion?" Rush suggested.

"And how would you escape from the fusing core of the sun?" Sheppard asked.

"If you had mass, you probably wouldn't."

"Well crap."

"Unless," Rush said.

"Unless—" Sheppard prompted.

"Unless you were ejected as a result of magnetic reconnection in the form of a stellar flare."

"Well all right then," Sheppard said. "No problem. We'll just do that."

"I'm a cryptographer," Rush replied, "not a plasma physicist."

Room 6, attempt 4

"What did you hear?" Sheppard whispered, his hands braced against the wall as Rush balanced on his shoulders, his hands wedged into the depression near the ceiling that housed the lights. "In the last room."

"Resonant frequencies," Rush replied.

"In D minor?"

"No."

"Do you hear anything now?"

"No."

They nearly overbalanced as Rush tore a strip of lights free of the wall and cast them into the water. There was a bright flash that travelled around the periphery of the room, creating a complete loop before portions of the lighting gave out entirely.

"So much for simulating fucking flux."

Sheppard bent down, trying to control the vibrating of his fatigued muscles as Rush fought to retain his own footing. Despite their care, they both nearly overbalanced into the water.

They collapsed back against the wall, staring at the pattern made by the now irregular lighting reflected in the water.

"Is that—" Sheppard began.

"There are mirrors," Rush whispered, "in the ceiling."

There was only one path unbroken by lines of lights. It began at the right lateral edge of the semi-circular dais and glittered in the shifting pane of dark water beneath them. They waited until the string of lights that Rush had liberated had sunk out of their view and the water was motionless, its variegations slowly smoothing into unbroken, uncrossing lines that fanned like field lines.

Sheppard didn't stand, couldn't stand in the absence of necessity. He dragged himself over to the rim of their semi-circular platform and looked down into opaque water that was dark and still, itself a mirrored surface.

"We're going to disrupt the pattern," Sheppard whispered, "as soon as we get in the water."

"I'm aware."

"Come on," Sheppard said.

Rush didn't move.

"Come on," Sheppard said again.

Room 7

They stood, soaking wet and supporting one another, blinking in the white glare of natural light. The curved walls of the room were transparent, shot through with arcing silver lines that met overhead in a closed corolla. Around them stretched an abandoned cityscape, familiar enough to inspire a substernal ache. Barely visible geodesic shielding arced over soaring arcologies with a discreet and friendly glow.

They were in a tower.

The floor was transparent, and, below them, silver spires rose in organized, radial clusters, bunching like crystal flowers, transparent and light and shimmering in the sun.

Far in the distance, they could see the glitter of the sea beyond rolling waves of grass.

It pressed on his mind.

It rang like an echo against his thoughts.

It focused on him with an alien yearning that made the pull of Atlantis seem sedate by comparison and Sheppard knew that he had only to will it and the room would come apart for him, separating into panes that would expose them to the open air.

He had only to wish it so.

The city was abandoned; bereft in the way that only abandoned Ancient technology could *be* bereft—where systems yearned subsonically for those who had left them behind. Altera saw him the way Atlantis saw him—as a polarizing element, as something to align to, a calibration set for a technology just self-aware enough to know that it needed such a thing.

Beside him, Rush crashed to his knees, unable to stand beneath the mental pressure of external, technological grief, his hands spreading over the glass of the floor. The room cracked open in response, unfurling with a delicate pink flare of semi-permeable shielding as the walls broke apart beneath a white star.

"We can't," Sheppard whispered, dropping into a crouch that he was too exhausted to hold as the sea breeze swept over them. He fell out of it, unable to catch himself with muscles pushed past the point of endurance. He lay for a moment on the transparent

floor, feeling the rhythm of the city below him, before he managed to sit, his hands braced against the glass, inches from Rush's own.

"This is why," the mathematician said.

"I knew if you came to Atlantis," Sheppard said, "you would understand. The genetic requirement—it's not elitism. It's for this. *For this*. So that what they built—could *know them*."

"Yes," Rush said.

The call of sea birds carried faintly on the wind.

Sheppard could no more prevent it than he could prevent the pull of gravity and so, around them, the silent city began to power up, shields activating, lights coming on, generators whirring to life in painful anticipation.

Rush had one hand pressed against his temple. "How much of this," he asked, "can you hear?"

"How much of what?"

"*Creare machina id potest sentio est crudelitas*," Rush whispered.

The words rang in Sheppard's mind like something remembered rather than heard and he swallowed, resisting the urge to engage with the dense pressure around his mind.

One could not comfort a city.

"To create a machine that can feel is a cruelty?" Sheppard echoed. "You—can *hear* that?"

"Everywhere," Rush said. "It's everywhere."

"We can't—do anything for this city," Sheppard said, "for this planet."

"Except to stay," Rush replied.

"No," Sheppard said. "We can't do that either." He looked to the center of the room, and only then did he notice it—suspended in a force field and shining with a red translucence in the open air. It was a crystal, carved into a stylized, three-dimensional representation of what could only be a gate glyph.

The wind hummed around the open edges of the spire, ruffling their hair.

"This place isn't ours," Sheppard said.

"But it wants to be."

He could *feel* the truth of Rush's statement—something he'd always known about Atlantis but never quite given himself over to—this proprietary, eternal longing for fulfillment of purpose on the part of a city.

They built you too well, he thought. *They built you to last too long*. He could feel a ripple of acknowledging mental pressure against his mind in response to the thought.

"This isn't what we came for," Sheppard said, struggling to stand against his exhaustion, against the pull of abandoned circuitry, against vertigo and the bleakness of his own thoughts.

"No," Rush whispered.

"What would you do?" Sheppard asked, a desperate edge to the words. "*Stay here? Alone?* With immortal electronics pulling on your mind until you finally—"

He stopped, his mouth going dry as he *felt* the mental wrench of a concealed neural interface chair shatter his thoughts and yank his mind aside. As if it had been listening. As if it had *heard* the subconscious desire beneath his words. He could feel it here; there *was* a chair here, of *course* there would be—Rush didn't understand, *couldn't possibly yet understand* about the *chair*, he couldn't know about the shuttles; he couldn't conceptualize the logistical sequence of events that would seal them here because if he'd been able to do *that*—

It would have already happened. Sheppard wasn't strong enough to put a stop to something he already wanted. Wasn't strong enough to resist the draw at the glittering heart of this city. Not if Rush caved. Not if they stayed too long.

"It will *wait*," Sheppard said, half-doubled over, his hand on the nearest transparent petal of wall. "It will wait for you. And when—you're not—needed anymore, then, maybe—"

"You can go home," Rush finished, like permission granted in advance.

Sheppard nodded, unable to look at him, unable to speak, his teeth aching with the acuity of his desire to stay. He pressed his hand to glass. "Take it," he whispered. "Take it."

Rush stood unsteadily, out of energy, half-paralyzed with some incarnation of the battle that Sheppard was fighting, even now against the activation of ZPMs, against the opening of shuttle bay doors hundreds of feet below.

He could hear the distant sea.

Rush crossed the floor, a dark silhouette against the reflected light of the sky and city. Sheppard watched him snatch the physical manifestation of his cypher key straight out of the air.

With a rending in his mind, the cityscape bleached to white.

Chapter Twenty Five

His nerves shrieked. Paresthesias claimed his foot. Young pulled in a slow breath, his weight carried almost entirely on his right side. Pain itself would not kill him. That was the hard thing about pain.

After the savage wind of the planet, the still, bright air was unsettling. He scanned the eight people in the *Odyssey's* small transport room, looking for the unnatural freeze of a body in extremis—trusting the primitive places in his mind to pull his attention toward any transport sweep induced catastrophe. The only thing that caught and held the slide of his gaze was the silver floor of the room, now obscured with leaves, mud, and fragments of alien vegetation sheared by the transporter.

He clenched his jaw, he clenched his left hand, and tried to ride out the agony that burst in waves along his back and slid down his leg. Adrenaline and denial had kept the worst of the pain at bay during the sprint for the tree line on the planet. Through bracken. Over uneven, wet ground. He felt air hiss between his teeth.

There was no escaping the fact that his bones were bolted together.

Young had, perhaps, placed too much stock in the solidity of those bolts. There was nothing to prevent his body from failing *around* the uncompromising internal supports. He wasn't certain whether it was the pain of the failure itself or the resultant disappointment that was more difficult to bear.

He drew another breath, trying to let another wave of pain ride as he shifted his weight.

A great head of Icarus *he* was going to make. Over the course of his first day of command he'd taken himself out of commission on a mission to a friendly planet and lost the project's most important scientific resource.

Even as he laid that reality out for himself, he recognized the need for a reversal in the hierarchy of his thoughts.

He was kidding himself by casting this shitshow in terms of command hierarchy. Ever since he'd spoken with Jackson, this whole thing had turned more personal than professional. The archeologist had really yanked his priorities around. Or, maybe, Jackson had just thrown some kind of light onto what his priorities had always been. When it came right down to it, Young wasn't interested in Rush because the man was a scientific resource, he was interested in a scientific resource because said resource happened to be *Rush*. His ridiculous, naïve, sarcastic neighbor who could make a

fucking fantastic quiche and who had no idea what kind of moral abyss the Lucian Alliance had constructed out there in the power vacuum left by the Goa'uld.

Young knew.

Oh *how* he knew.

He knew it ethically. He knew it intellectually. He knew it instinctively. He knew it viscerally. He knew it practically. He knew it in his bones, in his nerves, in the muscles that tensed with reaction over metal plates and metal screws.

But that was all right.

That was the point.

That had always *been* the point—to intersperse himself between the threat and the threatened. To stand between people and the things that try to come for them. It was a proclivity that he'd turned into his profession. It had carved out the scope of his personal life and it had shaped its contours. It was what had brought him into the path of the Lucian Alliance and what had broken his back.

That quality was, certainly, what Jackson had seen in him. Had to be.

There was something about Rush that demanded intervention. Something about the other man that suggested that the mathematician did not understand the nature of the threat posed by the LA, the Goa'uld, or the Ori. He could not possibly grasp the cruelties and bizzarrities of circumstance that came from exploring the galaxy on a network of invisible roads.

Let them be phase shifted.

Let them be stored, unaware, in a buffer.

Let them have no problems that exceeded the scope of what they had already known and suffered.

"How do you want to do this?" David asked, not looking at him, his silhouette hazy in air thick with ash, dark against the red of the sky. "The hard way, or the hard way?"

"Everyone have all their—parts?" McKay asked the room, his laptop held against his chest.

Young shook his head, gritted his teeth, and tried to harden his determination into something that would function as a shield against the pain in his back and hip.

McKay spun on his heel, repeating Young's initial scan of the room. The scientist paused to watch Vala unzip her jacket and fan out her wet hair.

"I'm all set, charmer," Vala said. "Thanks for your concern."

"Did you just call me 'charmer'?" McKay asked, apparently unsure how he felt about the possibility of such a nickname.

Vala winked at him.

"Everett," Mitchell said, catching his eye. "You good?"

"Yeah," Young said, his voice cracking. He swallowed. "I'm good."

Mitchell looked at him, his expression flickering through recognition into a hard-edged empathy. "Oh yeah," the other man said. "You *look* good. Real good." He stepped forward, skidding on the soaking, dirt-covered floor. As if this were all the teams had been waiting for, the inherent structure of the two circles cracked apart and people shifted, running their hands over their shoulders, twisting to gain visual confirmation that no parts of themselves had been left behind.

"I know how it goes," Mitchell said quietly, his words pitched for Young alone to hear, "so I'm not even gonna ask." With that, the other man stepped in, pulling Young's arm over his shoulder, taking a significant portion of his weight. "Except for the part where I say—how bad is it?"

"It's a set-back," Young said quietly through gritted teeth.

"That tells me nothing."

"I'm okay," Young said, biting down on the inside of his cheek to prevent any change in his facial expression. When he was sure he could control his voice he said, "McKay. Jackson. Go find your people and—do whatever it is that you do."

"Our people?" McKay said. "Our—*people*?"

Jackson shot him a look from beneath knitted eyebrows that could have been confusion or disapproval or concern or—any number of things, really.

"The science people. Save the day while Mitchell and I report to Emerson."

"For your information. *linguists* are not *scientists*. And, for *science*? The thing we really need right now is the Hell-DHD, which is currently on the Antediluvian Planet beneath a storm system of biblical proportions. In case you've—" he broke off at Young's upraised hand.

"Less talking, more day-saving," Mitchell said.

"Exactly," Young seconded.

"I'll be on the 'phone' with Perry," McKay said, making air quotes. "Bring a physicist next time, why don't you?" Halfway to the door of the room he paused and looked back toward the center of the floorspace. "Sheppard, if you're here, I'd stick with *me*, not team machismo over there."

For a moment, no one spoke. Then Mitchell, added, "Uh, speaking from experience—I'd probably second that opinion." He looked around, clearly self-conscious about talking to empty air. "Being phase shifted sucks. *Somuch.*"

"You are particularly unsuited to such a condition," Teal'c said. "Colonel Young, do you require additional assistance?"

Young shook his head.

"Eh," Jackson said, "being phase shifted isn't so bad."

"Except for the part where you can't eat or drink anything," Mitchell said, his frame tensing beneath Young's arm as he gave a non-verbal indication that he was about to start for the door.

"Well *that* wasn't very tactful," Vala said, looking away from Mitchell toward the unoccupied swath in the middle of the room. "Don't worry gorgeous, we'll have you back in time to make dinner."

"I wouldn't make promises you can't keep," Jackson said, eyeing Vala.

"Figures," McKay said. "Sheppard is 'gorgeous' and I'm 'charmer'?"

"Who said anything about Sheppard?" Vala asked.

McKay shot Vala a perplexed look.

"Don't worry guys," Mitchell said, speaking loudly, his gaze shifting between the center of the room and the door. "We got this. No problem. We've always re-shifted people before they die of dehydration. Am I right? Of course I'm right."

"Well—" Jackson began.

"*Jackson*," Mitchell snapped.

"All the times that we *definitely knew* that people had been shifted, we were able to shift them back. In this case, however—"

"Don't say it," Mitchell said, helping Young limp toward the door. "If you guys are here, you're gonna be fine. Carter can phase-shift like a champ."

"Here, darling," Vala said, reaching into her pocket and pulling out a small book. She handed it to Jackson. "You're going to want chapter four."

Jackson shot her an incredulous look, flipped to the page in question and began to read in an absently bemused tone. "Chapter four. Praxis in practice: the sensitive delivery of constructive criticism within the context of an alien belief system." He broke off with a disgusted sound and looked at Vala incredulously.

Young concentrated on breathing in through his nose and out through his mouth in a controlled manner as he tried to adjust to the rhythm of Mitchell's slow progress.

"Witty," Mitchell said dryly. "You should be proud of that one."

"You're the guy?" Greer said, looking at Jackson as he moved in on Young's other side without order or invitation. "Who writes all those—"

"No," Jackson said. "I am *not* that guy. I cannot *stand* that guy."

Young clenched his jaw as Greer took more of his weight. He found walking significantly easier with help from both sides.

"Huh," Greer said, as if he'd snapped his mental image of Jackson into place as easily as he assembled an assault rifle.

Young glanced at him.

Greer glanced back.

Neither of them said anything.

"Bridge or infirmary?" Mitchell asked.

"Bridge," Young said.

"Don't be stupid," Mitchell said. "There was a right answer and that wasn't it."

"I'm not being stupid," Young replied.

"Are you sure?" Mitchell asked. "Because you seem a little bit stupid to me right now. No offense."

"Nothing's broken," Young said. "It's going to be fine. I need to brief Emerson."

"You owe me so much beer if you re-broke your back," Mitchell said.

"How does *that* make sense?" Young asked, through gritted teeth.

"So. Much. Beer."

"This needs to be contained," Young hissed. "You know it does."

"So I'll contain it," Mitchell said. "You can pull rank on me, and I know you just jumped a security clearance grade a few hours ago, but unless you're a secret speed reader, I'm

betting that our knowledge regarding what the heck is going on with—*everything* is about on par.”

“Tell Emerson that we need to keep him off this ship,” Young said, resigned. “Unless there’s no other choice. No one so much as mentions his name on this ship. Keep the team from the planet together and isolated from the crew of the *Odyssey* with the exception of Jackson and McKay. If the LA were to become aware—”

“Yeah,” Mitchell said grimly. “I know. Consider it done.” Mitchell angled his head to look at Greer. “Sergeant. Stick with Colonel Young. Make sure he makes it to the infirmary.”

“Yes sir,” Greer said.

Young and Greer peeled off from the clustered team around Mitchell and proceeded down the brightly lit hallways, their soaked boots squeaking on the floor.

“Permission to ask a question, sir?” Greer said.

“Permission to *ask*,” Young replied.

“There’s a lot of speculation about the LA,” Greer said. “Maybe half the guys who came up through the armed services internal track and were waiting for assignment—they got axed. A week ago. People are saying it’s because of security concerns related to the the LA.”

“It is,” Young confirmed shortly.

“People are also saying that—a second front might open up. That we might go after the LA. Overtly.”

“Are they?” Young said, dread crawling down his spine and feeding straight into the pain in his back.

“You think it’s true?” Greer asked. “You think we can stand against the LA and the Ori at the same time?”

“We’ll take it as it comes,” Young said.

The chain of command was no place for real opinions.

Two hours later, after a physical and a set of x-rays, Young spoke briefly with Emerson in the *Odyssey*’s infirmary. The captain dropped by to let him know that Mitchell was briefing Landry via subspace, McKay had tentatively ruled out the presence of any phase-shifted entities on the ship and planned to confirm that assessment shortly, Jackson was working on cross-referencing the design of the modified DHD in the

available Ancient databases, and the rest of the team as holed in a conference room, tracking tropospheric scans. After the update, Emerson left, and Young was left to await the final verdict on his back from the ship's chief medical officer.

He sat on a gurney, holding himself as still as possible as he scanned the room and tried not to dwell on anything in particular. The infirmary wasn't large, but its internal geometries gave the small space an open feel. The main floor space consisted of a clean, white room. Every surface gleamed. Empty isolation areas were blocked off by transparent glass, occupied spaces off the main room were concealed by bright, reflective opacities that could be controlled remotely.

A door opened, and Dr. van Densen crossed the floor. She came to a stop in front of him, her arms folded over her chest. In one hand she held an X-ray, dark and unreadable against the white of her coat.

"I'm going to need a name," was the first thing she said.

"Excuse me?"

"Who cleared you."

"It wasn't like that," Young replied.

"Who. Cleared. You." van Densen repeated her question.

"No one cleared me," Young said. "I was authorized for light duty earlier this week. This turned into an emergent situation in friendly territory and I was the ranking officer for the project involved, which allows me to determine—"

van Densen turned away from him, paced two steps, and jammed the film she was holding beneath a clip on the wall. She hit a switch, and the panel behind it lit up.

Young winced, looking at the bright white of metal plates and screws that stood out against ghosted bone.

"Someone has shown you this, correct?" van Densen asked.

"Yeah," Young said, the word hard.

"I only ask," she said dryly, "because your behavior indicates otherwise."

Young shifted his weight and winced. He tried and failed to suppress a surge of irritation at this immaculate doctor in her immaculate infirmary reading him a condescending version of the riot act.

"This," she said, "is the three inch plate in your femur." She pointed to it with a perfectly manicured finger. "And the four screws that hold it in place."

"Yeah," Young said.

"This," she continued mercilessly, "is the line where you fractured your sacrum, and the plate that stabilized it. You were lucky this break was so lateral."

"I know," Young said. "They told me."

"This," she said, "is where you fractured your spine. L5, L4, and L3." Her hand moved upward in increments. "This is the plate that stabilizes your vertebral column. And the screws."

"I know," he said. "Did I re-break anything?"

"No," she replied, the word clipped, almost disappointed. As if he'd skirted something he'd deserved.

Probably he had.

"Great," he said.

"But you were lucky."

"I get it."

She looked at him over the top of square framed glasses, one hand pressed against the illuminated wall. She could have been Emily's sister, with that highlighted ash-blond hair, that guarded expression full of cautious disapproval. "Do you?"

"Yeah."

"Your back hasn't yet healed. Shear force, blunt trauma—bones will re-break along previous fracture planes, pulling away from the screws."

"Okay," he said.

"Do you know what your vertebrae are *for*?"

He was concerned that she might actually wait for an answer.

Fortunately, she plowed ahead. "They protect your spinal cord. Re-break them, and you run the risk of shatter. Even a single floating bone fragment—and you run the risk of paralysis, colonel."

"Okay," he said, his gaze fixed on the reflection of the lights on the far wall.

"You barely survived this," she continued remorselessly, the light glinting off her glasses, her earrings, the finish of her nails. "When they found you in that tel'tak you were suffering from spinal shock. You were comatose. Three surgeons were

consulted," she said, looking back at the film, transilluminated against the wall. "Vascular. Orthopedics. Neuro."

She seemed unusually well informed. "You read my file."

"I'm a doctor. I read charts. Reading charts is half my life and half my job. But more than that, I was there."

He raised his eyebrows.

She looked back at him. "And you were here. Do you remember?"

"I thought it was—I thought it was all Brightman. On Earth."

"Brightman is fantastic," van Densen said. "Triple boarded, and—" she paused, swallowed. "Determined. To a fault. But the woman only has two hands. And you weren't stable enough for transport." She looked back at the x-ray.

"Right," Young said, because he couldn't think of anything else.

"Colonel," van Densen said, not looking at him. "You're out of the field. Most likely for good. You'll never meet the criteria for a return to active duty."

"Bullshit," Young said.

"If you have to fight," van Densen said, "find another way to do it."

"With all due respect," Young said, "I think I'll be looking for a second opinion."

"Feel free," van Densen replied, her tone clipped.

"Is that all?"

"Yes," van Densen said, "other than a prescription for Percocet and a formal reprimand."

"*What?*"

"Circumvention of medical orders, by a misapplication of chain of command," van Densen said, moving to open a cabinet and pull out a packet of hermetically sealed tablets.

"I'm cleared for light duty," Young protested.

"In no way does an offworld mission in the middle of a life-threatening storm count as light duty. And as you're the ranking officer—" van Densen quirked an eyebrow as she offered him the painkillers.

"General Landry agreed with the classification," he growled, swiping them out of her grip.

"Looks like you were both wrong," van Densen said. "Are you suggesting that I should file a formal reprimand against the general?"

"Yeah," Young said, gingerly getting to his feet. "See how that works out for you."

"You're not going back down there," van Densen said.

"The hell I'm not," Young replied. "I'm the head of a highly classified, extremely high-profile project. Things are going to shit right now, in case you haven't noticed, so you can just take your medical rationale and your chief-of-surgery bullshit and shove it."

van Densen adjusted her glasses and smoothed the back of one finger over her impeccable blonde hair. After considering him for a moment, she walked over to a sink that was recessed against the adjacent wall and got him a cup of water. "If you're going back planetside," she said. "I'd take one now. Two every four to six hours once you find your missing people. No drinking once you're back on terra firma."

Young looked at her, a bit taken aback by her cool reversal of her decision. She handed him the water.

"Don't look at me like that. No running," she said. "You make a decent case, and yes, colonel, I have noticed that things are, indeed, 'going to shit.' No exertion. No trauma. No falls. Or so help me, that reprimand goes in your file."

He snapped a pill out of the plastic enclosure.

"If you had so much as the thinnest hairline fracture—if you had any focal weakness—"

"You'd ground me," he said. "I get it. Not necessary."

"This," she said, pointing at the x-ray with her little finger, "is the result of a fantastic amount of luck, skill, and circumstance. Don't destroy it."

"Yeah," he said. "Okay. No crimes against art. Got it."

She looked at him impassively.

"We're done here, right?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.

They beamed back to the planet under the cover of nightfall as soon as the worst of the storm had passed.

Young blinked rainwater out of his eyes, waiting for his vision to adjust to the abrupt absence of fluorescent dayglow lighting. Around him, he could hear the clicking of

flashlights as streamers of illumination cut through the darkness, the directed beams scattering as they reflected off sheets of rain.

"John," McKay shouted into the dark, his laptop, in its waterproof casing, tucked beneath one arm.

Young winced at the volume of his voice. Beside him, Greer tensed, his rifle moving marginally.

"Cool it," Mitchell said, with a quiet calm in Greer's direction. "Not so loud, McKay."

"It's a friendly planet," McKay replied, but his voice dropped to a whisper. "The *Odyssey* didn't pick up any life signs."

"Then there is no reason to shout," Teal'c said quietly.

The wind gusted irregularly through wet leaves. They fanned out, moving toward the DHD, which still glowed faintly in the clearing around the gate. Young limped forward, every step sending a blunted bolt of pain from his back to his heel, even when Mitchell stepped in to wrap a hand around his elbow, giving him a hand as they brought up the rear.

"It's not as bright," Jackson said. "The DHD."

"That doesn't mean anything," McKay replied, short and dismissive.

"*Vala*," Jackson said, urgent whisper.

Young looked past Greer to see that the woman had darted out in front of McKay. She threaded past Atienza and ducked in front of Reaves, who was on point. The lights from their flashlights followed her trajectory. Clearly, she had seen something.

"*Vala*," Mitchell called, raising his voice, as if by preventing her forward motion, he could prevent what would result. His hand tightened around Young's arm, his fingers digging into tensed muscle and then he was gone, tearing forward through the bracken, following McKay and Reaves, both hard on Vala's heels. Young watched her reach the DHD and drop to her knees, her dark hair spreading in a wave behind her, wet and glittering with rain and reflected light. The rest of the team followed in a slower, cautious fan, weapons ready, eyes sweeping the dark forest.

Jackson hung back, moving to stand with Young. The archeologist pulled Young's arm over his shoulder. "With *the Odyssey* picking up no life signs—there was almost no chance they were still alive.

"Move," McKay shouted, bursting back out of the loose collection of people. "*Move*."

"Back off," Mitchell shouted, motioning toward Reaves and Atienza. "McKay, if you can't dial this thing in one shot we're calling for transport from the *Odyssey*."

"They're—" Jackson began and broke off just as quickly, pulling Young forward, threading through the remains of Sheppard's original team as they backed away.

"They are alive," Teal'c said, looking at Jackson.

Young's struggled to pull himself together in the face of profound, overwhelming relief.

"Yup," Mitchell confirmed, from where he was kneeling, two fingers pressed against Sheppard's neck. "Unconscious, cold as hell, completely drenched, probably hypothermic to the point that they weren't registering on the *Odyssey*'s sensors, but definitely *alive*." He laughed once, short and high pitched.

Young stepped carefully over wet bracken to see Rush and Sheppard sprawled at the base of the DHD, as if they'd collapsed there. Sheppard was on his side, one hand at his throat, the other beneath him. Rush was on his back, his left hand outstretched, inches from the base of the metal. It was immediately apparent that the man was entirely unresponsive, his lips tinged a bluish color from the cold. Young glanced back at Sheppard, who looked no better, his profile unfamiliar with the spiked disarray of his hair plastered to his forehead.

With a hand from Jackson, Young knelt beside Vala and pressed his fingers against the side of the mathematician's neck. The man's skin was cold to the touch but he could feel the slow regularity of his pulse.

Young let out a slow breath.

"Teal'c," Mitchell said, sweeping his flashlight over Sheppard, "I can't see shit with these black fatigues. Give me a hand here."

Teal'c dropped into a crouch at Sheppard's feet and began carefully assessing for injuries while Mitchell did the same.

"Vala," Mitchell said. "Help Jackson. Head to toe. Look for broken bones or bleeding out, but don't move his head or spine."

Young pulled out his radio as he watched Vala copy Mitchell's movements, carefully threading her fingers through Rush's hair, looking for bleeding. "*Odyssey*, this is Young. We're requesting a med evac for two people. Ideally through the gate, pending establishment of contact with the SGC."

"Confirmed," Emerson's voice came back. "Stand by for our trauma team—ETA less than three minutes."

"How's the gate coming?" Young called over to McKay.

"It's coming," McKay replied. "I think I can switch protocols back to the default by the time the med team boards the dream team."

Young placed a hand on his back, his palm pressing gingerly into the tensed musculature as he studied Rush.

He hoped this had been fucking worth it.

Young was about to call Greer over to give him a hand to his feet when a reflected glint of light from an errant sweep of someone's flashlight caught his attention. He looked down and noted for the first time that Rush's right hand was closed around—something.

He glanced at Vala.

"Let me help you out," he said, watching Vala carefully run her hands over Rush's left shoulder. "Since I'm not going to be getting up under my own power anytime soon."

"Aren't you on medical leave, handsome?" Vala asked, with a faux innocence and a tilt of her head.

"Yeah yeah." He ran his hands over Rush's right shoulder, mirroring Vala's movements as he progressed down the mathematician's right arm.

"You seem to do an awful lot of running around and escaping from perilous situations for a person who on medical leave," Vala said, her voice light but her eyes intent.

"I blame Jackson," Young said, his fingers closing over Rush's elbow.

"It's Daniel, actually," Jackson corrected.

"Blaming Daniel is my favorite," Vala whispered.

"Turns out it's *everyone's* favorite," Jackson replied.

Young looked down.

Rush's fingers were closed tightly on an irregularly shaped object. With a combination of careful pressure on the mathematician's wrist and slow interspersing of his own fingers with Rush's, he was able to work the thing free. The briefest of glances showed it to be an oddly shaped crystal. In one fluid, casual motion he pocketed it.

He had no idea what it was—but he suspected that it was something that the LA would love to get their hands on. So the fewer people who knew about it? The better.

A flash of light in the clearing heralded the arrival of the medics from the *Odyssey*. Jackson and Vala helped Young to his feet and they backed off, letting the medics and McKay do their work. Mitchell joined them, then Teal'c and Greer, Reaves and Atienza—until the entire team was clustered, waiting before the gate in the starless dark.

Chapter Twenty Six

Creare machina id potest sentio est crudelitas. There is something at the heart of the city that wants him, that wants them both. Longing edged with alien, mechanized intent. A feedback loop designed to equalize pressures has been co-opted into another pathway in an attempt to modify subroutines into a correction of an imbalance or, put another way—to right a wrong. Possibly that's it or possibly it's an algorithmic retribution in which he is annexed as part of a debt that has not been repaid, that cannot be repaid as long as time flows as he conceptualizes it, which is not a given, not anymore. He need look no further for this kind of perceptual betrayal than a photon-level perspective of propagation velocity at the theoretical maximum, through a vacuum, where time slows into something with the consistency of concrete, meaning there would be no sensation of transit, only emission and instantaneous absorption when the time came for the smashing into a sea, or a retina, or a star, or a radio telescope, or something quite fucked up that the cruelties of relativistic physics implied, or nothing. It was not clear to him what would be worse but what did it matter? He hated photons. They were the cheap grief of the cosmos.

"Nick."

He was aware that there were processes that required initiation, completion, termination. Either there were, or there had been. This was not right. It was or had been some kind of monotonic, diatonic, tritonic, tetratonic, pentatonic, hexatonic, heptatonic, octatonic, *intervals thing* that was only half his mind. It was torquing things—*L'isle Joyeuse* in the Lydian mode—that was probably the closest descending cadenza he could think of, but he was—

"Are you awake?"

He began to dig in against what had happened to him, knowing that something was *not right*, something about the too bright light or their too bright, too far star had pressed his mind into some kind of indentured servitude. It had not wanted to let him go, it had not wanted to be alone with its cascades of grass and its empty sea and its white light that hadn't been able to hurt him through the wall of desolation it had projected into his mind.

"Nick."

It was not her. He could already tell that it was not *her*.

"Nick."

He opened his eyes. He did not recognize the woman looking back at him. He couldn't move. It was an effort even to breathe—he felt disconnected in some way, like he'd lost his graphical processing unit. He was in a bed but he did *not sleep in beds* he held this as policy.

"Hey."

He placed her by her too wild eyes in her too still frame and the edge of contingency in her voice. Amanda Perry. Placing her, he placed himself..

"Hey." He echoed her almost perfectly which had seemed a good idea at the time he'd conceived it but in execution it was drawn out and *American* for fuck's sake and though this was something he tried to remember to do with only marginal success, this emulating of Americans, he certainly hadn't remembered *now*. He wasn't certain of his internal template.

"Are you okay? Do you want me to call someone? I think I should call someone," Perry said. "What the hell are *they doing* just—"

He grabbed for her forearm, missed, tried again, connected.

She looked at him, startled.

"Don't," he managed. This time he sounded more correct, dropping his final consonant in a haze of linguistic uncertainty. "Not yet." Had he been speaking with Sheppard in English? Or had they slipped into Ancient somewhere along the way, in the afternoon when the alien star was halfway to set?

"Well *talk* to me then," Perry hissed, her eyes wide.

Rush blinked, trying to think of something to say that would prevent a psychiatric evaluation, because at the moment he didn't think he'd pass. They fucking *loved* those things here; they *also* loved telling people that there were no negative consequences to psychiatric evaluations but if that were true he didn't think they'd propose it so often. There was nothing wrong with him except for the need to reintegrate patterns of motion and thought. This, he was already doing. No wonder SG-1 had mastered the art of the witty repartee. Sometimes the only safe ground was flippant insincerity.

He pulled his hand back from Perry and brought it to his forehead. He shut his eyes and reopened them.

"There's something wrong with you," Perry said, as if she could negate the vector of his thoughts by reversing it with her own thought vector. How had she *known* what he was thinking? Had he said any of this aloud? If he hadn't, how could she be sure of

anything internal to him? Was her comment an observation unrelated to his own thoughts regarding his own agency?

Upon examination, this seemed most likely.

"I'm fine," he said. His statement approached veridicality even if it wasn't already a member of the veridical set.

Perry did not look convinced.

"How are *you*?" That was a typical thing to say.

"Awful," she whispered, swallowing, glancing to her left, her eyes sweeping the room.

"Thanks for asking. What happened?"

He tried to remember.

"There was a city," he said, and just the *thought* of it was enough to send the memory of crystal towers bursting across his mind, tearing through his narrative. There had been *other things* besides just a city; it had been cold and there had been tones and fields and Sheppard he had fallen and what release may come of it feels like, *felt* like—

He drove the heel of one hand against his left eye, trying to decide if he had a headache.

"I'm pretty sure that someone should be assessing you for—" Perry paused too long before finishing with, "—something." She turned her head, taking a deep breath, about to call out.

"Mandy," he said.

She looked back at him, their eyes level.

"It worked," he said, feeling the realization and the words come simultaneously.

"Yeah," Perry whispered. "I *know*. I was in on the conference call. What did you *do* to that DHD—and god, can you please *not* try to sit right now? That seems like a—"

He pushed himself up, grounded by the limited physicality of the movement.

He felt stiff.

That or air resistance was a more substantial thing that he remembered.

"—bad idea," Perry finished.

"Where's Colonel Sheppard?" he asked.

"Getting debriefed," Perry said. "With all the colonels. And McKay. And Brightman. They woke him up half an hour ago. Something's happening on Atlantis. He looked *terrible*—but not as terrible as you do."

Rush brought his hands to his face, parsing what she was saying into the paired ideas that Sheppard was neither here nor dead.

His muscles felt like they were actively resisting the electrochemistry that powered them.

He was not wearing his clothes.

He was wearing a hospital gown.

"How long?" he asked her, trying to remember anything other than the quality of the light—its reflection off planar glass, its refraction through shields.

"Since you left? Sixteen hours. Since you disappeared? Eleven hours. Since you reappeared? We estimate five hours. Since you came back through the gate? Four hours. It's two o'clock in the morning, Mountain Standard Time." Her words partitioned his memories into extensional sets.

"That was helpful," he said.

"You sound surprised," she replied. Her tone carried an edge of amusement, but her expression remained drawn. "I know how you like it."

He had been in his apartment, in his car, on the base, in the gateroom, through the gate, on the planet, disassembling a DHD, which, after a certain point, had taken its own disassembly upon itself.

"You don't seem like yourself," Perry said. "If you can't—"

"The manual control of an input/output cycle with subsequent quantum error correction of the response half of a call-and-response architecture generated enough mechanical resonance to shatter portions of the device," Rush said. "It—cracked apart."

"Yeah," Perry said, the word slow and even. "I know. Then what?"

"We touched it."

Sheppard had outlined the possibilities and he tried to interpret them now in light of being here with Perry at the SGC but found that he *still* could not determine—

"Then what," Perry prompted.

"We had the subjective experience of being somewhere else."

"The city?" Perry murmured.

"No. Not the city."

There had been grass and metal and the sound of wind through leaves—littoral and endless. There had been a pressure on his mind, an unseen subluxation of something broken and buried. There had been places beneath open spaces that were closed, that were dark, and where exit did not exist, except through, except *through*—

And what release may come of it—

Except through

And what release may come of it feels like—

"Nick?" Perry said.

He torqued his own thoughts.

"Spatial translocation occurred several times, or at least the perception of it, within the framework of the entire experience," Rush said.

"Okay," Perry said. "So—you were different places, including a city."

"Yes," Rush said, relieved. He had no particular wish to describe death, subsetted. Best to skip to the end, then. "At the end of it I—" Yes. At the *end*. "Fuck," he snapped. "Where are my clothes. I—*had* it." He stood and nearly overbalanced before he steadied himself on a combination of bed and IV pole. He had *gotten it*, a physical requirement for access—like a fucking second factor, *suggestive* of a second factor, *certainly* a second factor—he'd been *holding* it, that constellation-shaped crystal, and he was *not holding it any more*.

"Hey," Perry called, rotating her chair, clearly not talking to him, looking for someone else, "Excuse me? Hello?"

A woman rounded the corner, her blonde hair piled in an elaborate twisting. "Whoa," she said, her hands up, palms out, clearly talking to him. "Whoa. Let's just—lie back down, okay?"

"Feel free," he replied, managing to organize himself a bit better and identify the impediments to his current goals. He pulled a sensor off his finger and ripped a blood pressure cuff of his arm with the rending sound of separating velcro.

"You're going to need to calm down," the doctor or medic or nurse or passerby said.

"I'm perfectly fucking calm," he informed her, as he ripped out his IV.

"Nick," Perry snapped, her voice sharp. "*Stop*. Think."

This was, usually, a good suggestion.

He stopped.

Had any of this even happened? Was he here? Had he been there? Was Altera a place or a virtual construct? Did the crystal he had taken exist at all? If it existed, did it exist physically or was it a psychic construct? If it existed physically, where was it? Should he tell anyone about it? Would the Lucian Alliance find out about it? Did they already know? If it existed psychically or virtually, then how would it manifest? Was it a symbolic representation of an alteration of his mind? Had he been altered in some way? Had the gate? Had the DHD? Could modifications, given they existed, propagate through the gate network? Were all DHDs altered? Was he losing or had he lost touch with reality? If he had, did causative agency lie with himself, with the city, with the crystal? If he thought he had lost touch with reality, should he disclose that possibility? If he thought he hadn't, could he trust himself? Did he have any way of verifying anything?

He felt like shit.

Subjectivity remained reassuringly subjective.

He draped IV tubing with its attached dressing and cannula over the top of the bag of fluid that had been, only a few seconds ago, attached to his vasculature. He clamped a hand over the crook of his elbow, and sat down.

"I need my clothes," he informed the blonde woman, "and—whatever else I was brought in with."

"Did you bring something back with you?" Perry asked slowly.

There was a correct answer to her question. Unfortunately he didn't know what it was.

"I think so," Rush said.

The other woman stepped closer, her hands coming down. "Do you want me to check?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "Would you?"

"Sure," she replied. "Everything's in the next room, bagged for examination and decon. It's no trouble." She took a step forward. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Yes," he said. "I'm fine. I'm perfectly fine."

She looked less convinced than Perry looked, which was a look he would label as 'unconvinced.'

There had been a time in his life in which he had not had to convince anyone of the efficiency or soundness of his mental functioning. He was certain of this. He was also

certain that if relative circumstances were taken into account he was doing a passable job holding his worldview together in the face of external assault.

"TJ." Rush recognized Young's voice, pitched low.

The woman's eyes widened briefly before her expression smoothed out. She turned and, behind her, Rush could see Young, a crutch under one arm and a torn piece of paper in his free hand. He stood in the doorway. Pale. Exhausted.

"Hey," Young said, looking at the woman.

"Hi," she replied quietly.

For another long moment, no one spoke.

Rush wondered what the fuck was going on.

"Hello, colonel." The woman spoke with the air of someone effecting or affecting a restart. "How can I help you?"

"Can you give us a minute?" Young asked, indicating Rush with nothing more than a brief flick of his eyes.

TJ appeared undecided.

"TJ," Young said, absently toying with the scrap in his hand.

"Okay," she said. She glanced at Rush, already walking toward the adjacent room. "I'll be back."

Young stood in the doorway, watching Rush and Perry for a few seconds. Rush looked away abruptly, trying to relax his muscles, regain control of his breathing, and begin the process of figuring out how to address the problem of the missing crystal that might or might not exist.

"Dr. Perry, I presume?" Young asked.

"What gave it away?" she countered.

Young seemed vaguely uncomfortable, his eyes flicking restively over Perry, her chair, the floor.

"You must be the mysterious neighbor," Perry said.

"Yeah," Young replied with an air of faint surprise as he leaned into the doorframe.

"You guys talk about me when you're doing—quantum physics?"

"We do not *talk* about *you*," Rush said, feeling subtle muscular tremors begin as he tensed his shoulders.

"And it's quantum cryptography, actually," Perry said.

"Isn't everything physics underneath?" Young asked, limping forward. "That's what they're saying at the water coolers these days."

"Turns out," Perry said, "it's all *math* underneath."

"Flatterer," Rush murmured, looking at her rather than Young as the other man took a seat on the end of his bed.

"Well, what can I say? You're having a bad day," Perry replied.

Rush shot her a pointed look.

"Dr. Perry," Young said. "What's your security clearance?"

"Level four," Perry said.

"Fuck," Rush said.

Both Young and Perry shot him sharp looks.

"You okay?" Young asked.

"Jealous?" Perry asked dryly.

"Yes," Rush said. "And no."

"All you have to do is reverse that for factual accuracy," Perry said.

"Well, if it isn't little miss brilliant," Rush whispered.

Perry quirked her lips at that one, her eyes flicking briefly toward the floor.

"Can I run something by you?" Young asked, directing his question at Perry.

"Sure," Perry said.

Young took the paper that he'd been absently fingering and folded it carefully along certain lines, clearly in an effort to conceal some information. "What do you make of this?" He held it out so that she could see it.

Rush watched them with narrowed eyes.

"Huh," Perry said. "Looks like a simplified diagram of the chain of events that tags non-urgent messages for Atlantis-bound transmission. It's written in Ancient. The word in the leftmost box says 'you.' The next box is a phonetic spelling of the English word for 'server.' The word under the arrow that cuts through the, um, stylized version of the stargate is 'dialing.' The castle-shaped box says, 'City of Awesome,' and the last box says, 'me'." Perry looked in Young's direction, turning her head fractionally. "It's cute," she added.

"And this is?" Young asked, unfolding one of the creases.

"That's the prefix that needs to be attached to the email header to flag it for the server," Perry said, "and someone's authorization code."

Young sighed, glanced at Rush, and unfolded the remaining crease.

"And this?"

"It says—" Perry broke off, cracking a brief smile, "'so call me maybe'?"

"Of course it does," Young said dryly, handing the paper to Rush.

He took it and examined it. The thing seemed to have been torn off the bottom of a piece of notebook paper. Beneath the drawing and text was half of a watermark that had probably originally read 'classified'. At the foot of the page, 'J Shep' was scrawled, the angularity of the letters somewhat reminiscent of Ancient text.

"Can you give us a minute?" Young asked Perry.

"Sure," she said. "I will commence the logistical nightmare of getting home at two o'clock in the morning."

Rush grimaced.

"Um," Young said. "Do you—"

"No," Perry said. "I have a system. But I do require compensation of some kind." She looked pointedly at Rush.

He cocked his head, lifting his eyebrows.

"We'll talk later," she said.

"I'm not founding an interest group," he said, as she maneuvered her chair towards the door.

"But maybe you're co-founding one," Perry replied. "I'll see you later. Glad you made it back."

"Yes yes," he replied.

For a moment he and Young watched her go, saying nothing.

"You okay?" Young asked, exhaustion lacing his voice.

"Yes," Rush said.

"That's complete bullshit," Young said. "I was at Sheppard's debriefing."

Rush wished intensely, irrationally, that Sheppard were *still here*—wished there was someone he could ask if any of what he thought had happened had *actually* fucking happened and, if so, which parts.

"Carter has the crystal," Young said very quietly. "It's locked in her lab. The only people who know about it besides you and I are Sheppard, Landry, Jackson, and Carter. So don't say anything about it. To anyone. We're putting it out that the mission was a failure."

Rush let out a shaky exhale.

So it *had* been a physical object.

"Can you—get me out of here, possibly?" Rush asked.

Young turned to look at him, his expression conflicted, but about what, Rush couldn't say.

"Yeah," Young said. "That's the plan. Take it easy on the medical staff, hold your shit together while they give you a physical to make sure you're not brain damaged—and I'll spring you."

Rush nodded.

Less than an hour later, after Rush had been examined by Brightman and given a new set of fatigues, a lecture, and a bottle of pills, Young showed up in the infirmary again. This time, he had black bag slung over his right shoulder.

"Ready to go, hotshot?" Young asked.

Rush stood, feeling the tremors of his own overtaxed muscles. The literal physicality of his experience was still unclear to him in its scope, but *something* had caused this entire-body muscular fatigue. There was likely no way to circumvent the reflexive contraction of musculature at the perception of death whether or not said 'death' had actually happened.

He said nothing until they were in the elevator, heading out of the base. "And what happened to you, then?" he murmured, gesturing vaguely at Young's crutch.

"Eh," Young said, leaning against the wall of the elevator. "Little setback. No big deal. I might have been promoted and then immediately used my new rank to make a questionable decision about going into the field."

It took Rush a moment to work that one out. "You ended up on the planet?"

"Yeah. The weather was *not* good, turns out."

"No?"

"No," Young said. "We spent a few hours on the *Odyssey* until the storm passed. At that point the pair of you were back."

The elevator doors opened and they walked a short length of hall to emerge into the warm dark of late July. The night was clear and the stars overhead were a familiar spread against the dark. He had only to think of Altera to feel the subtle pull of the planet against his thoughts, even across vast distances in spacetime.

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

Rush yanked his gaze away from the stars and back to the parking lot, realizing he had stopped in front of the doors. He wished he knew what Young knew. What Sheppard had told them. It would make things easier. "Yes," he said. "I'm fine. Give me your keys."

"In what lifetime," Young said conversationally, "do you think I'd let you *drive* right now?" he reached into the bag he was carrying and pulled out a portable signal scrambler. He clicked it on and handed the faintly glowing device to Rush. "*This*, you can have."

Rush sighed. He reached up towards his shoulder. The movement was slow, as if the air itself was resisting him. "Do you want me to—" he motioned vaguely at the bag that Young was carrying, belatedly realizing that he probably should have offered earlier.

"I'm good," Young said.

"Oh yes," Rush said, with a pointed glance at Young's crutch. "You look it."

"This thing?" Young said, glancing down at the crutch. "Purely for fashion."

"I see," Rush said.

They walked in silence across the expanse of asphalt to where Young's car was waiting, a reflective black in the darkness. Young unlocked it remotely with a quiet chirp. Rush had a difficult time with the mechanics of door-opening, which required a cross-body stabilization of right hand with left and then a double handed peeling away of the door from the body of the car.

On the opposite side of the car, as he put his bag into the back seat, Young watched him.

Rush got into the car.

Neither of them said anything.

The intervals are nonstandard but predictable and he has to wonder now, given what he's learned about his own genetics whether this is part of it. Of course it would be, the ability to hear and identify absolute pitches. Was it chance that had combined musical proclivity and inclination, was it chance that he is, had always been, technically skilled in this way, chance that he can hear it, whatever it is? He doesn't yet know its nature but he knows what it sounds like. Is it chance that he is too entrenched in the sound to snap himself out of it? There is no out. There is no place to make a stand. He is within it and it is everywhere.

"Talk to me," Sheppard says. "Talk to me."

There had been a time in his life when he could listen; a time when she would play for hours and it had not bothered him. The partita in E major was the thing that had caught his attention and the thing that had led to the rest of it because before that there had been no intersection of their sets. All civilized people played the piano, at least to some extent. But it turns from one in E major to one in E minor and that turning must be him; he had always had a preference for the minor triad on the tonic note and she had thought that morbid but a touch amusing as well because of course he preferred the minor, of course you do, sweetheart, you would—

"You don't hear it?" he manages. "I can't shut it out."

"Rush."

"There's nothing to hear," Sheppard says. And that is what, recently, he has come to fear. That there is nothing to hear, that his mind is coming undone, his consciousness conquered by some kind of neuronal conflagration that must begin in his auditory cortex and spread outward. It was not unheard of. It had happened before. To others. Would it be better if he played or would it be worse, would it be infinitely worse—

"Hey," Young said. "Hotshot. Wake up."

Rush sat forward so abruptly that his seatbelt engaged and he slammed into the strap with a painful contracture of muscles, his hands coming up and wrapping instinctively around the belt as if it had attacked him.

"You were dreaming," Young said, unnecessarily slowly.

Rush struggled with his seatbelt, struggled with the car door, and finally escaped into the exterior air. After only a few heartbeats he identified his location as the parking lot of his apartment building. He tried to take a slow breath in the suffocating, warm air and failed. He tried to think of *nothing* but he knew their tonal inclinations now and it

was difficult to prevent his mind from turning toward what would be the last cypher. The one that—

"Hotshot," Young said, getting out of the car.

"Don't call me that," Rush snapped.

"Okay," Young said. "Open the back door and grab the pizza, will you?"

He did not remember that they had acquired pizza at any point. Something of this must have shown on his face because Young raised his eyebrows.

"You were sleeping," the other man said, "and there are only a few places in Colorado Springs that are open at three hundred hours. I figured you'd prefer this to wings, given the choice."

"I prefer neither."

"Too bad," Young said dryly. "Brightman said you should eat."

"When did you talk to Brightman?" His mind felt fractured, existing as a thing in pieces without perceptual continuity.

"In Sheppard's debriefing. Less questions, more grabbing the pizza," Young said, fishing his bag and his single crutch out of the back seat on the driver's side of the car.

"What did she tell you?" Rush asked, opening the back door of the car and pulling out the pizza.

"That both of you were mildly hypothermic and suffering from exhaustion. Your blood work showed massive amounts of adrenaline and indications of muscular injury. You'll both likely be sore as fuck tomorrow."

He found that pronouncement reassuringly conventional.

Rush followed Young to the door, carrying a fucking *pizza*. That seemed to err on the side of being too conventional and so again, he found himself slightly unsure whether any of this was actually happening. Furthermore, did it matter? He wasn't sure.

"What does that mean?" Young asked.

"What does what mean?" Rush replied.

"That thing you do," Young said.

"What thing?"

"You just did it."

"What?" he asked.

"The *thing* you *do*," Young said, slurring his words in exhaustion, as he unlocked the door to the building. "You know what mean. Where you blink kind of—slowly."

Rush said nothing, trying to figure out how such a question might be addressed.

"It looks like you're trying to pretend you're somewhere else, surrounded by geniuses."

Rush raised his eyebrows.

"It's the pizza, isn't it?" Young said, as they stepped onto the elevator. "You hate normal things."

Did he?

"I don't think so," Rush said.

"There's eggplant on it," Young said.

"Why?" Rush asked.

"Because it was the weirdest shit they had," Young said.

"I don't consider eggplant to be particularly 'weird'," Rush said.

"You know, Jackson thinks that you don't eat."

He wasn't clear on whether that was related, and if so, how.

The elevator doors opened and they walked toward the end of the hall. Young was moving extremely slowly. Without thinking too much about it, Rush reached over and pulled the shoulder bag off Young's right shoulder. As soon as he had initiated this chain of events he realized that it had, potentially, not been a good idea.

He then lost track of things for a few seconds.

When he was next cognizant of what was happening, the bag, the pizza, and the crutch were on the floor and Young's forearm seemed to be mostly against his neck. He also seemed to be against the wall, and Young seemed to be somewhat unbalanced, trying not to choke him, and trying not to fall over in equal parts.

"Bad idea," Rush managed.

"You think?" Young said through clenched teeth, managing to use the wall to rebalance himself. "What the hell was that?"

"Assistance?"

"Great," Young said, taking a deep breath. "Uh, thanks." He slapped Rush on the arm in a way that was probably supposed to be reassuring and possibly also meant to also convey gratitude. "Sorry. Long, stressful day."

Rush bent down and, with some difficulty, retrieved the crutch, which he handed to Young. He then shouldered the bag and picked up the pizza, trailing after Young to his apartment door. The other man opened it with the clatter of keys against lacquered wood. Young flipped on his light and Rush followed him inside, depositing the shoulder bag on the floor and the pizza on Young's table.

"Goodnight," he said. "Thanks for—" he tried to think of a pat way to summarize everything that he should be thanking Young for, came up blank, and compensated with a vague wave of the hand.

"No," Young said. "Sit."

"I don't think so," Rush said.

"Sit," Young said, lowering himself with a wince into a chair.

"Enjoy your dinner," Rush said. "Breakfast," he amended. "Eggplant."

"Sit, or I'm calling Jackson," Young said.

"Unnecessary."

"Debatable," Young said, pulling a piece of pizza out of the box. "You have two choices. Either we eat this here, or in your apartment. Since we're already here, and you're weirdly secretive about your apartment, I vote for option number one."

Rush dropped into a chair, planted an elbow on the table, curled a hand under his chin and considered the pizza in front of him.

"You're going to eat this, right?" Young asked. "I got this eggplant for *you*, you know."

"Why would you do that?" Rush asked.

"Because Brightman said you need to eat," Young clarified. "As I explained. Already."

"Was this a plan that you had?" Rush asked. "I thought we had established that you were to make no decisions about food."

"Maybe *you* established that. In your own head."

"That sounds like something I might do," Rush agreed, picking up a piece and taking a bite. He decided that he was ravenously hungry. After several minutes of attacking the pizza with silent voracity, he realized that Young was watching him.

"So," Young said. "What happened."

Rush looked back at him. "I thought you'd been debriefed."

"Yup," Young said. "By Sheppard."

He was too tired for this.

He considered the potential outcomes of telling Young nothing.

He considered the potential outcomes of telling Young everything.

He considered the potential outcomes of delay.

"Are you going to say something?" Young asked.

"Yes," Rush said.

Maybe he should just focus on the salient details.

"Anytime now," Young said.

"I think the crystal is a second factor," Rush said.

"Is that supposed to make sense to me?" Young asked.

"It's a principle of authentication," Rush said, taking another bite of pizza. "We're trying to open a lock. We determine how to dial each chevron—and that's something we know. The first factor. But now we have a physical object that was obtained—with some difficulty. It serves as a stand-in for the qualities required to obtain it, and it will likely interface with the gate in some way. Hence, a second factor."

"Okay," Young said. "So, just to be clear, you and J Shep hit this one out of the park?"

Rush shrugged with one shoulder. "The crystal is shaped like a glyph, which is likely the identity of the fifth chevron. I'm guessing that if we interface this crystal with the gate it will allow the unlocking. It may—" he paused, letting the train of thought begun on Altera, on the floor of a crystal tower, drop into place. "It may allow for sequential dialing," he finished. "Something that has, so far, eluded us."

"But you have five chevrons now," Young said. "I thought as you solve each one—"

"What makes you think that the five I have are the first five in the sequence?" Rush asked. "I have no idea which of the nine they are. We can get them to lock, but we can't—" he freed up a hand and twisted it in the air. "We can't dial from one to the next."

"You think maybe with this crystal plugged into the gate—you think then you can dial?"

"Possibly."

Young made an approving sort of noise as he chewed.

Rush resumed eating his pizza. He was feeling slightly better, his thoughts sharper than they'd been the entire night.

"So, that wasn't really what happened, hotshot," Young said, after a moment.

"What do you want," Rush asked, "a narrative?"

"Yeah," Young said.

"Why?" Rush said.

"Because," Young said. "This is your debriefing."

Right then. Of course it was.

"Your official paperwork is already in as an unnamed civilian adjunct to a highly classified mission that falls under the military purview of Atlantis. We're trying not to create a paper trail."

"So why do I have to be debriefed at all?" Rush asked.

"Because the acting head of Icarus has decided it's a good idea and General Landry concurs."

"Why now?"

"Because you're too tired to railroad me."

"We gated to the planet, cracked the cypher, broke open the DHD, Sheppard and I were transported in space and possibly time to the Ancient homeworld, passed a merit-based evaluation system, obtained a crystal, and woke up on Earth, feeling wretched."

Young sighed.

Rush took a bite of pizza. "Who's the acting head of Icarus?"

"Then again, maybe you'll never be too tired to railroad me."

Rush raised his eyebrows.

"Describe the planet," Young said.

"Covered in grass," Rush replied, trying to banish the feel of the place from his mind and hang onto his own irritation. "We only saw two locations. One was the place we were initially transported to, and the other was—" he broke off, wrenching his thoughts away from abandoned systems. "A city."

"The first place," Young said. "What was it like?"

"There was a low-built structure in a radial pattern," Rush said. "Mostly obscured by grass. The DHD was located in the center of a metal circle. Immediately upon arrival we encountered a holographic projection of a woman."

"How did you know she was a hologram?" Young asked.

"She identified herself as such," Rush said, starting in on a second piece of pizza, dropping his eyes.

He wasn't entirely sure what Sheppard would have communicated in the briefing, but it seemed like a minimization of uncertainties and subjective unpleasantness was his best course of action.

"What did she say?" Young asked.

"She gave us a standard greeting," Rush said, "and then she asked us what we wanted."

"What did you say?"

"We identified that we wanted the cypher key and she said correct—as if she were granting a computational validation. She then invited us to proceed." He did not feel inclined to continue his description with this level of detail.

"How did you know where to go?" Young asked, taking another bite of pizza.

"We looked for a break in the low metal wall that surrounded our position. There was only one such gap."

"So you went through," Young said.

"Yes," Rush said, his eyes scanning the solid regularity of the internal geometries of Young's apartment—the books, chairs, lamps, and conventional furniture, all of which had been doggedly unpacked.

"And then what?" Young said.

"We passed a series of tests," Rush said, taking another bite of pizza, "and obtained the crystal."

"Yup," Young said, fingering the corrugated cardboard edge of the box. "What was the first test?"

It occurred to Rush that Young had dragged him to the brink of describing something he did not want to discuss with a deftness that was terribly at odds with his perception of the other man. The resultant realization followed sans effort.

Young was *excellent* at precisely *this*.

He was better than Jackson. Possibly. David would have been the ideal choice for a debriefing but David was—unavailable. Rush felt sure that if there was anyone who could have understood the nature of Altera it would have been David. The other man

had always seemed to him to feel the drive of some motivational whip but the origin and outcome of such a drive remained obscure to him.

Young was excellent at this.

Rush could still torque things to his advantage.

He set down his pizza.

Bad idea.

He picked it back up, muscles contracting against the invisible force of fatigue.

Young raised his eyebrows.

Excessive abstraction seemed to cause him problems, but such things could be skirted in favor of the practical. So. He would torque this.

"There were seven rooms in total," Rush began, "and it's possible that the length of the entire ordeal was my fault because as soon as it became apparent to me that this was a trial of some kind I immediately extrapolated to what I thought would be its likely structure, which was a microcosm of the encoded chevrons used to dial the gate. I felt that there would be a relationship between the *form* of the trial and the *function* of it, which was to facilitate dialing. So, I predicted seven for the gate, or ten for the cypher, with a third, less likely, possibility being nine, for the encrypted address. Once Sheppard and I began to suspect the trial was adaptive, I began the attempt to come up with a cogent rationale for the thing to be six. I think I may have influenced the outcome." He shrugged and took a bite of his pizza. "But you asked about the first room."

Young was regarding him with an expression that was taken aback and wary.

"The first room consisted of two force fields that extended laterally for its entire length, floor to ceiling, and advanced toward one another, trapping us in between. Subjectively, we experienced pain, loss of motor control and death before 'resetting' as it were, back to the center of the field." He took a bite of pizza. "Repeated failures seemed to have a cumulative effect on our physiology. We attempted outrunning the field," he began counting off on his fingers, "altering the circuitry of the wall, and following an irregular line of text along the floor until we realized that we had to let the fields collide, pass through one another, and create places of destructive interference that were traversable."

Young tried to get a word in edgewise, likely the beginning of a request for more detail, but Rush continued as though he hadn't noticed. "The second room was really

more Colonel Sheppard's purview. It seemed at first to be a test of physical force against a computational opponent, but given that the difficulty level was—adjustable, I think the contest was inherently unwinnable and therefore a misdirection. It would have been avoidable entirely had we realized that simultaneous handling of the weapon was all that was required. He took another bit of pizza. "The third room was relatively straightforward once I realized that—"

"Wait," Young said, his hand coming up. "Just *wait*. The difficulty level was adjustable? What do you mean by that?"

He wished he had employed different phrasing.

"I mean it was adjustable," he said, trying to generalize his way out whatever Young's concerns were. "There was no way to win."

"Do you mean *you* were fighting?"

Apparently Sheppard's debriefing hadn't been as thorough as Rush had been imagining. Or perhaps Sheppard's phrasing had been less explicit. In any case, there was no point in equivocation.

"Yes," Rush said. "In order to effect a reset, we both had to fail."

"So you're saying that *after* you saw Colonel Sheppard get taken down, then *you* had attempt the same thing?" Young's shoulders were tensed, his arms braced against the table.

"Yes," Rush said, looking away. "Categorically, getting one's throat cut by a holographic projection is no more disturbing than death by force field when neither are real and both result from subconscious expectations influencing external processes."

"Please," Young said, "tell me you're not so screwed up you actually *believe* that."

Rush shrugged and forced himself to take another bite of pizza. He tried to think of nothing. Failing that, he tried to think of the Riemann hypothesis because that had been room three. "As I was saying," he continued, "with the third room we were successful in a single attempt. The solution didn't require a mathematical proof per se, it was more of an identification of a notable feature of famously unsolved problem—"

"What did it look like?" Young asked, watching him with an intensity that was only partially veiled.

"Well," Rush said, taking another bite of pizza, "it was a floor-to-ceiling representation of the complex plane, but the correct point of egress was clearly—"

"No," Young snapped. "The holographic projection. From room two. What did it look like?"

"Like a person," Rush said, looking away, "dressed in clothing of an unfamiliar, likely Ancient style, holding a weapon identical to the one I was holding."

He wished he knew what Sheppard had said, or not said. It seemed as if the other man had been somewhat circumspect about portions of his narrative, possibly due to time constraints, possibly due to constraints of other kinds.

"Did it change appearance?" Young asked. He didn't even give Rush a chance to respond before stating, "it must have, if you and Sheppard simultaneously holding the blade short-circuited it."

Rush nodded, forcing down another bite of pizza.

"Who was it?" Young asked.

"Technically, it was no one," Rush replied. "It was an adaptive hologram that changed height and build and appearance depending on whether it was facing Sheppard or myself."

"But whom did it *look like*, hotshot?" Young asked.

"When I was facing it, it looked like me," Rush said.

"Yeah, of course it did." Young looked away and then looked back. "Did it *talk* to you?"

He hesitated to the point at which there was nothing to say except— "Yes."

"What did it say?" Young asked.

"Nothing salient," Rush replied, "only dark reflections of my own subconscious irrationalities. Room four was some kind of basic competency in Ancient philosophical texts, in which we, unfortunately, *burned* to death several times before Sheppard was able to either recall or intuit the correct response. It wasn't clear to me at the time nor he did not seem particularly inclined to elaborate as to the manner in which he obtained the answer. He seemed to place a great deal of stock in the idea of thinking *at* the technological architecture that lay beneath what we were actually experiencing. Apparently, this is something that often works for him in these types of scenarios."

"Huh," Young said.

Rush took another bite of pizza. "Room five was somewhat complicated in that it consisted of a static, emitting, lethal field that was briefly warped by means unclear to me. The warping resulted in patches of constructive and destructive interference that created an aesthetically pleasing pattern that we were able to duplicate via force of

will transduced into electromagnetic force—terribly interesting, but not a fucking clue how *that* worked, if it even 'happened' at all—at which point a new pattern would be presented. Unfortunately, areas of destructive interference did not always overlap, which meant that one had to be positioned correctly before the next pattern was displayed, lest it killed you. Room six was—

"Sheppard said that you had a hard time with room five," Young said carefully.

"Yes well," Rush took another bite of pizza, trying to come up with something that would be factually accurate and that would not give away any additional information that would lead to subsequent lines of questioning and that would also not remind him of musical theory or Ancient interval preferences when it came to pitch because there was now something in his mind that had been *theirs*. It was very much like what having one piece of fucking *Chopin* would tell an alien culture about western music. There were generalizations that could be made—

But he wasn't going to make them now.

He was *not* going to make them *now*.

"He said you seemed to think there was a tonal component."

"There was," Rush said.

"*He* couldn't hear it," Young said, with a subtle emphasis on the pronoun.

"Well I'd be willing to bet he can't hear a fucking dog whistle either. Do you feel qualified to pit two subjective experiences against one another, as if there's any metric you could use to test the validity of one versus another?" He could not prove them wrong; he could not prove them *right*—whatever it was they suspected—because they all suspected something; he just wasn't sure *what* and he wasn't sure if *they* were sure either.

"No," Young said slowly. "That's not what I'm saying. I'm not saying you're *wrong*—"

Which was good because he wasn't wrong, there was no way, objectively, that he *could* be wrong. Such a determination would be impossible.

"—I'm just saying that it wouldn't be the first time that something like that had—upset you." Young was clearly being careful, because even though his last statement was correct, he had certainly, *certainly* meant to imply that the tonal nature of the room might have been nothing more than an imagined construct, which it had *not been*, not anymore than all of the rest of it had been.

"True," Rush replied, allowing Young to backtrack, as it allowed him the latitude to move on. "Room six was a bookend to room one, its aesthetic opposite, full of—" his throat closed. "Full of water. There was a path that we were able to reveal in short order based on another Ancient phrase."

"Sheppard said you also seemed to have a hard time with that one," Young said.

He did not like the water.

"I was getting tired of fucking *dying* by that point," Rush said.

There had been a cost to *willing* an early end to the test, for trying to force it into six rooms, and whether that cost had been truly inevitable or there only because he *believed* a cost to be inevitable—it didn't matter.

"Makes sense," Young said.

As soon as he had known the nature of what it was that had trapped them, he had known there would be water. "So we drowned a few times," Rush managed with a tone he felt was passably cool. "We were then transported to a room in a city that contained the crystal we were looking for. I retrieved the crystal, and we were transported back to the planet."

"There was no test in the seventh room?" Young asked.

He thought of the heartsick city, alone under a white star. Even now he wasn't certain why or how he'd left it.

He didn't have to wonder what Sheppard had told them.

He knew.

"No," Rush said. "There was no test."

"You don't remember anything after grabbing the cypher?" Young asked.

"No—" Rush said, breaking off abruptly as a quick flash of darkened sky and the whisper of rain through trees imposed itself on his mind. "I was only conscious for a few seconds. Long enough to know I had it."

There was no sound in the apartment save the low hum of Young's air conditioner. The other man said nothing, looking at him with a haunted expression as he rubbed his hand absently along the line of his jaw.

In the absence of an overt line of questioning, his thoughts seemed to lose their edge.

"Are you okay?" Young asked finally.

"Obviously," Rush said.

Young stared at him.

He stared back at Young, wondering if there was something wrong with himself that he hadn't noticed.

"I'm fine," Rush reiterated.

"Good," Young said quietly, toying with a half-eaten piece of pizza. "I'm glad to hear it."

They stared silently at the congealing pizza.

He felt his thoughts slowing.

"It's half past three in the morning," Rush said. "This *cannot* be what you people usually do for briefings."

"Why don't you sleep on my couch," Young said.

"No, thank you," Rush said.

"How about 'yes'?" Young said.

"Why would I do that?"

"I bought you dinner, the least you can do is make me breakfast."

"If we are doing some kind of quid pro quo exchange," Rush said, "I think you owe me something like fourteen meals at this point."

"I told Brightman that I'd keep an eye on you," Young said.

"Yes well, she'll never have to know," Rush replied.

"And I told her that *you'd* keep an eye on *me*," Young said.

Rush looked at Young. The man was sitting gingerly on the edge of his chair, his expression troubled. The skin around his eyes was tight, and there was a faint sheen of sweat on his forehead. The crutch he hadn't left the apartment with that morning argued for some kind of event on the planet that was likely more physiologically significant than exertion brought on by bad weather.

"What happened?" he asked, toying with the edge of the pizza box.

"I'll tell you tomorrow, hotshot, I'm too fucking tired right now."

Rush nodded shortly, then said, "I do not sleep on couches."

"Fine," Young said. "You can sleep wherever you want. *I'll* sleep on the couch."

"Are you done with this?" Rush asked, indicating the pizza that they'd mostly consumed.

"Yeah," Young said. "It tastes like shit, actually."

"You think I'm unaware?" Rush asked dryly. "This is the problem that comes with elevated culinary standards." He picked up the box and headed through the door of the shadowed kitchen.

"You can never go home again," Young agreed.

"Precisely." He had a hard time mustering the fine motor control necessary to tear aluminum foil.

"This does not bode well for the 'chess and wings' night that Mitchell has planned for later in the week," Young said, following him into the kitchen, leaning on his crutch.

"Chess and wings?"

"He's calling it che'swings," Young said. "One word. Because he's a dork. And he thinks this is going to teach Teal's lesson about giving earth food a Jaffa name. This is how he's 'redefining his leadership role'."

Rush had no idea how to respond to that.

"You're doing it again," Young said.

"Doing 'what' again?"

"Wishing you were surrounded by geniuses," Young said. "That, or you're about to pass out. I'm never quite sure."

"It's neither," Rush said, planting the fourth and fifth fingers of each hand against the counter as he folded the foil over the pizza.

"If by neither, you mean 'both'," Young said, "then yeah, probably."

"Colonel Mitchell does not strike me as a chess player," Rush said, turning to open the refrigerator. He squinted in the glare of the fluorescent lighting and layered the foil-wrapped pizza atop an impressive array of beer.

"He's not," Young replied, leaning against the doorframe, backlit by light from the next room. "He's just doing it for the ladies."

"That's nice," Rush said, attempting to break down the pizza box, but lacking the requisite coordination to do so.

"Don't worry about it, hotshot," Young said.

Rush completed his crass folding job on the cardboard box and shoved it beneath the sink next to Young's paper recycling. He leaned against the counter for a moment, recovering, hoping the fine muscular tremors from overuse were not at all noticeable.

"Or," Young said, "that's good too."

"Shut up, will you?" Rush said.

"Four to three," Young said.

He looked over at Young. It took him a moment, but finally he said, "Fuck."

"You should take whatever it was that Brightman gave you if you want to be able to move in the morning." Young reached into a cabinet, and grabbed himself a glass. "I plan on taking a responsible dose of painkillers myself."

"I'll consider it."

"Consider away," Young said, limping back toward the kitchen table where he had deposited his bag. "In the meantime, want to watch infomercials?"

"How could I resist?" Rush asked dryly.

"I'll be back," Young said, heading toward his bedroom.

Rush leaned forward, his hands braced against the table, trying to suppress the subtle shaking of his muscles. He wondered what John Sheppard was doing. He imagined the other man facing down some nebulous threat halfway across the universe—exhausted, full of secrets, kept company by his city on the sea.

Rush shook his head, fished the medication that Brightman had given him out of his jacket pocket and regarded it with narrowed eyes. He repocketed it without opening the bottle.

He opened one of Young's closets, looking for spare bedding. He was fairly sure that the man had inherited quite a bit of it. He remembered unpacking at least one handmade blanket crafted by a relation with a dubious knack for color coordination. He found it without much effort.

After a few minutes, Young reemerged in a t-shirt and vaguely athletic looking pants, his crutch under one arm, a blanket and pillow under the other. He dropped the bedding on the floor next to the couch.

"You missed," Rush said dryly, looking at the floor.

"That's for you," Young said. "I'm good with just the couch. But um," he looked at the blanket that Rush had retrieved. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it," Rush replied.

"Can I get a hand, here, hotshot?" Young asked.

Rush stepped in, and they locked forearms as he helped Young sit, counterbalancing the pull of gravity.

"You need anything else?" Rush asked, as Young gingerly dragged his left leg off the floor with the help of his right hand. "Twenty more IQ points, possibly?" He reached in to slowly pull Young's foot up to the level of the couch. The controlled movement taxed his already exhausted muscles, and he tried to suppress the resultant tremors.

"You're an asshole," Young said, his teeth gritted, grimacing as he shifted position. There was no mistaking the amusement in his tone.

"It's a gift," Rush said as he straightened. "Try to contain your envy if you can."

"Yeah," Young hissed, finally easing back into position. "I'll do my best. Fuck," Young continued, sounding slightly breathless. "So, that was worse than I thought it would be."

"What happened?" Rush asked, scanning the room for the television remote.

"Outrunning death-by-high-voltage turned out to be less 'light duty', and more 'regular duty'," Young said. "But, on the plus side, I didn't re-break anything."

"Congratulations," Rush said dryly. "Death by high voltage?"

"Lightning storm," Young said. "Scratch that. Normal storm. With lightning. And by 'normal storm' I mean freakishly large storm. But it had rain. And hail. You and Sheppard were lucky you came back after the worst of it was over."

"Apparently," Rush said, retrieving the remote from Young's bookshelf.

"Thanks," Young said, as he took it. He turned on the TV.

Rush turned down the lights and then sank to the floor, his back against the couch. Belatedly, he realized that his lap was missing his laptop, but the idea of going to retrieve it from his own apartment seemed like too much of a barrier in activation energy.

"Hotshot," Young said, changing the channels in predictable, short intervals, "you know that was fucked up, right? What happened on that planet?"

Rush said nothing.

"Because it was," Young said. "The entire thing."

"I suppose," Rush replied.

"It doesn't usually go like that," Young said. "But sometimes, when you get in the way of a thing that you don't understand, it plows over you."

For a long time, Rush said nothing, a muscle twitching subtly in his cheek.

Young stopped his channel switching on an instructional tutorial regarding how to best render trees while painting a landscape. After a time, Rush could hear the other man's even breathing as a forestscape was rendered on the screen.

He thought of the gate, of the cyphers within it. He thought of Altera, of its ceaseless, interrogative loops that ran forever unanswered. He thought of the mathematics, of the blurring of the line between truth and its description.

"I don't think that's the problem," he whispered finally.

Chapter Twenty Seven

His fingers dig into loosened earth. He drags himself through the darkening landscape, up the steep slope. His progress is slow—hand over agonized hand while his bad leg trails behind him, useless. Even the air feels hot. Beside him, Telford coughs, his fists tightening uselessly into gray dust, trying to gain traction. Failing.

"We are not going to die here," Telford says, choking on the ash in the air.

Young coughs. "No?"

"No," Telford replies. "I will not allow us to die here."

Young opened his eyes to the sun, streaming into his apartment through gaps in his venetian blinds. "Oh god," he whispered, his right hand coming to his face in an attempt to shut out the clear brightness of early morning. He was covered in a cold sweat.

The pain had woken him.

Or the sun.

Or, maybe, it had been the shreds of a dream that, even now, was already fading.

He stared at his ceiling, watching the morning creep across white paint.

His bones would heal. His bones were healing. This was just—a setback. Nothing more than a setback. He slid laterally toward the edge of the couch and lowered his right foot to the floor. With a combination of right hand and right foot he was able to level himself into a vertical position without either flexing or extending his left hip. Much. He gripped the wall for balance as he gingerly put weight on his injured leg.

He exhaled, slow and controlled.

It could be worse.

It could also be better.

He looked down at the floor and flinched in alarm. The spike of adrenaline caused him to step back and nearly unbalance onto the couch. He staggered and caught himself with a hand on the wall, pulling in a deep breath before shooting a venomous glare at the mathematician who was currently lying face down on the floor, doing an excellent impression of someone who had been murdered and left for dead.

"God *damn*," he hissed, trying to calm the hell down.

If the man didn't want to sleep in a bed for reasons of his own, Young had no problem with that. Sure, it was weird—but Rush? Yeah. A bit of a weird guy. What Young *did* have a problem with was how *alarming* he found it to wake up and find someone lying underneath his coffee table as if they had been slide-tackled by sleep.

After confirming that Rush was definitely *breathing*, he rolled his eyes. "Scientists," he whispered.

He pulled his crutch away from the wall and limped toward the bathroom, where he gingerly stripped off his T-shirt and the SGC-issue pants from the previous day. He tried to avoid his reflection in the mirror, as he wasn't inclined to face down scars that served as yet another reminder of just how far it was that he had to go before he'd made it anywhere near his usual level of functioning.

After a shower, two more Percocets, and breakfast, which was a piece of cold eggplant pizza eaten over the sink, Young felt significantly better. It was just before oh eight hundred, and he wasn't clear on whether he was due to make an appearance at the SGC. On one hand, there were work-hour protocols in place that kicked in after offworld travel. Duty hours would dictate that after a mission like yesterday's he would have at least the morning off. On the other hand, often those protocols were enforced or waived by the upper level command staff, and given that he now was acting head of Icarus, he was fairly certain that the person deciding whether or not he was coming into work was himself.

He limped back into his living room and considered Rush for a moment.

Making up his mind, he retrieved the locked, kevlar-reinforced, shoulder bag he'd removed from the SGC the night before and returned to the kitchen to start coffee. He unlocked the seven-digit combination lock on the bag and pressed his thumb to the portable scanner. Once he had the thing open, he pulled out a stack of files and set them on his table before slipping his laptop out of the bag.

He opened his email to find several unread messages. He clicked through them in order.

To: Everett Young

From: Cameron Mitchell

Subject: DO NOT EVEN THINK ABOUT IT

If you come to work today we're replacing you at che'swings night with your neighbor.

(Seriously though, how good of a chess player do you think he is? He seems like a chess

guy. Would he give me tips, do you think? Would you give me tips?) You're gonna call me tonight, right? Heck yes you are. We've got some ish to discuss.

-Cam

Young rolled his eyes and clicked to the next message.

To: Everett Young

From: Daniel Jackson

Subject:

I'm assuming that you've got quite the reading list now that you're acting head of the IP. You're going to want to talk. 555-2438. FYI, SG-1 is OW day after tomorrow, not sure for how long. Hope your back is okay. And your hip. And your leg. Even though Dr. Lam is ostensibly out of commission, Cam may have given her a heads up regarding your recent activities. I would describe her as 'irked'.

-Daniel

Young sighed.

To: Everett Young

Cc: Daniel Jackson

From: Henry Landry

Subject: Paperwork

Colonel Young, I'll expect your report by oh nine hundred tomorrow. I will not expect you until you're cleared by medical. Dr. van Densen sent an internal memo regarding her assessment of your command decision as well as the efficacy of the medical clearance procedures in place at the SGC. She finds them wanting. Bureaucracy will certainly ensue, so do both of us a favor and write up the rationale behind your decision to go into the field using form H7650. Get Jackson to sign off on the thing. Politicians love the guy. Doctors love the guy. Everyone loves the guy.

-HL

The quiet whistle of the coffee pulled Young back to the kitchen. He poured himself a cup of the stuff and then returned to his dining table to take care of his email. When that was done, he sat sipping his coffee, undecided.

He could start on his paperwork; he was certain that was what *Landry* would prefer. On the other hand, Rush was currently asleep, and Young was *not* in love with the idea of trying to read a pile of classified files with the other man up and around.

No contest then.

He limped to his bedroom to retrieve his reading glasses from his bedside table. When he was back in the kitchen, he shut his laptop, dragged the files within reach, ordered them chronologically, and began to read.

—having completed a discussion of Dr. Beckett's impressive empirical progress to date, we must turn our attention to the following questions: 1) What is the biological purpose of the ATA, LTA, and NRA genes? 2) How were these genes introduced into human lineages? 3) What are the broader implications for human evolution? 4) How can current and future knowledge regarding these genes be used to better inform our use of Ancient technology and the development of our own equivalent devices? Due to the format of this report, potential answers to these questions will be outlined briefly below for the non-specialist reader. For a more technical analysis, please see attached documents prepared by Dr. Carson Beckett, beginning on page 4.

1) Regarding the biological purpose of the Ancient genes. It is tempting to discuss the "purpose" of xenogenetic elements in terms of their observed effects. If we were to indulge this tendency we might say that ATA allows for projection of electromagnetic waves generated by the brain, and therefore activates Ancient technology. We might say that LTA is receptive, and allows for mental calibration between activated Ancient device and its operator. This interpretation is erroneous. Genes are passed from parent to offspring because they confer a survival advantage to the organism that they generate, differentiate, and maintain through their combined workings. ATA has not persisted in the human lineage because it activates Ancient technology. Regardless of how this gene was introduced to humans, it endures because it confers a survival advantage of some kind, independent of its ability to allow for effective use of Ancient devices. The same argument can be made for LTA and indeed each of these genes can be found alone, without the presence of the other. Speculation regarding the survival advantage conferred by these genes in the SGC medical community has centered on the possibility that they may allow for the primitive development of a quantifiable "sixth sense" that allows for interaction with portions of the electromagnetic spectrum that are normally outside human perception. Measurements taken by Dr. Beckett and Dr. McKay following John Sheppard's interaction with Lantean technology (including "Puddle Jumpers," lifesigns detectors, and the neural interface device) indicate that there may be some basis for this hypothesis, though, by its nature, this evidence is no more than anecdotal. It is teleologically appealing to speculate that a survival advantage could be conferred by the ability to sense or influence the local electromagnetic environment. Given the potential that these genes may hold, it is a

mistake to restrict our interpretation and investigation of them by defining them by a side effect ("projective" and "receptive" in regards to technological interfacing) of their primary role, as this may limit subsequent advances in basic science.

2) The introduction of Ancient genes into the Tau'ri lineage. It is evident to anyone who has made a study of either ATA or LTA that these genes are not human equivalents of Ancient counterparts, acquired over time via convergent evolution. The human versions of ATA and LTA exhibit such a high degree of genetic conservation vis-à-vis the Ancient genetic code that there is no question that [even if humans are the second evolution of this form in the galaxy (an event whose independent spontaneity seems unlikely and has yet to be verified)] these particular genes were introduced into human lineage at some point in our evolutionary history. Whether this occurred via deliberate interference or as a natural consequence of sexual reproduction is a question that we cannot answer at this juncture, nor can we assess motive if this introduction was indeed a deliberate act. Examination of the genetic background of individuals with these genes has given rise to a pattern suggestive of eight separate founder events. One in sub-Saharan Africa, two in central Asia, two in western Europe, one in eastern Europe, one in the middle east, and one in central America. Due to the demographics of the SGC, most of the individuals that have been identified thus far can be traced back to the founder events of western Europe, specifically the event that has been localized to the United Kingdom, which, based on genetic polymorphisms, is believed to be the source of the gene carried by Dr. Carson Beckett, Colonel John Sheppard, and General Jack O'Neill.

Young raised his eyebrows, wondering about Rush. He checked the date of Dr. Lam's summary report against Rush's recruitment date, and found that it predated the man's employment by approximately two months. He skipped over her analysis of evolutionary implications of the gene, leafed through the document, and set it aside in his pile of completed files. Most of what he'd covered so far had been background—a collection of files recommended by Landry to get him up to speed before he tackled the heavy stuff. The remainder of the stack consisted of black cardstock, emblazoned with red letters denoting the security clearance level required for their removal. He picked up the next file and opened it. To his surprise, the papers were unmistakably typed. As in—on a typewriter, not printed with a laser printer. He frowned, adjusted his glasses, and began to read.

August 31st, 2007.

Unnamed Committee #4—meeting transcription

In attendance: General Jack O'Neill (JO), General Henry Landry (HL), Dr. Daniel Jackson (DJ), Colonel David Telford (DT), Dr. Carolyn Lam (CL), Aide to the General Walter Harriman (WH—scribe).

Agenda: 1) Statement of purpose; 2) Discussion of project task group; 3) Proposed actions

HL: Thank you for coming. As you know, we are currently facing a threat of nearly inconceivable proportions. This committee is tasked with the decision of whether or not to authorize the creation of an unnamed project with the express purpose of combating the threat posed by the Ori. Dr. Lam, out of all of us here, I'm betting that you're the only one who isn't up to speed on events of recent days. Dr. Jackson is going to fill you in.

DJ: As you're aware, Vala and I exchanged consciousness with individuals in another galaxy using an Ancient device we're now calling 'communication stones.' During that experience we encountered a race of beings similar, in some ways, to the Ancients. Like the Ancients, they exist as pure energy on a higher plane of existence. They speak Ancient. But they call themselves the Ori. And, unfortunately, these beings were—are—much less scrupulous about the policy of noninterference with our plane.

CL: Hence the burning to death of their supplicants.

DJ: Yes. What you don't yet know is that they made an overt threat against this galaxy.

HL: A threat we believe that they are in a position to make good on.

DJ: They accrue power through the electromagnetic energy produced by the synchronized worship that they demand from their followers. They are—they have become—quite formidable.

JO: Isn't it always the way? We don't need a blow-by-blow, Daniel. The bottom line is that we'll resist these guys as best we can, but defeating the Ori may be a little more complicated than taking on the System Lords. It may require—unconventional methods.

HL: That's the purpose of this committee. To explore less conventional options.

CL: I'm sorry, could you please clarify what my role is in all of this?

HL: You're here in an advisory capacity, Dr. Lam. Dr. Jackson requested your presence in light of potential—ethical concerns that may arise.

CL: Ethical concerns.

DJ: Yes.

CL: What kind of ethical concerns?

DT: Recently we've become aware of an option that may provide us with an edge against what essentially amounts to a hostile, ascended, ultra-powerful enemy.

DJ: There's no evidence of that. No evidence of a tactical advantage of any kind.

DT: Nevertheless, a tactical advantage is looking likely. To bring everyone up to speed—because you may not have previously had this clearance for this either, Carolyn—a reference to a nine-chevron address has been found in the Atlantis database. The glyphs aren't anything we recognize, and it's been suggested that the thing is actually a cypher. Cross-referencing the address against all our databases gave a bit more detail on where it might go. I'll let Jackson handle that, seeing as this is his area.

DJ: 'And when the plague came for them, when it arose from that which they had wrought, they set forth over two roads. The first was their failsafe, the means by which they might alter their destiny. The second was their hope, and began in the heart of their island amongst the stars.' The second road is clearly Atlantis itself, and the text indicates the original city might have been even larger than we know it to be now. The first road—this is the one that's linked to the nine-chevron address. Altering one's destiny sounds good. It sounds promising. But we have to keep in mind that the Ancient word for 'road' is used frequently, and often applies to things that we wouldn't really conceptualize as a 'road.' We're applying our own cartographically informed concept of a 'road' here, when really what they meant by 'road' wasn't necessarily a structure or even a literal or metaphorical path. It's more like—a means by which any difficulty can be addressed and traversed—whether that was physical or metaphysical. The same word is used for "edge" and, confusingly also for "ship." You can get a sense for that here, because they describe Atlantis itself as a road/ship, when really we'd conceptualize it more as a city, but all of those words apply. The founding documents of a city or colony, for example were also referred to with a variant of the word road, but one with more stationary connotations.

DT: Great. We get it.

DJ: Do you? Because I want to be very clear that whatever this nine-chevron address leads to—it might be another Atlantis or it might not be. It might be something like Celestis. It might be something worse. It might be a place where the Ori already are, especially if it's outside this galaxy, which seems likely to me, given the fact that an eight-chevron address takes you to Pegasus.

DT: Or, it might be something we can use. A weapon, for example. You're the one who's obsessed with finding Merlin's—

HL: Let's stay on topic and try to avoid discussion of other, equally classified, areas.

CL: I don't see how any of this, as outlined, presents an ethical quandary.

DJ: That's not all there was in the database. Apparently in order to access this—destiny-altering concept or—

DT: Road. Road or ship.

DJ: We're not calling it a ship. We're not calling it a road. I don't think that's what it is and it's a mistake to mislead ourselves into easy answers. In order to gain full access to this address, certain 'benchmarks' need to be met. Now, the word, as used, certainly refers to the electrophysiological changes that take place in the brain prior to ascension, and we know that because of a really, really unfortunate incident. The cloned version of Anubis. We came across inscriptions on the wall of his lab that used the exact same term.

[See attached photo-WH]

CL: So if we want to do this—we're going to need a person who meets these same—benchmarks?

DJ: Yes.

DT: That may not be as far fetched as it sounds, seeing as we have access to Anubis' research. We may be able to alter one of our own people to within the parameters specified in the database.

CL: I see. What kind of alterations are we talking about?

DT: That's what we would need to determine after assessing Anubis' progress.

DJ: We are talking about Anubis here. Anubis' progress. Are we really even putting this on the table?

DT: We're also talking about the destruction of our species if we don't find a way to combat the Ori. You're damn right we're putting this on the table.

HL: Settle down, gentlemen. We're not committing to anything yet.

DJ: If we do this, if anyone is going to do this—I volunteer. It's going to be me.

JO: No it's not. It's going to be the best genetic candidate we have.

DJ: Leave Sheppard on Atlantis. They need him there.

DT: I have another candidate who came up via the NMDP. Someone better even than—

Young jerked, startled, as a chair scraped across the wood of the floor. He winced, bringing a hand to his back as Rush dropped to sit opposite him, his movements unusually slow.

"Well. You look like you're about ready for a clap wi' a spade," Rush said.

"Is that supposed to be an insult?" Young asked, shutting the file, "because *you* look like *shit*. And you sound Scottish."

"Is that supposed to be an insult?" Rush asked, his eyes narrowed.

"Last time I checked," Young said, "yeah. The phrase 'you look like shit' was an insult. 'You sound Scottish' is not an insult. I like it."

"You *like* it?"

"You're impossible to talk to. Make me breakfast or something."

"It's nearly noon," Rush replied. "You're looking acharacteristically scholarly."

"Thank you," Young replied, pulling off his reading glasses, "and I would be willing to substitute lunch for breakfast."

"Would you now?" Rush replied, his chin resting in one hand.

"Or, there's eggplant pizza," Young said.

"But is there *coffee*?" Rush asked.

"That's not a meal," Young said. "But yes, there is coffee."

"Right then," Rush said, wincing as he got to his feet, one hand coming to his chest, the other braced against the table.

"Sore?" Young asked.

"No," Rush replied, lying through his Scottish teeth.

"Maybe think about not sleeping on a hardwood floor. Did you take that stuff from Brightman?"

"No," Rush said.

"Maybe think about taking it."

"I'll consider it," Rush replied, with something like ten percent of his normal hauteur.

Young waited until the other man had disappeared into the kitchen before he put his glasses back on and reopened his file. He finished scanning the minutes of the first meeting and moved on to the second.

September 14th, 2007.

Unnamed Committee #4—meeting transcription

In attendance: General Jack O'Neill (JO), General Henry Landry (HL), Dr. Daniel Jackson (DJ), Colonel David Telford (DT), Dr. Carolyn Lam (CL), Aide to the General Walter Harriman (WH—scribe).

Agenda: 1) Progress made on Goa'uld research into ascension 2) Proposed plan for dialing nine-chevron address

DJ: This is the agenda? Are we really considering going forward with—

DT: Enough with the righteous outrage, Jackson.

JO: Cut it out, both of you. There will be a time for this debate. Later. After coffee.

HL: Dr. Lam, can you bring us up to speed on what we've learned about Anubis' work?

CL: I've prepared a document.

[See attached—WH]

CL: I'll briefly summarize what is contained in more detail in my report. I encourage all of you to read it, as our decision regarding whether or not to proceed will be made based on Anubis' technical method and whether we deem it scientifically and ethically sound. From the clone that spent a brief time in our custody, we learned that Anubis was attempting to achieve ascension through biological means. To that end, Anubis engineered his clone with the ATA and LTA genes. In preparation for this meeting I ordered a whole-genome alignment between the biological samples obtained from the clone and those we have of Ancient tissue. As expected, the alignment revealed that the clone had two copies of ATA and two copies of LTA. What we did not expect was to discover another region of overlap.

DJ: Are you saying you found a third Ancient gene?

CL: Yes. That's what I'm saying. We're confirming it now, but everyone who has tested positive for either ATA or LTA is now being checked for this third gene. We already have at least one positive sample.

DT: Who?

CL: Nicholas Rush.

DT: We have got to get this guy.

DJ: I talked to him last week. He said no.

DT: Well then we give him the hard sell.

DJ: What's the 'hard sell?'

HL: Dr. Lam. Please continue.

CL: *We discovered something else in our research. It seems apparent that the presence of all three genes is not sufficient to begin the transformation of the mind that was noted in Anubis' clone, in Dr. Jackson as he ascended, and in Dr. McKay following his exposure to the Ancient modification console discovered on Atlantis. Something more is needed.*

JO: *It's going to be some creepy device, isn't it? Why is it always the creepy device.*

CL: *Anubis' research describes an organic compound he developed that was capable of rapid, maximal induction of the protein products of these three Ancient genes. In order to ascend, these genes are induced to undergo a massive increase in activity. Far beyond their baseline, physiologic levels. We believe this genetic overexpression can be achieved by conscious intent, as it's described in many of the Ancient texts, but—it's also possible to induce this overexpression artificially.*

JO: *So, where can we get some of this organic compound?*

DJ: *Did anyone else notice that that clone of Anubis had slightly psychopathic tendencies and nearly destroyed the SGC?*

Young stopped reading. His eyes flicked to the kitchen, where he could hear the sound of Rush pulling dishes out of cupboard. He rubbed his hand across his mouth and continued reading.

DT: *Likely that's a side effect of the fact that it was a clone of Anubis, Jackson. Not exactly a goa'uld known for his civilized discourse or rational worldview.*

DJ: *Oh really? Are you sure? Do you have a degree in advanced genetics? Do you specialize in organic synthesis? We need someone else on this committee. We need Sam. Why isn't Colonel Carter involved in this? I think that's a legitimate question.*

DT: *When the Ancients activated these genes they ascended; they didn't go nuts, Jackson. Calm down.*

DJ: *They activated their through conscious control, not through a twisted Goa'uld device. This is a mistake.*

HL: *You're free to step down from this committee at any time.*

DJ: *I don't think so.*

JO: *Dr. Lam, why don't you keep going?*

CL: *That's where the hard information I have ends. We don't have a sample of this organic compound, but we do have its formula. We're trying to synthesize a small amount of it, but so far without success. It's proving to be difficult.*

DT: We need to try to find another of Anubis' labs. Before the LA finds one. We know they're interested in this. We know we have a leak.

JO: Agreed.

HL: Most definitely agreed. Colonel Telford, work with Jackson to come up with a list of priority targets to check out.

DT: Sure. What about Nicholas Rush?

DJ: I've set up some unobtrusive security for him.

DT: Not good enough.

DJ: He doesn't want to join the program.

DT: He just doesn't know he wants to. There's a difference. Let me talk to him.

DJ: No.

HL: Fine. Talk to him. But make that list.

Young flipped ahead, skipping over the report that described Anubis' lab. He had written that one, as the person who had headed up a joint effort of three SG teams to secure and document the contents of the Goa'uld's cloning facility. He scanned ahead through pages of meeting minutes regarding the discussion of the contents of Anubis' lab until the next time that Rush was mentioned.

HL: So we have a candidate device to make the physiological alterations, but no actual candidate.

DT: Give me some time. I almost have Rush convinced.

HL: You have as much time as we all have, colonel. The truth of it is that we would have an Ori beachhead in our galaxy right now if it hadn't been for Vala Mal Doran, mind-boggling though that is.

DJ: I'll do it. We don't need Rush.

JO: You're not doing this, Daniel. You don't have the genes, and we need you on SG-1.

DJ: Since when has 'not having the genes' ever been a problem for me? They'll let me do it. I know they will.

DT: 'They?'

DJ: The Ancients.

DT: I don't see that this is any of their business. If they don't give enough of a damn to help us out of a mess that they created, then we do this on our own.

DJ: We shouldn't use this device. I'm telling you, there's going to be a cost to doing this. Rush is a Fields medalist. He solved a Millennium Prize Problem last year. $P=NP$. Something about polynomial time. I don't know. The point is, he's extremely well known in academic circles even outside his field. He's not a low profile candidate. People are going to notice if he disappears. People are going to notice if—something were to happen to him.

DT: As far as I'm concerned, his mathematical skills are a bonus. We can put him to work on the nine-chevron address. He can probably tell us whether or not the thing is a cypher, as opposed to all this handwaving bullshit we're getting from our math guys.

JO: You don't want to mess with the math guys.

DT: The point is, we snap up the top fraction of the scientific community almost every year. This is no different.

DJ: There's a reason we do it before they win Fields medals. Or Nobel prizes. Leave him alone. Leave him to Earth.

DT: This guy belongs here. He does not belong in academia.

DJ: That wasn't my impression.

HL: If it's not going to be Rush, then it's going to be Sheppard.

DJ: It shouldn't be anyone.

DT: I understand why you feel responsible for this situation, Jackson. And—you know what? You should.

JO: Out of line, colonel. Way, way out of line.

DT: But trying to block the recruitment of the best possible candidate out of a sense of personal culpability—

DJ: You don't know where this address leads. You have no idea. So stop framing it as if it's some magical solution.

DT: We're under siege. It will be a damn miracle if we don't have to open up a second front against the Lucian Alliance within the next year. We're going to be annihilated if we don't do anything.

"Well shit," Young said, quiet in a quiet room.

DJ: We're looking for the weapon. We're eroding the belief structure from which the Ori draw their power. We're unmaking their beachheads, we're—

DT: It's not enough. None of it is enough, Jackson, and you know it. You know it as well as I do or you wouldn't come to these meetings.

DJ: I come because the alternative is worse. I can barely stand—

HL: Control yourselves.

JO: Daniel.

HL: No decision needs to be made yet.

DJ: We're making it. We're making it by inches.

HL: That's enough, Jackson.

JO: Daniel. I think we all—we know what we're doing. We know what we'll eventually have to ask of someone. But I think we're all clear that it needs to be asked.

CL: There's something I'd like to say.

"Do you have an objection to discarding this?" Rush asked.

Young jumped. "What?" he snapped, too sharp and too loud.

Rush gave him a searching look and held up the remains of the eggplant pizza. He was leaning against the doorframe, eyebrows raised.

"No," Young said absently. "Go ahead. Whatever."

"What are you reading?" Rush asked, his gaze flicking to the files on the table.

"Nothing."

"It doesn't look like nothing. It looks like a stack of classified files."

"Exactly," Young said. *"Nothing."*

Rush rolled his eyes and vanished into the kitchen.

HL: Go ahead, Dr. Lam.

CL: I've prepared a document regarding the nature of the organic compound. We're now referring to it as a genetic transactivator, because we've confirmed that's its biological role. It's lipid soluble and permeates human skin rapidly and efficiently. We believe it was designed to be applied transdermally. Upregulation of gene expression begins immediately and ramps up over the course of several days to the biological maximum.

JO: So—you rub some goo on yourself and you're good to go? Benchmarks met?

CL: No. No, we don't think so. We think that in order for this method to work, the person must have the LTA gene. In the presence of LTA, the electrophysiological patterns of the

brain are able to be subtly influenced by Ancient technology. When LTA is upregulated by the transactivator, the carrier becomes much more susceptible to external manipulation.

DJ: I knew it. I knew it would be something like this.

JO: Dr. Lam, can you rephrase with smaller words?

CL: The goo is applied, which makes it easier to alter the electrochemistry of the brain. We think it may allow for neuronal remodeling—er, it may allow the brain to be 'rebooted' by an external device. This would mimic a high degree of conscious control described by the Ancients during the process of Ascension. We think.

JO: So you rub some goo on yourself, then a device resets your brain?

Young stopped reading. He pulled off his glasses. He looked toward the kitchen, where he could hear Rush's methodical chopping. He put his glasses back on.

CL: Yes.

DJ: Not acceptable.

CL: I agree with Dr. Jackson. To present this option to a person who is one of the very few who are genetically predisposed is to, in effect, apply a form coercion.

DJ: Yes. Yes that's it exactly. We need to find another way.

HL: Would you do it?

CL: Excuse me?

HL: Would you, knowing what you know about our current situation—if you were asked, would you do it?

DJ: The point is that she shouldn't BE asked.

CL: Are you asking me?

HL: I'm posing a hypothetical question.

DJ: This is inappropriate. This is—

JO: Daniel. Cool it.

CL: Yes. Yes I would.

HL: We all know that Jackson would do it. What about the rest of you?

JO: What's your point, Hank?

DT: I'd do it in a heartbeat.

JO: Sure. Why not. My brain has been scrambled enough times.

HL: All of us would do it. Knowing what we know.

DT: We should make a list of the most genetically compatible candidates.

CL: I have that list.

JO: Give us the top five.

CL: Nicholas Rush. John Sheppard. Dale Volker. Robert Caine. Carolyn Lam.

JO: Now give us the breakdown.

CL: Nicholas Rush has two copies of ATA, two copies of LTA, and one copy of NRA. John Sheppard has two copies of ATA, and two of LTA. Dale Volker has one copy of ATA, one copy of LTA, and one copy of NRA. Robert Caine has one copy of ATA and two copies of LTA. Carolyn Lam has one copy of ATA and one copy of LTA.

HL: This list is eyes only. This list cannot get out. What about Volker and Caine? Are they on the base?

DT: Yes. Volker's an astrophysicist, so he fit right in. He's looking for sources of naquadria that could be used to power the gate if we can dial this address. Nice guy. Caine—he was an IT guy, so—well, he's in the IT department. I'm not sure he bought my story about why we recruited him, but neither of them know their status. Neither does Rush, for that matter.

CL: Is this why— Is this why I was recruited? Because of my genetic status?

HL: You were recruited because you were the best candidate for the open position.

CL: Really.

HL: We need to make sure that as we identify people from the national bone marrow registry they're either placed under security or brought here.

JO: I don't like the idea that our number one guy is the only guy who's not on the base.

DT: Now is—not a good time for him. I think I can convince him to come in the spring. It would help if I had clearance to tell him about the address.

HL: Done. I want his name coming up on as little paperwork as is humanly possible. There's no need to advertise his existence to the LA.

DT: Already taken care of.

HL: Walter, run a search for him in our internal database and start classifying or deleting files that contain any reference to him.

WH: Yes sir.

HL: Transcription of these meetings is to exist only in hard copy, and is to remain locked in records.

WH: Yes sir.

HL: That means you type this, Walter. On a typewriter.

WH: Got it.

Young downed the dregs of his coffee scanned through several more pages, flipping through months of meeting minutes.

DJ: Icarus. It was Rush's suggestion.

DT: Not very optimistic.

DJ: I like it.

DT: I don't. If you want to go with Greek, how about Project Perseus?

DJ: Icarus.

DT: Theseus.

DJ: Can we move on?

DT: Icarus is just—a terrible name. Do you know what happened to Icarus?

DJ: Funnily enough I do. I have a Ph.D. in history and I speak Ancient Greek. Do you know what happened to Theseus? He was thrown over a cliff after his popularity in Athens began to fade.

JO: Yeah okay, let's have the weirdly vindictive nerd debate later. Is Rush on the payroll yet?

DT: Yes. He just relocated. He's got access as a consultant. His security clearance is level one. He's been working from his apartment for a week now.

JO: Is there a reason you look unusually pleased with yourself, colonel?

DT: He confirmed the gate address is a cypher. And—he's already gotten one of the glyphs to lock.

DJ: What?

HL: That was fast.

DJ: What do you mean he 'got one'.

DT: After seeing the address, he asked for the internal schematics of the gate itself. I gave him those, and I gave him access to Carter's computational model of the gate. Right

off the bat he pulled nine separate interlocking cyphers out of the thing. After looking at the code and the hardware, he took a crack at one of them that looked familiar to him. This morning I got Sam to interface his program with our dialing computer, and a chevron lit up and locked.

JO: No shit.

DT: Yeah. In a week he gets one? We should ramp up our search for naquadria. He's going to bring this thing to its knees. I can feel it. We should invite him to these meetings.

DJ: No we should not. He should be told why he was recruited. It should be explained to him that it's not for the math. It's for something else, and that he can do—he can do whatever he wants. He can go to Atlantis. He doesn't have to work on the cypher set.

DT: That's a terrible idea. Our top genetic candidate is also the guy who's getting us the nine-chevron address? That's more than coincidence, Jackson, even you can see that.

DJ: And what would you call it.

DT: Destiny.

DJ: He's miserable. He's unbalanced. He—

DT: He's not 'unbalanced.' He was cleared by psych.

DJ: Yes. That means so much here. He's unbalanced in the sense that he has no balance in his life—

JO: Daniel.

DJ: Fine. Let him unlock the gate if that's what he wants and that's where his skillset lies. But we need to stop talking about using Anubis' device on any of these people. We need to stop talking as if that's a tenable option.

DT: Says the guy who just last week begged Morgan Le Fey, begged her, on his knees, to get involved in this struggle—and he had her convinced? Watched her get destroyed right before his eyes. Get blown away into so much gold dust. We're not going to win this fight without another option. You know it. I know it. Fuck, it seems like the Lucian Alliance knows it.

DJ: If we persist in talking about using this device on anyone but me I'm taking this to the IOA.

JO: Daniel. Let's not—

DJ: I'll take it to Wray. I'll get all of them involved.

HL: That's unacceptable from an information security standpoint. You do that, Jackson, and I'll strip you of your position.

JO: Whoa. Just—whoa. That is not happening. There is no way that's happening.

DT: The IOA is going to come down on my side, Jackson. Not yours. You know why? They don't want to be annihilated.

DJ: Neither do I. I'm giving you another option. Try it on me. On me.

DT: Fine. I have absolutely no problem with that. We'll try it on you. And when it doesn't do a damn thing? Then what?

CL: I think everyone needs to calm down. There's no reason to—

DT: Then it's going to be Rush. Do you understand that? I don't like this any better than you do, but that's the truth of it, Jackson. When this address is unlocked, when we've sent a MALP, at some point someone has to get into that god damned goo and unlock the potential of that site, or we are fucked. We are fucked. Not just us. The Jaffa. The Tok'ra. The Lucian Alliance for god's sake. We're facing a future of mindless, eternal, empty servitude. Tell me that doesn't horrify you. Because it horrifies me. I. Will. Not. Serve.

DJ: You can't put all of this on Rush.

DT: I put it on you, Jackson. I—

JO: That's it. We're done here. You got that? We're done. Colonel Telford, I'm writing you up for conduct unbecoming.

DJ: You're right. You're right. It's on me. You think I don't know that? You think I don't spend every waking minute of every day—

HL: Put a lid on it, both of you.

DT: Then make an effort to fix it, Jackson, and stop trying to sacrifice yourself in a needless, pointless way. It won't accomplish anything except to make your own fucked up conscience a little easier to die with. Suck it up and deal. You went exploring and you attracted the attention of something horrific. It's a consequence of what we do. Is it on you? Yes. It's not even the first time you've done something like this. Accept it, and move on. The rest of us have.

JO: Shut up, Telford. That's an order.

"Are you—feeling all right?" Rush asked, sliding a bowl of soup and the remains of some homemade bread in front of him.

Young stared at the food without comprehending what he was seeing for a few seconds. Then he snapped the file shut, stacked it with the others, and slid the pile to the edge of the table. He realized he was sweating. "Yeah," he said. "I'm fine." His voice sounded unconvincing, even to himself.

Rush continued to watch him.

Young looked at the soup. He made an effort to sound more normal. "So ah—what's this stuff?"

"It's soup," Rush said.

"I can see that."

"Congratulations," Rush said, taking a seat opposite him. The other man moved slowly, wincing as he sat.

The mathematician glanced again at the files.

"You're not going to give me some kind of lecture on the principles of molecular gastronomy that underlie this meal?" Young asked.

"It's not my best work," Rush said.

"I distinctly heard you chopping in there." Young angled his head toward the kitchen.

"It's canned soup, selected by Vala, marginally supplemented with un-canned vegetables."

"It looks pretty good," Young said, blowing on it. "Why 'marginally'?"

"I'm quite fucking sore, Young, and chopping is difficult with insufficiently sharp cutlery."

"So take a painkiller and a nap," Young said. "A nap that's not on a floor."

"I absolve myself of responsibility for the culinary adequacy of this meal," Rush replied, ignoring his suggestion.

"Nope," Young said. "No way. I'm definitely holding you responsible."

"That's your prerogative, I suppose." Rush glanced at the files again. "Who's the acting head of the Icarus Project?"

God *damn* but the man was irritatingly perceptive when he was interested in something.

"Who do you think?" Young asked.

"What's in the files?" Rush asked.

"Ask me again when you have level five security clearance."

"I'm never going to have level five security clearance."

"Hmm," Young said, smiling at him faintly as he took another bite of soup.

Rush rolled his eyes in a manner that managed to convey both irritation and exhaustion. "Who recruited you?" the other man asked. "The Jackson-O'Neill axis, or the Telford-Landry one?"

Young looked up sharply at the dead-center assessment. "Why do you ask?"

"Just curious," Rush said.

"Do you know why Jackson and Telford are fighting?" Young asked, taking another bite of soup.

"Telford wants to gate to this address," Rush said. "Jackson doesn't. I've already told you as much. If their argument is more subtle than that, I'm not aware of it."

"It's subtler. More subtle. Whatever."

"I am unsurprised. So. Who recruited you?"

"Landry," Young said, following his instincts, "*and* O'Neill. They both made the offer. I think I'm supposed to be a neutral party."

Rush raised his eyebrows. "Interesting. *Are* you a neutral party?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" Young asked.

Rush watched him. "It's odd that they happen to choose my neighbor for this."

"Now you're just being paranoid." Young said, looking down, dragging his spoon through his soup. "Believe me when I say that I have more qualifications for this job than living next door to gate bait of epic proportions."

"Did you just call me 'gate bait'?" Rush asked.

"No?"

"I'm *certain* that's an insult. It's also far too witty to have originated with you."

"It's a slang term referring to a person or an object that is—some kind of resource that the SGC doesn't want to lose. Something that invites abduction or attack or freakish accident. Also, it's occasionally used to refer to the SGC recruitment team that gets sent to MIT, Harvard, Caltech, West Point, and so forth. They tend to be—on the more attractive side."

"Do *not* refer to me as 'gate bait'," Rush said, looking at Young over the tops of his glasses.

"You got it, hotshot."

Rush sighed and directed his attention toward his soup.

Young spent a moment considering the man who was at the epicenter of the conflicts with the Ori and the Lucian Alliance. "Are you—doing okay with all of this?" he asked. "With everything that happened yesterday, I mean?"

"Yes," Rush said, without looking up. "I'm fine. And, as it seems you are as well, I'll be heading back to my apartment, post lunch."

"What happened to a painkiller and a nap?"

"That sounds like an excellent plan. For *you*," Rush said pointedly.

"What are you going to do in there by yourself?"

Rush gave him a nonplussed look. "The same thing I always do?"

"Take a day off," Young said. "You've got five cyphers at this point. You're halfway there. Watch some PBS or something in celebration. Do whatever it is that mathematicians like to do on the weekends."

"They prefer to do mathematics," Rush said, slowly getting to his feet and collecting Young's now empty bowl. "Furthermore, it's not the weekend. Enjoy your disturbing, classified documents." He headed toward the kitchen.

With some difficulty, Young levered himself out of his chair and limped after him. By the time he made it to the doorway, Rush was drying dishes. "Rush—" he began, but he was cut off by the ringing of the other man's cell phone.

The mathematician looked at him, raising his eyebrows.

Young raised his eyebrows back. "That's your phone, hotshot, not mine."

"Oh. Fuck." Rush extricated his phone from his pocket and answered it.

Young tried to think of a way to convince the other man to stay.

"Yes yes. I'm fine," Rush said, aborting his attempt to trap the phone between his ear and shoulder with a wince. He began rubbing his free hand over the side of his neck.

"Thanks for—oh. Yes, well."

"Who is it?" Young mouthed at him.

Rush shot him an aggravated look. "I thought you couldn't drive," Rush said, furrowing his brow.

Young glared at him.

"Well," Rush said. "Congratulations, I suppose. Unfortunately this week—" he broke off, clearly getting an earful about something if his expression was anything to go by.

"Is it Vala?" Young whispered.

Rush shot him a look that had progressed beyond aggravated to something more like poisonous. "Do you mind?" he mouthed back.

"It's Vala, isn't it," Young whispered.

"How far have you progressed?" Rush asked, ignoring Young, leaning against the counter, still rubbing his hand over his shoulder. "Really." There was another short pause. "I don't know. You're going to have to define 'al'kesh'," he said.

Young grabbed his phone out of his hand and held it to his ear. He could hear the tail end of a voice that was clearly Vala's.

"—don't you worry about it gorgeous, it's not important. What I'm trying to say is that I have a very good sense of spatial relationships from my previous background so that makes the geometry easy, but I have an inherent horror of irrational numbers that I—"

"Vala," Young growled.

"Oh. Hello, handsome," she said. "What happened to your neighbor?"

"Can we please keep in mind that the man has an extremely *low* level of security clearance? *The* lowest, in fact?"

"He must find that terribly demoralizing, don't you think?" Vala said. "But I take your point. I *may* have let the word 'al'kesh' slip by me, but I didn't define it for him, handsome, so you can calm down."

"Why are you calling him?"

"Because he owes me dinner," Vala said, her voice slowing. "As do you. Is something wrong?"

"No," Young said shortly. "Nothing's wrong." He shoved the phone back at Rush, who was now watching him with a wary expression.

"Vala," Rush said. There was a short pause before he said, "I'm not sure."

Young limped back out of the kitchen and sat down again at the dining room table, looking at the dark tower of files next to his laptop.

Jackson had prepped him for this. The man had told him nearly all of it—other than the part about screwing up the brain of their local Fields medalist, a point which Young was having a lot of trouble wrapping his mind around—but it was different to see it laid

out across the pages. It was different to look beyond the typeface to see Jackson and Telford saying things to each other than he couldn't imagine coming out of either of their mouths. He had been involved on the LA side of things, primarily. He hadn't believed Jackson, not really, when the other man had referenced the possibility of dismissal. Of—fuck—of a memory wipe. A memory wipe for *Daniel Jackson*. But now —

Now he believed him.

He had known the situation with LA was bad. But he hadn't known how bad things were with the Ori.

Everything about this nine-chevron address was earmarked with desperation. The devotion of resources to finding a naquadia-laced planet. The building of a god damned base before the address was even half-unlocked. The recruitment of everyone and anyone found to carry more than one Ancient gene. The subtle house arrest of the world's most famous cryptographer.

If Telford was right, and the address led to some kind of weapon, some kind of defense against the Ori, if Rush was the only one who could unlock it—shouldn't he?

If Jackson was right, and it *wasn't* a weapon, they ran the risk of destroying a human mind. His goddamn neighbor's mind. And if not his neighbor, then it would be J Shep's mind. Or Jackson's. Or Robert Caine's, whoever he was. Or Carolyn Lam, who had already demonstrated just how far she was willing to go for the SGC. God. It could *already be happening* to Dale Volker. Who knew how far the LA had progressed along these same lines. Who knew what they had discovered. What they had stolen.

"Young," Rush snapped, looking at him from the doorway of the kitchen. From the expression on his face, he'd said his name more than one time.

"What?" Young replied.

Rush said nothing. He walked forward slowly, carrying a glass of water.

"Do not throw that in my face," Young said wryly.

"I was tempted," Rush said, "but primarily out a desire for revenge." He slammed a large book down on the table with an obvious wince.

"I own a cook book?" Young asked.

Rush pulled a bottle of pills out of his pocket and shook two of them onto the table. He raised his eyebrows in Young's direction and then flipped open the cover of the book. "To Everett," he read. "Don't starve. Good luck, Emily."

Young shut his eyes and turned his head away, fighting a sudden tightness in his throat.

"This is what you get," Rush said, in a reassuringly conversational tone, "when you allow your neighbors to do your unpacking." He swallowed the pills.

"What are you doing?" Young asked.

"I plan to make an inadvisably elaborate dinner," Rush said.

It took Young a moment to organize his thoughts.

"Is Vala coming over?"

"Yes," Rush said. "I volunteered your apartment as a dinner venue."

"She need a ride?" Young asked, not keen on the idea of *Rush* driving to the base to pick her up.

"She does *not*. She passed her driver's test this morning."

"Oh my god," Young said. "Is she even—a citizen?"

"Apparently."

Young looked at Rush skeptically. "What are you going to make?"

Rush leafed casually through the book before settling on, "Paella. She also requested baked Alaska."

Young stared at him. "Baked Alaska? Hotshot, you realize you just took a pretty substantial dose of—" Young grabbed the bottle of stuff that Brightman had given him.

"Yeah, so, speaking from experience, this is definitely a muscle relaxant."

"I am unconcerned."

"Oh," Young said. "Great. Good for you."

"*You* try to make fucking paella when it feels like every single muscle in your entire body has performed some kind of marathon-equivalent in the absence of adequate physical conditioning."

"Generally when I feel like that? I get take out." Young shot him a pointed look. "I don't make paella *and* baked Alaska."

"I'm willing to wager that there are no circumstances under which you make paella."

"Hey," Young said.

"Furthermore," Rush continued, "I'm completely unaffected."

"Yeah, because you took the stuff about forty-five seconds ago," Young replied. "Why don't you give it half an hour and see if you still think this is a good idea."

"Read your fucking files, colonel," Rush said, pushing himself to his feet. "Leave acts of culinary creation to responsible professionals."

"Okay," Young said, not bothering to hide the skepticism in his voice as he watched Rush swipe the book off the table. "Though I'm not sure how responsible you actually are. When are we supposed to be eating this masterpiece of yours?"

"Six hours from now," Rush said.

"Sure," Young said, putting his reading glasses back on.

"I take issue with your tone."

"I think you already have enough issues."

"Oh very witty," Rush said. "Terribly impressive, I'm sure."

"A sarcastic compliment," Young said, as Rush vanished in the direction of the kitchen, "I'm moving up in the world."

Six hours later, Young had finished reading everything he'd removed from the SGC archives and drawn up a list of additional documents to request. He had just replaced the files in the locked case when he heard a knock on the door.

It took him two attempts to get to his feet.

He limped across the floor, leaning heavily on his crutch.

"Hello, handsome," Vala said, as he opened the door. Her hair was half down and half piled on top of her head and she was dressed in civilian clothes—a blue blouse and black slacks.

"Hey," he replied. "You clean up nice."

She arched an eyebrow as she held up a bottle of wine and a DVD. "I determined that this was customary," she said, rotating the wine for his inspection.

"Yeah," he said. "Red. Good choice. Come on in."

"You look exhausted," Vala said, stepping around him.

"Long, depressing day," Young said. "Congrats on the license. Sorry I was snappy on the phone."

"Oh," Vala said, with a smile that Young wasn't quite sure was genuine. "I have a great deal of experience managing men *much* crankier than you are, colonel."

"Um," Young said. "Great?" He closed the door behind her.

"Your apartment smells wonderful," she said.

"More like half-wonderful," Young said dryly.

She raised an eyebrow.

"The culinary genius in residence unfortunately dosed himself with muscle relaxants right before starting the dinner prep. He managed to heroically make it about halfway through the paella and ten percent of the way through the baked Alaska before he lost the ability to speak in complete sentences." Young tipped his head in the direction of his couch where Rush was currently sleeping.

Vala pressed her fingers to her lips in an amused sweep and then looked up at him, brushing her hair to one side.

"How do you feel about take out?" Young asked. "Because I already ordered from the Italian place down the street."

"Take out sounds wonderful," Vala whispered, "but I am not giving up my quest to sample every possible incarnation of America's Greatest Desert."

"You really don't have to whisper," Young said. "The man is out. And I fully support your decision to make him follow through on the baked Alaska. He'd never tell you as much, but—I think he might have been kind of excited about it."

Vala smiled at him. "Would you like to see my car, handsome? Since we have to pick up dinner anyway?"

"How do you already have a car?" Young asked.

"I'm an adept planner who also happens to be financially savvy," Vala said primly. "Daniel graciously offered to let me borrow his for any driving needs I might have, but —"

"Stop right there," Young said. "I get ya."

"I knew you would," Vala replied. "So? What's the verdict? Want to see my charming 'earth vehicle'?"

Young snorted. "I could stand to get out of my apartment."

They paused, and looked over at Rush.

"Goorrrrgeous," Vala called.

No response.

"We'll leave him a note," she said, fishing around in her outlandishly large shoulder bag and pulled out yellow legal pad that seemed to be mostly covered with something that looked suspiciously like math problems. She flipped quickly to the end of the pad before Young could get a good look and scribbled the words, 'back soon, don't leave, gorgeous,' on a piece of paper. She tore a hole in it and threaded it over the doorknob.

Still, they hesitated on the threshold of Young's apartment.

"They're watching downstairs," Vala said. "At the monitoring station."

"Yeah," Young agreed. "Let's go."

He locked the door behind them and they walked slowly toward the elevators.

"How's the hip, handsome?" Vala asked.

"Fine," Young said. "Little setback. No big deal."

She looked at him from beneath her hair for a few seconds before saying, "I have very important news of a personal nature."

"Oh yeah?" Young asked.

"September first," Vala announced.

"Um," Young began.

"—is going to be my birthday," she finished, with the air of someone slightly disappointed. "I decided I should be a Virgo."

"Oh. *Right*," Young said, trying to both rehabilitate his image through enthusiasm while simultaneously trying to remember back to the relevant Cosmo horoscope in Jackson's ridiculous car. "Good choice. That's the—perfectionist one?"

"Yes," she said. "I think it sends the right sort of message about responsibility."

"I'm pretty sure that most people aren't judging your reliability via your astrological sign," Young said. "At least—not at Stargate Command."

"You never know," she replied, holding the elevator door for him as he limped inside. "You wouldn't *believe* the hoops I had to jump through for my psychiatric evaluation. Electra complexes. The collective unconscious. Your species has a strange relationship with itself."

"Well *that's* true," Young said. "But it's also not my area." He decided to change the subject. "Speaking of weird species stuff, let's see your license," Young said.

"Why?" Vala replied, intrigued

"Driver's license pictures are notoriously bad." He was only slightly curious about her picture. He was *significantly more* curious as to whether she was actually in possession of a valid Colorado ID.

"I'm extremely photogenic," Vala said, fishing around in her inappropriately large bag.

"Can you explain to me why this is a thing?" Young said, waving his hand vaguely in her direction.

"What?" Vala asked. "The need for licensure in vehicular operation?"

"Um, no. Women and giant shoulder bags."

"Ah. Well, it all has to do with preparedness, really."

He caught a glimpse of something in her bag that looked disconcertingly like a *textbook*.

"Is that a textbook?"

"No," she said. "Stop being so judgmental."

"Judgmental?"

"What is this?" she asked. "Junior high school? The contents of my bag are none of your business."

"Okay," Young said. "Wait. There's no way you've ever been to—"

"Hold this, will you?" she asked, passing him a can of something.

"Vala—what—" he broke off, staring at what she'd handed him. "Bear mace? Is this seriously bear mace? How do you have bear mace in your purse? You realize this is like—pepper spray but—for bears right? This is *not legal*—"

"Relax handsome," she said. "First of all, you're misinformed. Bear mace is legal in all fifty states, nor does it require a permit to carry. Second of all, I hardly plan to use it on the street. It's not for *me* anyway."

"What do you mean it's not for you? Where did you even get it?"

"At a sporting goods store. It's for your neighbor."

"Why are you giving bear mace to my neighbor?"

"I should think the reason would be obvious," Vala said, emerging triumphantly with her wallet. She snatched the bear mace away from Young and stowed it back in her bag.

"He needs some kind of defense, and he had no interest in obtaining any kind of

weapons training even when I offered to accompany him to a nearby shooting range that offered certification in—"

"Are you serious?" Young asked.

"I'd prefer he carried a gun, but—"

"When did you—even talk to him about this?" Young asked, trying to force his brain to operate more quickly.

"A few days ago," Vala said stepping forward as the elevator doors opened. "He's very anti-weaponry for some reason, but I've been working on him. Honestly, between you and Daniel you'd think I'm suggesting something outrageous. The man should know how to use a firearm. At the very least. Clearly he's got some aptitude for it."

"Well—"

Actually, it was a fair point, and he wasn't entirely sure why he hadn't thought of it himself.

Hang on.

Yes he was.

"If he—" Young brought his voice down. "If he gets abducted by the Lucian Alliance, trying to shoot his way out is a good way to get himself killed."

Vala paused in front of the glass door that led to the outside. She looked up at him and then out over the parking lot, lit up by the horizontal rays of the setting sun. "Yes," she said quietly. "That's a risk. But if it were me, I would want the option." She paused, her hands closing around the handle of the door. "Wouldn't you?"

He looked back at her without speaking. She pushed the door open and stepped out, holding it for him.

He stepped through, feeling the weight of the summer heat press down on him like an invisible hand.

"So," Young said. "You asked him about a gun?"

"I did," Vala said. "But as I said, he had no interest."

"That was—bringing that up to him was probably something that should have been discussed in committee."

"I know, colonel," Vala said dryly. "I understand how things work around here."

"I know you do," Young said. "It was a good thought."

She turned to him in a sweep of dark hair. "You think so?"

"Bear mace," he said with a rueful smile. "I like it. Though—regular mace would probably work just fine. I'm not sure he needs bear mace."

"I'm not sure how the two compare, honestly. The packaging leaves something to be desired."

"There is no way he's going to carry the stuff."

"Give me time, handsome."

"How often do you talk to him?" Young asked as they proceeded slowly through the parking lot.

"Most days," Vala said, handing him her driver's license.

He took it, examining it carefully. "Nice pic. Most days? Seriously?"

"Nearly," Vala said, taking her ID back and stowing it in her wallet. "Since our impromptu road trip." She paused and then gestured sweepingly at the car in front of them before stepping forward to lean against the hood in clear imitation of a cliché advertisement. "Well?" she said batting her eyelashes at him as she ran a hand over the car. "What do you think?"

It was a sea green, convertible VW beetle.

He shook his head, mostly converting his laugh into a smile.

"Handsome," she said, mock-scandalized. "Are you *laughing* at my *car*?"

"No," he said. "No, it's—a bit more—girly than I'd have predicted, but—"

"The word you're looking for is feminine," Vala said, sliding off the car. "And I'll have you know that Sam is already planning to upgrade the engine for me in return for an unnamed favor so you watch it, buster. This little number is going to be quite formidable by this time next month."

"I don't doubt it," Young said. "But—there's no way I can fit into that thing."

"Nonsense," Vala said. "They're very spacious inside."

After only fifteen minutes they were back in Young's apartment, sitting on either end of the low coffee table in front of his TV, take out Italian food spread out between them in white styrofoam boxes. Young stretched his injured leg out carefully in front of him as Vala leaned forward to queue up the movie. As it began she twisted, looking back at Rush, who was still asleep, taking up the entire couch.

"Gorgeous," she said, drawing out the word.

"There is no way that's going to work," Young said, sampling a breadstick.

Vala reached back to yank subtly on Rush's sleeve. "We bought you dinner," she said, "and a *very* nice Pinot noir."

"I'm pretty sure he has years of sleep debt," Young said, shifting his entire frame to follow Vala's gaze. The man was on his back, eyes shut, still wearing his glasses. "Years."

"You're missing movie night," Vala said, tugging at Rush's shirt with every protracted syllable.

Rush twitched marginally.

"There's manicotti," Vala continued. "Manicotti and revenge and stylized depictions of violence."

"What?" Rush said vaguely, half sitting before collapsing back with a wince, one hand coming to his ribs.

"Hello gorgeous," Vala said. "You're looking particularly poetic today."

"Fuck," Rush said.

"Hey there champ," Young said.

"Shut up," Rush said, clearly mostly asleep.

"Five to three," Young said.

Rush's eyes flicked between Young, Vala, and the TV. After approximately five seconds he managed to get himself onto the floor in between the coffee table and the couch in a movement that was impressively lacking in coordination.

"Definitely saw that one coming," Young said to no one in particular.

"I don't think you need any wine," Vala said, leaning back to look at Rush, her hair a dark curtain behind her. "Did you do that on purpose?"

"Yes," Rush said, grimacing as he pushed himself into a sitting position, his back braced against the couch. "Did I—make this?" he asked, eyeing the array of Italian food spread on the table between Vala and Young.

"No," Vala said, smiling at him. "You took some very strong pain medication and passed out on the couch."

"You gave it a good shot though," Young said. "You held out for a long time on pure willpower. I think if you'd gone with something that didn't require continuous stirring, you might have powered through."

"Did we have a conversation about the etymology of the word 'pan'?" Rush asked him.

"Maybe," Young said. "It was hard to tell."

"Well, I think you've learned a valuable lesson," Vala said, as she piled pasta onto a plate.

"Which is?" Rush asked.

"Never trust a doctor."

"Um," Young said pouring himself a glass of wine. "I'm pretty sure that's not the lesson."

"And never trust your neighbors," Vala continued, passing Rush a plate.

"That is *definitely* not the lesson," Young said, looking down, looking away, looking anywhere but the bag beneath his table that contained stacks of classified files. "Your neighbor is very trustworthy, actually."

"I have it on good authority that it's best to trust no one, in fact," Vala said.

"Vala," Young said. "You don't want to take *The X-files* too much to heart."

Vala raised her eyebrows at him and then looked back at Rush. "Trust no one, always carry your phone, and always carry a weapon. And—to that end, I bought you some mace, gorgeous."

"You bought me *mace*?" Rush asked, looking more perplexed than Young had ever seen him. "What is *happening*?"

"I have no idea," Young replied. "But I plan on enjoying it while it lasts."

Expansion Pack

Eli would legit like to know where the heck people come up with names for these places. Because seriously.

"I see that your SAT scores were excellent."

Seriously. 'Golden Tree Tutoring: Where Teaching Meets Learning' seems to possibly be a front for a portal to Hell, as featured in the pretty-much-never-to-be-exceeded-in-terms-of-ironic-excellence TV series: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Except, this time, instead of hell containing various demons and vampires and maybe the odd zombie or two (somehow putting zombies in a hell dimension has never really sat quite right with him and so perhaps he shouldn't conflate Hell and the brain-eating undead; it sends his inherent science-sense tingling) GTT:WTML seems to offer evidence that Hell consists of arithmetic without theoretical underpinnings and the memorization of lists of words without comprehension for eternity. Eli has often speculated that Hell consists of manual determination of the statistical properties of vast quantities of M&Ms or something equally boring, and he now has preliminary evidence that this is indeed the case.

"Um, yeah, thanks," he replies, glancing at the poster on the wall behind his interviewer. It depicts a child looking rapturously at a suspiciously unremarkable and therefore probably nefarious butterfly while her mother looks on with a glazed expression of pride. He's not really sure how to respond to a compliment that might be compliment or might be a test of how he responds to compliments or might just be a set up for the next question, which is the one that they always ask.

"But I see that you left MIT after only one semester," the interviewer says, adjusting her glasses, tucking a graying brown strand of hair behind her ear. "Why is that?"

"I had some family problems," Eli replies, trying not to fidget with his pencil or think about anything in particular, especially not Butterfly of the Damned over there on the wall. "My mom was sick. She *is* sick."

He decides that GTT:WTML, should undergo a personalized renaming in honor of Eli Wallace.

It shall henceforth be known as God Tortures the Talented: Why is This My Life.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Mr. Wallace," the woman says, and she really does look sorry.

"Do you have any plans to resume your college education?"

"I do," he says. "I *definitely* do. I'm just looking for something in the short term that might help me make ends meet."

He's *also* looking for something that will fund his monthly online subscription fee to the unspeakably awesome MMORPG associated with the otherwise uninspired *Wormhole X-treme* franchise. Well, Dr. Levant is pretty okay, he supposes, but the point is that his mom does not consider MMORPGs to be a necessary expenditure for an 'unemployed young man,' even if that young man happens to be a gaming prodigy of the type unseen for generations upon generations of the world of men.

The interviewer looks appropriately sympathetic. "Normally it's not our policy to hire non-college grads," she says. "But we might be able to make an exception in your case, given your circumstances."

"Oh," Eli says, genuinely enthusiastic about his prospects regarding both employment and gaming and trying not to look at the creepy two-dimensional butterfly on the wall behind his interviewer because he does *not* need that thing in his life right now; it's stealing his positive energy. "That would be awesome."

"How would you feel about a trial period?" she asks.

How he feels about a trial period depends entirely upon whether he will be paid or not.

"That sounds completely reasonable," he says. "However, like I said, I'm looking to make ends meet and I do have another interview lined up later this week, so—"

"Is it with 'Growing Tree'?" she asks sharply.

He freezes, and then thinks about the fact that he just froze, and how he's probably now sporting a deer-in-the-headlights kind of look because a) he doesn't have any other interviews lined up so maybe he's about to be busted but b) if he did, and it were with 'Growing' tree as opposed to 'Golden' tree, what would that mean? Would that be good? Would it be bad? Are the two companies related? Do they talk? Are they competitors?

He decides no one would name their tutoring center 'Golden Tree' unless 'Growing Tree' was already taken and they were bitter.

"Yeah," he says. "How'd you know?"

"Just a hunch," she replies, obviously vexed.

"Well," he says, "I could maybe put off the interview with them until after the trial period, if you were able to pay me during that time. If not, I totally get it."

She nods at him. "You'll start at twenty-five an hour," she says. "High school math."

"Cool," Eli says. "No problem. I mean, thank you."

"You're welcome. We'll be in touch regarding student names and locations. Sessions are usually held at a library close to the student's home or school."

"Great," Eli says. "I look forward to it."

"You'll have a performance review in three weeks," she says, standing to shake his hand. "Welcome aboard, Mr. Wallace."

"Thanks," he says, smiling at her.

He leaves GTT:WTML and steps into the twilight of late July with the quiet ring of a bell affixed to the door. Even though the sun has already set, the day is still punishingly hot. Like freaking Tatooine, rather than Boston, except for the preponderance of red brick and asphalt and the distinct lack of Tusken Raiders.

He's halfway to the bus stop when his phone rings. He pulls it out of his pocket and glances at the caller ID.

"Luke Skywalker," he says, as he answers, "here to rescue you."

"A childish fantasy epic just called," Rob replies, "It wants its one-dimensional hero back."

"Oh like Kirk is so multidimensional."

"Did you get it?" Rob asks in a distracted, flat tone accompanied by furious keyboard clicks and taps that tells Eli he's probably deep in the City of Souls and making a good effort to mount an assault on the dark tower, presuming he's playing *Astria Porta: Prometheus* and hasn't switched over to something subtly less awesome while waiting on Eli.

"Yup, I got it," Eli said.

"Good, because you will not believe what I'm about to tell you," Rob says, and the clicks stop abruptly as he pauses the game.

Eli gets chills, despite the warmth of the evening.

Chills of ominous, awesome, epic portent.

"The trailer is out," Rob says. "For the *Prometheus* expansion pack."

"I'm on my way," Eli says. "We must view. We must discuss. We must watch repeatedly. Over four-dollar box-wine and Cheez-Its."

"It looks," Rob says, drawing out the words, "*amazing*."

"Duh," Eli replies.

"No, I don't think I'm doing this justice," Rob says. "It's going to require *learning* a *language*."

Eli stops dead on the sidewalk. "Wait. Wait wait wait wait wait. Like, an Earth language?"

"No, think J.R.R. Tolkien and Elvish," Rob says. "They wouldn't make you learn a language if it was not going to be the most awesome expansion pack in the history of awesome. There's a quest to unlock the lexicon that's already available."

"Please tell me that's what you're—"

"Yeah dude, it's in progress. Get home so that we can call up Dane and coordinate for this thing."

Eli starts walking again, his phone pressed to his ear. "I'm on my way."

"There's going to be like—math. Math and languages and crypto and the story and the graphics—ugh. It hurts me. It hurts my *soul* it looks so good."

"Do we have a date?" Eli asks.

"This fall," Rob says. "Early October."

"And do we have a name for this expansion pack of epic import?"

"We do," Rob says, "but it gives nothing away."

"Don't make me beg," Eli says. He begins to run as he sees the lights of the approaching bus in the darkening air.

"*Mathématique*," Rob replies. "They're calling it *Mathématique*."

Chapter Twenty Nine

One week post-Altera, Rush sat next to his window, watching the distant condensation of water vapor in the upper atmosphere. Tesla had come here, with his voltage differentials and his dreams of the complete annihilation of distance, and his obsessive tendencies. He had come to Colorado Springs post-fire, pre-pigeon, and here he had measured the resonant frequency of the planet.

The sun was bright, the air was bright, it was a Thursday, and he was having a difficult time.

Demonstrably true, a corollary, probably true, and certainly true.

Was it a Thursday?

Rush sighed, leaning his head back against the wall, surveying the impersonal expanse of his mostly empty rooms and trying to decide whether it was possible that he'd hallucinated a trip to an alien world. The contrast between the hissing wind of Altera and the silence of his apartment could not have been sharper. The nature of reality was not something he'd devoted much mental energy toward examining, apart from the requisite philosophical interest of every civilized mind, but it *bothered* him now because certain elements of his existence appeared—improbable. In the extreme.

The tail end of any bell curve was a precarious place to live. Fortunately, as he had recently instituted a policy of not anthropomorphizing graphical systems used to represent data, he didn't have to concern himself with such things.

He contemplated his ceiling without seeing it.

The rest of the cyphers were difficult, each in their own way. He had spent roughly a week parsing out the final four that were explicitly keyed to their chevrons. One looked like a variant of elliptic curve point multiplication, with the caveat that it wasn't necessarily an *elliptic* curve. The second looked less like a cypher and more like prompt for a solution set to a Navier-Stokes variant describing predicted turbulence in the formation of an event horizon, the third seemed to be a cryptographic hash function, the fourth—

Yes the fourth.

Or rather, the ninth.

The ninth was tonal.

It certainly was.

Certainly.

If only he'd known.

If only he could have worked on that one *before*.

Before leaving California.

Before coming here.

They could have done it together.

It might not have been so difficult, it might not have been so terrible. But now—he would need to get a sense of their musical structure, what kind of scale they had used, whether their preference was for relatively conjunct or relatively disjunct musical forms. The answer to the latter question knew already because he had *heard* it on Altera.

Conjunct.

Their interval structure was conjunct.

But he wasn't thinking about that now, that would be a mistake. He was making a strategy for the other three.

The curve and the hash function fell squarely within his area of expertise, but the fluid dynamics problem—he'd farm that one out to someone else, Carter, perhaps, or Perry—she wasn't exactly a specialist in applications of chaos theory but she must have at least some background in the mechanics of plasma flow, given that she worked on hyperdrives and plasma behaved mostly like a fluid, at least, he *thought* it did—he wasn't a physicist, even though sometimes he felt like one, especially now when so many of his problems seemed to involve traversing interstellar distances and welding leads to quantum computers.

Yes well, the point was that Perry had the physics background to give it a reasonable go once he'd rendered it for her in a way that she recognized.

So. He would do that so that she might get started, and then he would take on one of the others, or maybe both simultaneously, and determined which seemed most amenable to solving. Probably it would be the hash function.

He wanted to leave.

He wanted to get out of his apartment with its floor to fucking ceiling windows, and its scattered essentials all on the floor. He wanted to live in a place where the sun wasn't

so apparent day after day after day, or at least where *it rained*—not in the middle of a desert. What had he been thinking—he wasn't meant to live here, confined to a nameless set of rooms by someone else's fear. What did they want him for, this Lucian Alliance—what did they want, what was their ethos, what had they wanted with Volker, that ridiculous astrophysicist whom they couldn't have wanted for his mind or for his math—but only for his genes.

What did it mean to be wanted for one's genetics?

What was happening to Dale Volker?

He was certain he didn't want to know.

Rush stood, pressing his hand against the glass of the window, locked inside a clean white room, consumed by a cryptographic spread, waiting for abduction and torture. He looked out over a wide expanse of asphalt roads and parking lots to the distant edges of the Rocky Mountains,

The cyphers would consume him. But they were *his*. They were his and he was theirs. They belonged to one another, like Colonel Sheppard and his lost city.

Someone knocked on his door. It was almost certainly Young. He crossed the room and opened it to find that it was *not* Young.

It was Vala.

She stood on his doorstep with an imprudently large bag slung over one shoulder, wearing sunglasses, jeans, and T-shirt that read 'SG-1 does it with a lexicon'.

"Hello gorgeous," she said.

"Hello," he replied cautiously.

They stood there for a moment regarding one another.

"Aren't you going to invite me in?" she asked.

"I hadn't planned on it, no," Rush replied.

"Well," Vala said, opening her bag, "I suppose we can do this in the hallway."

"Do what in the hallway?" he asked, dubious and pointed.

She ducked her head and pulled off her sunglasses, letting her hair fall into her face as she fished around inside her bag and pulled out a pad of paper with a watermark that read 'confidential.'

"I don't think 'confidential' means what you lot seem to think it means," he said, taking the proffered pad.

"Oh hush," Vala said. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to find a pad of paper at that base that *doesn't* have the word 'confidential' stamped on it?"

"No harder than finding a bookstore," Rush said. "Which I know lies within your skillset."

"Why would I pay for paper when I live inside a bureaucratic empire built of the stuff?" she asked him.

"They still use paper?" Rush asked examining the pad, which seemed to be primarily covered with equations. "How primitive."

"My thoughts exactly," Vala said, with only a shadow of her usual verve.

He glanced up at her. Her eyes were red-rimmed, the whites shot through with a laced network of vessels. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes, of course," Vala replied. "I have terrible allergies to grass pollen. Just terrible. It's permeating the atmosphere at extremely high levels at the moment according to my adorable little phone. I'm not accustomed to your 'Earth plants'."

He regarded her skeptically.

"Are you going to look at that," Vala asked him, indicating the pad with her eyes, "or just stand in your doorway like an artistically disheveled ambassador of men's dress shirts?"

That threw him for a moment, as it was no doubt intended to, and he couldn't help reflexively glancing down at his shirt. It seemed unobjectionable as far as he could tell. He looked back at Vala. There was something about her demeanor that was not *quite* in place; it lacked the effortless quality that characterized her typical flow of voice and actions.

She had the look of a person lacquered together with her own will.

He looked down at the pad he held, flipping through page after page of algebra, geometry, and trigonometry, and sighed. "Would you like to come in?" he asked her, like the admission of defeat it was.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I would."

He stepped back, swinging the door with him. She entered his apartment and he shut the door behind her, watching and listening and feeling for the click as the catch depressed and the door became part of the planar surface that defined the wall so that he would have to look at her as she looked at his disastrous set of rooms.

"Minimalist," Vala said, surveying the atypically empty expanse of his visible floorspace.

He looked at her, adjusting his glasses. "Yes," he replied.

"I like it," Vala said. "I approve."

"You *approve*?" he echoed, looking at the furnitureless space, the laptop and lamp and assortment of pens and notebooks spread over the floor.

"It's terribly practical," Vala said. "Personal items tie you down. It's best to have as few as possible. Unless of course, you're trying to fit into a materialistic society like a native. Then you can buy all the torrid romance novels and body lotion you'd like."

He raised his eyebrows at her.

"Not that I would know anything about that," Vala said, walking toward the window and looking out toward the mountains.

"No," Rush said. "Of course not."

He looked back down at the legal pad, tracing the minuscule writing that descended in three columns over the front and back of each page, as if paper were something precious.

Maybe, to her, it was.

He watched the progression from algebra and number lines and the basics of factoring to coordinate systems, properties of angles, the axioms of Euclidean geometry, trigonometric functions, angle transformations, the laws of sines and cosines, and the basics of formal proofs.

He looked up at her.

"What do you think?" she murmured.

"I think you may not have been entirely forthright when you said you'd had no formal mathematical instruction," he said dryly.

"Thank you, gorgeous," Vala said, sliding down the wall next to the window and looking down into the parking lot. "Very flattering, I'm sure."

He looked at her for a moment over the tops of his glasses before flipping the legal pad back to the beginning and studying not her solutions but her mistakes and her methods. "I *also* think," he said, slowly closing the distance between them, his steps measured and quiet on the wood of the floor, "that you have an inherent talent for spatial relationships. You began with a terrible instinct for negative and irrational numbers," he said, frowning at one of her notes to herself, "but you seem to have gotten over that particular hang up fairly quickly. You have a tendency to rely on graphical methods to solve problems, which is not necessarily a drawback at this point, but *will* hold you back as you progress."

Vala leaned forward, watching him continue to scan the yellow pages.

He dropped down into a seated position on the floor directly opposite her.

"I find it astonishing that you completed all of this in less than a month," he said. "You must have been familiar with some of it, at least indirectly."

"I come from a culture that believes numbers are sacred." Vala paused. "I was instructed in their use by someone who had a love for the beautiful and the arcane." Her statement carried a profound quality that was beyond the current scope of his insight. Or, maybe, just beyond the current scope of his security clearance.

"Fascinating," Rush said, dropping his eyes back to the classified algebra. "That would explain your difficulty with irrationals."

"Even now," Vala said, "I find it hard to think about them. I feel the need to ward something off."

"You're hardly alone there," Rush murmured. "Upon their discovery, the cult of Pythagoras murdered one of their members for the demonstration of the irrational nature of the square root of two."

"I wonder if Pythagoras was a goa'uld," Vala said.

"Perhaps. That story is likely apocryphal. Don't let it stand in the way of enjoying his theorem."

"I would never," Vala said, smiling faintly. "I understand where he's coming from. Irrational numbers—" she broke off, shuddering. "I'm not sure I'll ever get over the instinctive horror and the instinctive reverence."

"Reverence?" Rush asked. "Nevermind. I'm sure the goa'uld had a mystical appreciation of pi."

"Pi yes, but don't get me started on phi."

Rush smirked at her. "Phi? How ostentatious."

"Well, that's the goa'uld for you, gorgeous. Very excited about pi and phi, very hush-hush about e, vilifying the rest. It never occurred to me that there would be so many of them."

"Irrational numbers? Just wait until you get to set theory."

"What's 'set theory'?" Vala asked.

"An entire branch of mathematics dedicated to describing groups of things."

"Sounds—well, I'm not going to lie to you gorgeous, it sounds a little bit boring."

"Incorrect," Rush replied.

"You're terribly sure of yourself over there," Vala said, closing her bloodshot eyes.

"Yes," Rush said. "Well. This *is* my profession."

Vala smiled, her eyes still shut. "Have you really done this," she whispered, "for your whole life?"

"What," Rush asked, quietly. "Mathematics?"

She nodded.

"For most of it," Rush replied.

"And you chose it?" Vala asked.

"Yes," Rush replied.

"I have a daughter," she said.

"Ah." Rush realized he didn't understand the nature of their conversational trajectory—where it had come from and what it might be progressing towards.

"Her name is Adria," Vala said.

"That's—a nice name."

"It is, isn't it? She's trying to destroy this galaxy."

Rush said nothing.

Vala said nothing.

Rush said nothing.

Vala said nothing.

"Ah," Rush said.

Vala laughed, high and torn. "I know," she said.

"How *old* does one have to be to destroy a galaxy?" Rush asked.

"She's—not really aging in the conventional sense," Vala said. "I'm sure that you don't have the security clearance for this, gorgeous, I shouldn't have mentioned it, don't tell your neighbor. I just—she's terribly bright, and I can see echoes of what she *would* have been if she hadn't been twisted by what happened to her, if she hadn't been corrupted by her upbringing and her nature and I *never wanted a child*, why would I bring some other consciousness into a galaxy like this one? This planet is the only place I've ever been that allows some kind of self-determination about one's own

future, and even *here* it's not universal, you have those who are destitute, who spend most of their mental resources finding a way to secure their next meal, those who are discriminated against, those who are trapped by the unenlightened parts of your hierarchical social order, but still." Her voice had faded to nothing. "Still. There are mathematicians." Vala turned away, her face hidden by an upraised hand.

Rush wondered why she was telling him this. Telling it to *him* and not to Jackson. Jackson seemed like the right person to tell these kinds of things to. "What happened?" Rush asked. "Something must have happened."

"*This* week?" Vala whispered. "One hundred thousand Jaffa were killed. Their nation was fractured. My daughter destroyed an Ancient temple of unparalleled religious and scientific import that contained a weapon that might have been used against her. She nearly murdered Daniel while I watched."

"Ah," Rush said, subjectively and objectively out of his depth and his security clearance.

"I'm sorry," Vala said, looking out the window, into the light of the afternoon sun. "I didn't come here for this."

"What did you come here for?" he asked.

"I came here for approval to progress to calculus."

"You certainly need no such thing," he said dryly.

"I'm glad to hear that, gorgeous, because I already purchased a book."

"I am unsurprised," Rush said. "Do you have it with you?"

Vala reached into her bag and pulled out a weighty textbook. She handed it over.

Rush took it, eyeing the cover art with narrowed eyes. Across the cover of a book was an integral symbol styled as an f-hole of a stringed instrument.

"What?" Vala asked.

"Nothing," he said, opening it. He flipped to the index, scanning the list of covered topics. "After this," he said, "it gets interesting."

"It's already interesting," Vala replied.

"Good," he said, handing the book back to her, cover down.

"How *are* you, gorgeous?" Vala asked. "Your little offworld adventure is all the rage at the water coolers these days."

"Is it?" Rush asked.

"Well, it would be if the SGC had water coolers instead of a state-of-the-art water filtration system available only on floors where there aren't any labs. But you know what I mean. I've heard it wasn't successful," she said.

"Yes well," Rush said. "Real world applications of quantum phenomena are few and far between. I suspect there will be a bit of a learning curve."

"I've *also* heard that you and Dr. Perry haven't met in a week," she said, idly fingering the ends of her hair. "I've heard that neither of you have made any follow-up attempts to solve whatever problem it was that you ran into."

She was correct. That had, potentially, been an oversight.

"We're regrouping," Rush said, trying for casual, but falling straight to defensive instead.

Vala fixed him with a sharp look. "Then I'd suggest making it *look* like you're regrouping."

"Why so interested?" Rush asked, recovering his equilibrium.

"That's the spirit," Vala said, "and carry that mace."

"I *refuse* to carry *mace*."

"I don't understand your resistance to this, gorgeous," Vala said.

He couldn't explain it to her, could barely explain it to himself. He didn't want to think of it or discuss it, whatever it was that lived under the veneer of civilization which was, as Vala had stated, a veneer of *choice*, of peer-to-peer implicit trust settings, of rising above one's genetics and one's nature. He would not be dragged back into a world where survival was contingent upon the vicious determination to *persist*, where hierarchy derived from strength and chance rather than from merit.

"No," he said. "You don't."

Vala regarded him silently. He wondered how much she understood of his unvoiced sentiment.

"All right," she said finally. "No mace. But have you considered aikido?"

He raised his eyebrows at her.

"Just a thought," Vala said. "Teal'c has taken it up."

"You are *incorrigible*," Rush said.

"Well, I hear you're 'a lot of work'," Vala replied. "Personally, I don't see it."

He slips in blood that never seems to dry. He's next to Sheppard. That is where he falls.

"You think she would have ever wanted this?" it asks. "Because you know she loved you, just not why."

It was not like this for Sheppard. He knows because he saw. Is there a moment when they both are dead before the system grants them their reset? He likes to think there is. Already he can feel the blade against his throat.

"If you are caught in endless torment here, it will be nothing less than you deserve."

"Why?" he asks against the blade, its edge an asymptote of death.

It does not halt its press of blade but when it speaks, it's kind. "This is what you believe."

He cannot speak past slide of knife, it cuts into his throat—

Rush snapped awake, muscles contracting instinctively, his hands coming to his throat fast and bilateral. Gasping. Disoriented. Surrounded by light and soaked in sweat.

It took him an uncounted but significant interval to understand that he had imprudently fallen asleep on the floor of his apartment, post meeting with Vala. It took him another substantial interval to understand that someone was knocking on his door. Insistently.

He pushed himself up to knees and then to his feet, barely able to see past the pain of a photosensitive headache and the fading of his surroundings into the gray static of hypotension. How long had he been lying there? Could it have been an entire day? Was it still Thursday? He was sleep deprived enough that missing a day was possible, though not necessarily likely. He should make more of an effort to keep track of the days at baseline but he didn't even have the cyclical order imposed by the structure of the workweek of the western world to orient him.

Maybe he could fucking carve notches on his fucking wall, seeing that his apartment had become a kind of prison.

He crossed the room and flung open his door. "What?" he snarled.

To no one's surprise, least of all his, it was Young, standing there in his usual state, which seemed to be stoic silence trending toward disapproval. "You look terrible," the man said, by way of greeting.

Yes well, that was probably true, considering that he *felt* terrible. He wished he could say something equally disparaging about Young's current appearance, but, unfortunately Young looked unfairly presentable in his uniformed, well-groomed, orderly, cane-wielding way. So Rush said nothing.

"If you pass out in this hallway, again," Young said, "you are spending a night in the base infirmary."

"I'm hardly going to pass out."

"You say that like you've never done it before."

"Did you *want* something?" Rush asked.

"Dinner?"

That answered his question regarding the time.

"Is it Thursday," Rush asked, "or Friday?"

"It's Tuesday," Young said slowly.

Maybe it had always been Tuesday.

"Oh," Rush said.

"I bought you tacos."

"I'm certain you did no such thing," Rush said.

"Well, I *thought* about buying you tacos, and then I thought about throwing them away while you made something infinitely better and decided not to waste resources. So, I skipped the part where I actually bought them."

There was no question about it; Young's conversational skills were improving.

"Fucking call Jackson or some other maladjusted personality to keep you company. I'm otherwise engaged."

"Jackson is extremely normal," Young said. "Kind of. Mostly. Sometimes. He can fake it like a champ. Are you annoyed I ditched you for dinner yesterday? I told you I had a meeting."

He now had enough contextual information to decide it was indeed still Thursday, by which he meant Tuesday, likely somewhere between five and seven PM, and he was fairly certain he'd slept for somewhere between three and five hours rather than something like twenty-seven or twenty-nine hours, but he wasn't entirely certain because his deductive efficiency was being impeded by his headache, disorientation, and disbelief at the idea that Young would think he would be *annoyed* at being left to his own devices for a day, but—what had he done yesterday? Today? This morning?

Parsing remaining cyphers.

That was what he'd been doing.

"Rush," Young said, unnecessarily slowly, "are you all right?"

"Yes," Rush said. "I'm fine."

"Dinner?" Young said again.

Rush sighed.

"Good choice," Young said. "Grab your stuff."

Rush raised his eyebrows.

"Phone?" Young growled. "Signal scrambler? Laptop?"

"I don't require computational assistance to make you dinner."

"Yeah, but you're going to want it."

"I won't."

"You literally always want your laptop if you have two seconds to rub together."

Previous experience would seem to bear Young out.

Rush rolled his eyes. "One moment."

He shut the door in the middle of Young's exasperated pull of his name and located his phone, signal scrambler and laptop in short order. When he reopened the door, he found Young leaning against the wall.

"Is there a reason you won't let me into your apartment?" Young asked.

"Do I need one?" Rush shot back, pulling his door closed, thousands of dollars of technology pinned between his right arm and right hip.

"No, I'm just pretty sure you have one."

"I don't let anyone in," Rush replied.

Except, apparently, Vala, but Young didn't need to know that.

"Not a bad instinct given your current situation," Young said, leaning heavily on his cane as they progressed down the hallway, "though I'd be surprised if that was your real motive for keeping people out."

Rush shrugged, and Young opened the door to his apartment. The place was painfully awash in the light of early evening. He nearly tripped over a box of books positioned near the door, but stepped laterally at the last minute.

"Watch out," Young said belatedly.

"Thank you," Rush replied, with all the aridity he could muster while simultaneously shielding his eyes.

He set his collection of electronic devices on Young's coffee table and then collected himself enough to shut the nearest set of blinds.

"You sure you're okay, hotshot?" Young asked, shutting the door.

His head felt like someone was prying it open with a tool manufactured by primitive man.

This was not an unusual state for him.

"I need coffee," he said.

"Are you sure? Because I think maybe you need a ten day nap and some soup." Young closed the second set of blinds.

"Coffee," Rush repeated.

"Come on then," Young said, limping toward the kitchen, shutting blinds as he went.

Rush followed him, one hand pressed to the side of his head.

"So," Young said, his voice an overtone to the reassuring, mechanized sound of the coffee maker. "Jackson tells me that you're legit famous."

"Does he?" Rush asked, unwilling to commit to so much as looking in Young's cabinets for culinary inspiration before he had some demonstrable evidence that the portion of his headache made up from caffeine-withdrawal was going to come to an end sometime in the near future.

"Yup, at least as famous as some other math guy I've never heard of," Young said.

Andrew Wiles, most likely.

"Oh good," Rush replied, squinting at him.

"He says people don't yet fully understand the implications of your work, but that it's already turning information security on its head, and it's probably going to increase the efficiency of computational rendering of—stuff."

"Yes," Rush said dryly, "I'm sure it will."

I'm not gonna lie to you hotshot, I'm not entirely sure what kind of stuff and I don't think Jackson was either, though he talks a good game." Young handed him a cup of coffee.

Rush held the cup for a moment, feeling profoundly relieved and profoundly overheated.

"Basically what I want to know," Young said, "is how jealous the academic math community is that the most hotshot of all math hotshots is making me dinner."

"That depends on whether or not they're personally acquainted with me," Rush said, trying to drink his coffee and succeeding only in burning his mouth. "Envy is going to be inversely proportional to degree of acquaintance."

Young looked at him for a moment, working through his statement before he said, "but do any of them know about the culinary skill set you've got on you?"

"No," Rush said, as he pulled open Young's refrigerator.

The combination of cold air and hot coffee was both dissonant and welcome.

"So, I'm just going to go with the idea that I am the envy of mathematicians everywhere."

"An unimpressively small subset of academia that is by no means universally prone to envy," Rush replied.

Young sighed.

"I'd say you'd net a greater proportion and absolute number of envious computer scientists."

"I can live with that," Young said. "What are you going to make?"

"Watermelon bisque," Rush decided, "paired with whatever fish it is that Vala bought you."

"How do you know it was Vala?" Young asked, sounding offended. "I could have bought that fish. You don't know."

"I know," Rush said. "The only things you buy are alcohol and frozen pizza of deplorable quality. Plus, the woman has a bizarre love for supermarkets and other examples of capitalism at work. Jackson should fucking take her to New York."

"Yeah, but the man's about as sharp as a wooden spoon when it comes to those kinds of things, I think," Young said.

"That, or acutely aware and acutely terrified," Rush said, pulling out a cutting board before turning his attention to making demonstrable process on his coffee.

"Maybe," Young said.

"Speaking of things that are dull," Rush began, giving Young a pointed look.

"Hey," Young said. "You watch yourself there, hotshot."

"Your *knives*," Rush continued, "are unacceptable. I require you to purchase a high quality set of cutlery and accompanying knife block if you ever," he said, putting his back into bisecting the fruit in front of him, "want watermelon bisque again."

"Oh yeah?" Young said, opening the refrigerator and retrieving a beer which he then levered open. "I'll take that under advisement. Depends on how outstanding this damn 'bisque' actually is. Beer?" he asked.

"No thank you. Do I seem like the kind of person who would enjoy—" Rush glanced at the bottle, "—Coors Light?"

"Not really, no, but I'm an optimist. Do you drink? At all?"

"With discretion."

"I have wine," Young said. "White goes with fish, right?"

"Who chose it?" Rush asked. "You or Vala?"

"Which answer is the one that will make you more likely to drink it?"

Rush paused in his chopping to consider. He made some additional progress on drinking his coffee.

"Keep in mind, it's been *heavily* implied that she's an alien," Young said. "Though officially I'm not confirming or denying that either way. You know she likes herself a weird-ass cocktail."

Rush raised his eyebrows.

"You remember that thing," Young continued.

"I *liked* that cocktail," Rush replied.

"Admit it," Young said. "You only claimed to like it because you're a contrarian."

"I'll admit I'm astonished you know that word," Rush said, "and nothing else." He resumed chopping the watermelon.

"It's a Sauvignon Blanc," Young said, "and I'm definitely not telling you who bought it."

Rush still said nothing. He was undecided. A cost benefit analysis of drinking wine under these particular circumstances yielded no demonstrably clear outcome. In the 'benefits' column, he very much approved of the fish/watermelon/Sauvignon Blanc trifecta from a culinary, cultural, and aesthetic perspective. Also in the benefits column was the strong suspicion that if he decided to drink wine than Young would likely switch from beer to wine, which would be a positive because the idea of pairing fish and watermelon bisque with Coors Light was fair fucking vexing. In the costs column—

well, he didn't particularly care to enumerate the costs column, as potential costs were poorly defined but potentially profound, depending on many variables. He still was not entirely sure how he really felt about this arrangement that he'd somehow entered into with Young. It contained many tacit assumptions.

"Well," Young said in that extremely transparent, overly casual manner he adopted at intervals, "you let me know when you decide, hotshot." Young reached up to open a cabinet, wincing as the motion strained his back. He pulled out a glass and filled it with water before setting it down next to Rush. "You should probably drink that," he said. "I'm still not convinced that you're not going to pass out in my kitchen before this *bisque* materializes."

"If by 'materializes' you mean is flawlessly, competently constructed," Rush said, as he continued slicing.

"Yup," Young said. "That. You eat and drink more than once a day, right? You know that this is one of those things that humans are supposed to do?"

"So, tell me, how's the *galaxy* these days?" Rush asked, changing the subject, eating a piece of watermelon with artful nonchalance.

"Going to shit. Why do you ask?" Young replied, leaning against the counter.

"No reason," Rush said, not looking at him as he transferred the watermelon to the blender before beginning to crush and mince garlic.

"You hear something about it?" Young asked.

"I'm fucking shut in a set of rooms all day," Rush said, "where am I going to hear anything?"

"The galaxy's been better," Young said. "No secret there. At least not from a guy-with-level-one-security-clearance standpoint."

"I feel that I should, at a minimum, be level two," Rush said.

"Well," Young said. "You're not the only one. McKay petitioned the SGC to up your clearance."

"McKay?" Rush echoed.

"He wants to be able to gate-skype with you," Young said. "Well, either *he* does, or *Sheppard* does, I'm not sure which; they're a little bit interchangeable when it comes to circumventing red tape. They tend to front for each other. Drives Homeworld Command crazy."

"Is that likely to happen?" Rush asked. "Level two security clearance?"

"I wouldn't hold my breath," Young said, "but you never know. Jackson's in your corner, so I'd say there's at least a small chance, but then, Jackson's always been in your corner."

"Has he?" Rush asked.

"Yeah," Young said quietly. "Definitely."

Rush hit the blender, and their conversation was interrupted by a bladed whirl.

Young motioned at him as he pulled a vibrating phone out of his pocket.

Rush killed the blender and picked up his coffee, downing the remains of the cup in a oneer, deciding that his headache was trending away from craniotomy levels and toward something more manageable.

"Emily," Young said. "Hey."

Rush pulled the fish out of the fridge and wondered what the fuck he was going to do with it.

"Yeah," Young said. "Yeah, I have them."

Baking seemed easiest. He decided to improvise a watermelon-based salsa to go with the bisque.

"Now?" Young asked. "I kind of have dinner plans."

"No, you don't," Rush said, rolling his eyes.

Young glared at him before continuing, "No, it's um, dinner with a coworker. A scientist on the project that I—"

Rush raised his eyebrows.

"No," Young said emphatically. "*No*. It's nothing like that. Now is good. Now is fine. Come on up." He hung up the phone.

"So," Rush said significantly.

Young shot him a steely look.

Unperturbed, Rush began assembling the fish in a glass baking pan.

"We're exchanging personal items," Young said.

"I see," Rush said. "So she gets her three copies of *Sense and Sensibility*, and you get—what? Tell me it's a food processor."

"No," Young said dryly. "I don't think so."

"I concur," Rush said. "You clearly ended up with the lesser half of a marginally adequate kitchen. Would you like me to leave? I'd be happy to oblige."

"Are you kidding me?" Young asked. "No. Now you *have* to stay. It's going to look— weird if I'm supposedly cooking an elaborate dinner in an empty apartment, especially given the fact that *I don't cook*. Watermelon bisque? I mean, come on." The man seemed anxious.

"Do you want to invite her to dinner?" Rush asked.

"No," Young said. "*No*."

"Are you trying to reestablish your relationship?"

"Oh my god. *No*," Young said.

"Are you planning to *eventually*—"

"Can you *stop talking*? Where is Jackson when you need the guy?"

"You had better be grateful that I'm *not* Jackson," Rush said dryly. "*Jackson* would *certainly* invite your ex-wife to dinner simply because he is, ostensibly, a human being par excellence, and would not be physically capable of sending her away without some fucking fantastic bisque."

"Was that ostensibly a human, or ostensibly 'par excellence'?"

"What do you think?"

"Well I don't know, Rush," Young said. "That's why I asked."

"The entire merit of the construction lies in its ambiguity. Obviously." Rush restarted the blender, let it run for a few minutes, then killed it. "Casper," he said.

Young looked at him, a distinctly amused cast to his features. "Nope," he said.

"Laramie," Rush said.

"Guess again."

"Gillete."

Young shook his head.

"Rock Springs."

"You're not gonna get it, hotshot."

"I'm certain I will."

"Did you start memorizing the names of Wyoming cities in order of population density?"

"No," Rush snapped.

"Just declare defeat," Young said, "and I'll tell you."

"Un-fucking-likely," Rush shot back.

There was a knock on the door.

"Come on," Young said.

"You want me to *meet* her?" Rush asked, surprised.

"Well, ideally this wouldn't be happening at all, but I think it's weirder if there's a half-dead mathematician in my kitchen cooking me bisque behind the scenes, don't *you*?"

"Half-dead?" Rush echoed.

"Look in a mirror, hotshot," Young said over his shoulder as he limped out of the kitchen.

"I don't understand what you have against bisque," Rush said, following him out of the kitchen. "Bisque is not that fucking *rare*, you know. Admittedly, making a bisque out of watermelon is a bit of a perversion of what is classically meant by 'bisque,' but I'm not a culinary historian."

"Your expectations about my expectations may be the strangest thing about you," Young said, "but I'm not sure."

Young opened the door to reveal a blonde woman in a pale pink blouse, wearing khaki pants and low black heels, holding a cardboard box. "Hey Em," he said, swinging the door wide. "Come on in. Let me take that." He set his cane against the wall.

"I don't think you'd better," Emily said, eyeing the cane and stepping past him. She looked at Rush. "Hi," she said, as she put her box down on the end of the couch. She extended a hand.

He took it. "Nicholas Rush," he said.

"Emily Thenardier," she replied.

Young winced.

"I told you I was going to change it back," she said, glancing at him.

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

Rush politely looked at the edge of the open door.

"How's your back?" Emily asked. "And your hip?"

"Fine," Young said. "Good. Getting better."

"I thought you didn't need the cane anymore," she asked, toying with the cuff of her shirt.

"Just a setback," Young said. "That's all."

"A setback," Emily echoed, giving the word a gravitas that did not seem to suit it.

There was a prolonged, uncomfortable silence.

"Are you cooking?" Emily asked finally, looking at Young.

"No," Young said. "Definitely not. Rush is cooking."

"Oh," Emily said, looking at him. "That's very nice of you."

"Yes," Rush said, giving her a half smile. "I'm aware."

Emily smiled back at him, quick and polite.

"You want to stay to dinner?" Young asked.

"No thanks," Emily said. "I have to get going. Enjoy your—" she paused.

"Watermelon bisque," Young said.

Emily looked at Rush with increased interest. "Watermelon bisque?"

He nodded at her.

"Offer's still open," Young said.

"I can't," Emily said, "but thank you." She glanced at the floor, taking in the box near the doorway. "Is this it?"

"Yeah," Young said.

She glanced through its contents and pulled out one of the books. "This was for you," Emily said, pulling out *The Girl's Guide to Everything*, and setting it on Young's couch.

"Thanks," Young said dryly.

"Take care," she said, getting to her feet. "Nice meeting you," she added, looking at Rush.

He nodded at her.

"I'll call you," Emily said, looking at Young.

"Yeah," Young said. "Okay." He shut the door behind her.

Rush looked at him, his eyebrows raised, arms crossed.

"Not a *word*," Young said.

After dinner, after his headache had receded into a chronic, conquered smolder, after the sun had set beyond the western mountains and no longer exerted a threatening presence behind lowered shades but before they had gotten up from the table, Young asked him a question.

"So, what do you think of all of this, hotshot?"

Young had been asking him iterating questions about his mental state for days now, following his planetary adventure with Sheppard, but this particular variant was a new one.

"You're going to have to specify," Rush said, tracing the edge where his wine glass ended and the table began with his index finger as he leveled the full force of his attention straight at his neighbor.

Young looked mildly alarmed, but when he spoke his voice was perfectly controlled. "You're a smart guy," he said, "and don't think I haven't noticed that you're aces at getting information out of people, especially people who want to give it you. Like Jackson. Like Vala. Hell, *Sheppard* spent less than a day with you and gave you the server codes to flag your email to Atlantis, which, while not technically prohibited given his status within the program, was not a popular move. So. I'm pretty sure that you've made some kind of strategic assessment about what's going on and I'm curious as to what it is."

Rush raised his eyebrows.

"And don't give me that," Young said.

Young overestimated his interest in everything except for his cypher set. But by simply posing the question, the man implied that perhaps there was something that Rush was missing.

For a moment, he said nothing.

He had assumed that he had been recruited to navigate the maze that had been woven into the intergalactic transportation system that humanity had discovered and appropriated. Recruited to define it, to parse it, to separate it, and to unlock it. Only slowly had the threat of the Lucian Alliance been introduced, though he suspected it had been there all along, simmering unmentioned as events outside the scope of his

knowledge took their course. It had likely been there before he'd met Jackson. Before he'd met Telford.

Jackson and Telford.

"It's the genetics aspect that bothers me," Rush said quietly. "Why they wouldn't tell me, and then—"

"Why someone tipped you?" Young asked.

"No one 'tipped' me," he snapped. "As I stated. Repeatedly. In a debriefing that lasted for eight hours. I *simply decided to—*"

"Hotshot," Young said, cutting him off, "I *know* someone tipped you. And I know who."

Rush shot Young his most icily neutral expression.

"I'm not trying to give you a hard time," Young said. "I just want to know *why* you think you were tipped."

"Because I deserve to know," Rush shot back. "It's my fucking file, and they're my fucking genes."

"Yeah," Young said. "This is true. But I'm not sure you realize the incredible risk that—the person who tipped you took. The risk that Lam ran in physically handing over your file. Your right to that knowledge had already been denied categorically by this institution for strategic reasons, but someone *within* that organization *gave it to you anyway*. To you, but not to anyone else. That astrophysicist—Volker? You think he knew anything about his genes? You think he knew why he lit up red in that LA fog while other people didn't? I'm not sure, but I doubt it." Young was leaning back in his chair, one arm draped casually over it's back. He wasn't looking at Rush. He was looking at the opposite wall.

Rush looked away, his gaze fixed on his glass as he considered Jackson.

The man had made only a halfhearted effort to recruit him, especially when compared with Telford's single-minded persistence. He spent most of his conversational energy trying to get Rush to go to Atlantis nearly every time they interacted. He had told Rush about his file and had given him a second reason that the Lucian Alliance might want to abduct him. A second reason that had, on the same day he'd discovered the file, been revealed to be *their primary* motivation because they had flooded the base with a gas that lit up their targets and they had taken Volker.

Volker, who was an astrophysicist. Who had about as much chance of working through the cryptosystems of the gate as Rush had of discovering an exoplanet.

Jackson had told him about his genetic status but, in so doing, he had, obliquely, told him *why* the Lucian Alliance wanted him. He had undermined Rush's implicit peer-to-peer trust settings within the context of the SGC and that, perhaps, had been his real goal.

Fucking Jackson with his empathy and his subtlety and his concern for everyone that was probably in no way feigned.

The cyphers and the genes.

Jackson and Telford.

"It does beg the question," Rush said, still watching Young, "of *when* the SGC knew that I was positive for all three genes. Before I was identified as a recruitment target, or after?"

"Yup," Young said. "It does make you wonder."

"The *other* obvious question," Rush said, "is what's the utility of having all three genes?"

"Any thoughts about that?" Young asked.

Ancient technology would open to him.

It had already done so.

"Compatibility with Ancient technology is the obvious benefit, but there are, of course, darker alternatives, depending on the eugenic aspirations of the Lucian Alliance," he said.

From the look on Young's face, the latter possibility had not occurred to him.

It had been the *first thing* that had occurred to Rush.

If he had been recruited to the SGC for his genes, and if his genetics were the primary motivator behind the Lucian Alliance's campaign to abduct him, given the astounding level of infiltration the LA had achieved, then perhaps—

Perhaps the goals of the Lucian Alliance and the goals of the SGC were aligned.

Perhaps they wanted him for the *same thing*.

For some defined task or purpose.

Something that Jackson feared.

Something that Jackson hated.

Something that Telford embraced.

"The interests of the Lucian Alliance and the SGC overlap," he said, flashing Young a humorless, uneven smile. "Don't they."

It wasn't a question, and Young didn't answer it.

"Go to Atlantis," Young said.

"I don't think so," he replied.

Chapter Thirty

The early morning sun promised another day of relentless heat and light.

Young adjusted his sunglasses as he drove over empty roads toward Cheyenne Mountain, enjoying the graded curves of the inclined ascent.

The Dodge Charger was a *man's* car.

He liked the look of it, he liked the feel of it, he liked its aesthetic and its lines and the deep black of its paint and its acceleration into and out of turns, the kick of its V8 three hundred and fifty horsepower engine, the friction of its tires over asphalt.

The only person who Young could think of who had a better car than he did was Sheppard. And maybe Carter, who so secretive about her car and the upgrades she put into it that Young suspected it was not strictly street legal. And maybe McKay, though prototypes should be disqualified as comparison material. Mitchell liked to claim the Camaro was more badass and, on paper, sure, it could pull zero to sixty faster than the Charger, but the point was that *Mitchell's* Camaro most definitely could not outgun *Young's* Charger, not that they had tested this in the middle of the salt flats, because probably that required a permit of some kind and they were responsible professionals. The point was that these things had to be considered on a case-by-case basis, and his Charger could wipe the floor with Mitchell's Camaro any day of the week and twice on Sundays.

He was pretty sure that Rush hadn't even really *noticed* his car, despite the fact that he'd ridden in it about ten times at this point.

Young was in no way offended.

Well.

Maybe a little bit.

But then, 'not noticing normal things' seemed to be an intrinsic part of Rush's personality—just who the guy was. Young wasn't sure that the man ever noticed *anything* that didn't have math on or around it. That was the impression he seemed to be determined to give to the world, at least. Maybe it wasn't *quite* as true as it seemed. The guy could cook a mean three-course meal. And then there was the question of the car.

Young was incredibly curious as to how Rush had ended up with a white Prius. On some levels it made sense. Rush was probably pretty environmentally conscious, though he'd never actually mentioned anything about the environment. The man had spent a good chunk of time at Berkeley, so it stood to reason that some of the liberal mentality had probably rubbed off. Or been required. Or something. But if Rush was going to have a Prius, it should at least be a *red* Prius. Or maybe blue. Blue could work. The thing was, Rush just seemed like the kind of guy that should have a convertible. Though, if he *did* have a convertible, Young was pretty sure it shouldn't be red. Maybe silver. Maybe black. As for make and model, well, that was trickier. He had the feeling that Rush would have a philosophic objection to a luxury car.

He'd spent too much time thinking about this already.

One thing was clear.

Young was going to have to ask him about his car.

Ideally in such a way that didn't imply he thought a Prius was a bad choice.

Because it wasn't.

It just wasn't an *inspired* choice.

For Rush.

He sighed.

Watermelon bisque and witty repartee aside, the man hadn't looked great when Young had stopped by his apartment the previous day. He'd looked sick—pale, sweating, and breathing way the hell too fast for someone who was supposedly sitting in his apartment doing math. Young hadn't seen him look that bad since the first time he'd met the man and at that point Rush had been unconscious.

It didn't take a genius level IQ to figure that you couldn't transition a guy who was essentially under house arrest to a lethal, psychologically-disturbing alien planet for a day and then put him back in his apartment alone with almost no contact with the outside world and expect him to cope very well.

God, how many times had they 'died' on that planet?

Sheppard had lost count.

Rush should be talking to someone.

Normally, he would have been *required* to do so.

The current situation was, unfortunately, not normal.

Young navigated the final, winding approach to the base, flashed his ID, and was waved through by the guard at the gate. He parked his car as near to the entrance as he could and stepped out into the shadow of Cheyenne Mountain.

Mitchell was nearby, pulling a messenger bag out of his own car and settling it over his shoulder.

"Hey," the other man said. "You're looking particularly badass today."

"Oh yeah," Young replied, pulling his cane out of his back seat, his back sending a bolt of pain straight down his leg for his trouble. "Real badass." He waved the cane disgustedly.

"Eh," Mitchell said, unimpressed with Young's self-deprecating cane-brandishment, "did I ever tell you about the time I stopped a purse snatcher with a well-placed crutch? You could do a number on someone with that thing."

"Thanks?" Young replied.

"So what brings the 'light duty restricted' to the base at oh seven hundred?" Mitchell asked as they approached the doors.

"A meeting," Young said.

"Oh boy," Mitchell said, the words a dark, discordant pull. He held the door while Young walked through.

After they flashed their badges for the guards inside the doors, Young shot him a questioning look.

"Jackson has an early morning meeting," Mitchell said quietly. "Same one?"

Young shrugged. "Can't say."

Mitchell said nothing.

Young said nothing.

They boarded the elevator and descended into the base in silence.

At level twenty-one the elevator slid open. Mitchell stepped off and turned, placing a booted foot against the recessed doors. "Good luck," he said quietly. "Play it cool. Don't let Jackson heat things up."

"Yup," Young said, feeling unsettled.

Mitchell withdrew his foot and the elevator closed again, bringing Young down to level twenty-eight.

He walked toward the briefing room, leaning heavily on his cane. He was arriving precisely on time, but when he rounded the doorframe the only people in the room were Walter Harriman and General O'Neill, who was seated at the head of the table, folding a piece of torn notebook paper into a compact triangle.

"General," Young said as he entered. "Harriman."

"Colonel," Harriman said, nodding at him.

"Everett," O'Neill said, waving away the burst of salutes that threatened to break out between the three of them. "Last time I saw you, you didn't have a cane."

"Small setback," Young said, "nothing to worry about."

"That's the spirit," O'Neill said. "Coffee's on your right if you want it."

"Thanks," Young said, moving to pour himself a cup. "Where is everyone?"

"Daniel runs on a schedule that's at least five minutes out of sync with the rest of the world," O'Neill said. "And Landry—well, he's coming with Lam this morning."

"I didn't realize she was back from medical leave," Young said, stirring sugar that he didn't really want into his coffee.

"Day one post—well, everything," O'Neill said, grimacing. "I think." He glanced at Harriman.

"That's correct, sir," Harriman confirmed.

Young eyed the table, trying to decide where to place himself to maximize the chances of sitting across from Jackson rather than next to the man.

He left two seats between himself and O'Neill, picking the opposite side of the table from the one Harriman had chosen.

"Telford's seat," O'Neill said mildly. "How'd you know?"

"Lucky guess," Young said.

O'Neill used his pen to flick his carefully folded paper at a trashcan near the table with the coffee. It sailed in a flawless parabolic arc, hitting the metal with a satisfying clang.

"Nice shot, sir," Harriman said.

"Thank you, Walter," O'Neill replied with ironic mock-arrogance.

Young did his best to not fall into the casual mindset invited by O'Neill's calculated irreverence.

He took a sip of his coffee.

It was awful.

Movement in his peripheral vision caught his eye and he looked up to see Landry and Lam come through the open doorway.

Lam looked diminished somehow, pale and thin and fragile without her high-heeled shoes, without the sweeping lines of her white coat, and without her stethoscope hanging like a primitive charm about her neck.

Young stood abruptly, instinctively, at the sight of her. O'Neill and Harriman did the same. O'Neill took a step forward but stopped at a brief shake of the head from Landry. Never had it hit Young so hard that Lam and Landry were related.

"Gentlemen," Lam said. Her tone held the same low, brusque quality it had always possessed. She swept the room with her eyes, leaning on her father's arm.

"Dr. Lam," O'Neill replied. "Glad to see you on your feet."

Landry helped her to the chair next to Young.

Young pulled it out and slid it carefully beneath her as she sat.

"Thank you," she murmured, glancing up at him.

"No problem."

"I heard you reinjured your back," Lam said, quirked a disapproving eyebrow in his direction.

"Just a little," Young replied, finding defense in understatement. "Can I get you some coffee?"

Lam looked wistfully at the cup in his hand but shook her head.

"Where's Jackson," Landry asked the room.

"Right here," Jackson announced, sweeping through the door with two cups of some kind of beverage and a stack of files that seemed to be coming apart. He deposited everything in a pile next to Harriman and then leaned forward to slide one of the paper cups across the table toward Lam.

"I can't," Lam said.

"It's herbal tea," Jackson said. "Chamomile. I know you can't really drink it, but it's freezing in here with the AC cranked up. How are you feeling?"

"Fine," Lam said, reaching forward to wrap both hands around the cup as she drew it toward her, revealing a bandage over her left wrist. She looked up at Jackson with a faint smile. "Thank you. How's Colonel Carter?"

"Spending her sick days reinventing physics," Jackson said. "She's doing great."

Lam nodded and smelled her tea.

Jackson looked over and locked eyes with Young.

Young gave him a subtle nod.

"Where's *my* fancy beverage?" O'Neill asked.

"I only have two hands," Jackson replied, "and I like Dr. Lam better than you."

"Sounds fair," O'Neill said. "I think I like her better than me too."

"Let's get started," Landry said.

Harriman stood and slid a typewritten agenda to each of them.

"Walter," O'Neill said, "you want to run through the policy for Colonel Young? Daniel, will you *stow* that stuff before we get started."

"No documents pertaining to matters discussed within this closed door meeting are to leave this room, under penalty of court martial. Nothing discussed today may be further discussed outside the confines of this room, under penalty of court martial," Walter began.

It took all of Young's willpower not to look at Jackson.

"All electronic devices are to be collected at the beginning of each meeting and placed outside the room for the duration of the meeting. The room will then be swept for microprocessors of any kind," Harriman continued.

Around the conference table, people began pulling out their phones. Young followed suit.

"No computers are permitted," Harriman said, as he rounded the room, collecting their phones and radios. "Note taking *is* permitted, but any notes created become part of the file and may not leave this room."

Young watched Harriman pause at the spectacularly cracked faceplate on Jackson's phone before putting it in the bag he held, along with the archeologist's assortment of messily stacked files. "Typewritten transcripts of these meetings exist as a single copy which require the permission of General Landry or General O'Neill to access, even for review," Harriman finished.

"Got it," Young said. He looked down at his agenda. There was a small, handwritten number in the upper right corner, likely denoting copy number.

Item 1—SG-3 medical reports and NID debriefing

Item 2—current movements of Lucian Alliance

Young felt a cold thrill of dread as he looked at the short list.

"Start us off, Dr. Lam," O'Neill said. "Whenever you're ready."

Lam set her tea down on the table and then opened the file folder that Landry slid over toward her.

"I've prepared a document," Lam said, "which I will reference in a few minutes." She removed a type-written report and passed a copy to Young before sliding the remaining pages toward General Landry, who distributed them in a quiet, fanning slide.

"It's my understanding that the official medical reports and the NID debriefing transcripts will be made available to all members of this committee as of tomorrow?" Lam looked at Landry, who nodded.

"I will confine my comments to the areas that do not appear in those official reports. To briefly summarize the current situation, two members of SG-3 and Colonel Telford were sent back to us through the gate during a foothold situation. The two remaining members of SG-3 died in the attack on their Tel'tak. The organic debris collected by the Odyssey confirm this."

Young looked down, quenching the impulse to wince.

"Telford, Reynolds, and Ramirez report being separated from one another and tortured for information with electrical devices of goa'uld manufacture. Their physical exams show burns consistent with this. Electrolyte abnormalities indicated mild to moderate dehydration upon their return. At their initial debriefing, they reported that they were not administered any drugs during the time they were held. They also deny any attempts at coercive persuasion during the time they were prisoners."

"What did their scans indicate?" Jackson asked.

Young looked over at him.

The archeologist's gaze flicked toward him and then immediately away.

"Before I share that information," Lam said, holding her tea in both hands but not drinking it, "I'd like to remind everyone here that while we have made significant improvements to the tok'ra zartek detector as a means of detecting evidence of coercive persuasion, it remains a poorly tested and incompletely understood device prone to substantial errors in interpretation, especially in emotionally intense situations."

In cases such as this one, it's my personal opinion that it is so unreliable as to be nearly useless."

"What did their scans indicate?" Jackson asked again.

"Reynolds and Ramirez show indications of cognitive tampering by zartek scan," Lam said. "Telford was clear."

"What are we supposed to take from that?" O'Neill asked.

"Nothing," Lam said.

"Nothing?" Landry echoed.

"Nothing in isolation," Lam continued. "As I said, I consider it an unreliable metric. However, I have been directing all my available time and attention to developing a more robust chemical test. I have been working with samples from Teal'c, Agent Barrett, and the few others we know to have undergone coercive persuasion."

"Do you have something?" Landry asked, leaning forward. "Tell me you have something."

"We have something. It is not definitive. It doesn't tell us whether or not coercive persuasion has been successful, or whether or not a person is free of influence, it *only* tells us about exposure to the agent used to induce the mental state in which coercive persuasion is initiated," Lam said cautiously.

"That's phenomenal," Jackson said.

"It is in no way phenomenal," Lam said flatly. "It's only an indication of exposure; it does not provide any meaningful data about the clinical question that interests us. Furthermore, the sample size of known positives is not high enough to determine, even at the roughest approximations, the sensitivity and specificity of this test."

Young pulled his reading glasses out of his pocket and glanced over the text of the page in front of him, taking in acronyms and bullet points about standard curves but not much actual data.

"You're going to bottom line this for us, right?" O'Neill asked.

"Yes," Lam said. "I'll walk you through it. The agent used for coercive persuasion causes a modification of a surface glycan on circulating red blood cells. We can detect the modified red cells directly. So can the body. Both Teal'c and Agent Barrett mounted an immune response against the modified red cells and so they have antibodies in their blood. The modified red cells don't persist, because the life span of

a red cells is about four months. But the antibody *does* persist." Lam looked around the table.

"Could you, maybe, bottom out that bottom line a little more?" O'Neill asked.

"We have a way to detect acute exposure to the agent, and a way to detect exposure that happened a long time ago," Lam said. "Teal'c, for example, would have the antibody but not the modified red cells. Same thing for Agent Barrett. If I got kidnapped by the LA tomorrow and the agent was used on *me*, I'd have modified red cells, but I wouldn't have the antibody yet."

"So you can determine the yes/no of exposure and get a rough sense of timing," Jackson said.

"Yes," Lam confirmed. "Ostensibly. We haven't had enough occasions to use the test to determine how good of a test it is."

"But," Jackson said, one hand raised, his eyes fixed on the paper in front of him.

The entire room waited for him to finish his thought.

Lam took a small sip of her tea.

"The drug—" Jackson said slowly. "The drug that the goa'uld developed and the Lucian Alliance stole—the drug that's responsible for the brainwashing of our people—it modifies *red blood cells*? How does that make sense? Shouldn't it be modifying the *brain*?"

"We don't yet know how it works," Lam said. "We need a sample of the drug. But you're correct—modification of red blood cells would not explain its cognitive effect. We're detecting an effect that's likely ancillary. The antibodies people develop may be detecting the means of clearing the drug from the body in an expeditious manner. Alternatively, the binding to red blood cells might be critical to its function or to its distribution within the body. To determine answers to these and other questions, we need the drug."

"Who's positive?" Young asked. "Out of SG-3, who was exposed?"

"Ramirez and Reynolds are positive. Telford is clear."

"Telford is clear," Jackson repeated.

"Yes," Lam said. "He is. He had neither the antibody, indicating past exposure, nor the red blood cell modification, indicating recent exposure."

The room was silent for a moment.

Jackson glanced at Young.

"Well," Landry said, "that's something."

"Good," O'Neill said. "Surprising, but good."

"It doesn't make *any sense* that he would be clear if the other two aren't," Jackson said.

Young shot Jackson a sharp look. He wasn't the only one.

The fluid motion of Harriman's pen paused.

"He should be tested again," Jackson said. "He should be reassigned for *at least* the next sixty days pending—"

"Jackson," Landry snapped. "He's clear by every method we have."

"Pending the results of his *final* testing," Jackson said, continuing undaunted. "He should be denied access to all classified projects and he should be relocated *away* from Cheyenne Mountain for the—"

"Daniel," O'Neill said.

"—for the duration of that time. His network access should be revoked. He should undergo the same recertification procedures as Barrett is undergoing. As Reynolds and Ramirez will be required to undergo, should they wish to come back."

"Jackson, the IOA is not going to let you railroad him off this project, no matter how much it might suit you. The man has the senatorial backing of Alan Armstrong amongst others—" Landry said, his voice rising.

"Excuse me," Jackson said with more icy self-possession than Young had ever seen him bring to bear, "but did you just accuse me of acting to *consolidate* my *position* in Colonel Telford's absence? I have been and *remain* opposed to the entire ethos behind this unnamed committee but do not mistake my recommendations for anything other than the professional opinion of the stargate program's most senior civilian consultant."

"Hey," O'Neill snapped, lifting both hands and shooting Jackson a significant look. "Everyone just cool it. Daniel, we will take your opinion into consideration, *as always*, but this is a military decision with political overtones and is going to be handled as such. And no one is accusing anybody of anything."

"We have a leak," Jackson said through clenched teeth. "It could be him."

"It could also be you," O'Neill said. "It could be Everett." He gestured toward Young. "It could be a lot of people. We've avoided turning this into a witch-hunt so far, let's keep it that way."

Jackson sat back abruptly, sipped his coffee, and said nothing.

"Put Telford on medical leave," Young suggested. "Don't make him recertify, don't reassign him, don't revoke his passwords—just—put him on mandatory medical leave. Sixty days."

"No," Jackson said. "He should be required to recertify. His access should be revoked."

"I think enforced medical leave is a prudent compromise," Lam said. "I'll make it an institutional directive. It's based on our best guess about the upper limit of when he might be reasonably expected to turn positive for the antibody. You can then send the IOA and Senator Armstrong to me."

"I can live with that," Landry said.

"Always nice when the red tape works in our favor," O'Neill said.

Jackson, with a doggedly neutral expression, toyed with the plastic lid on his coffee cup like a guy spoiling for a fight. Young tried to keep his eyes off the man, but it was hard.

"Dr. Lam," Landry said, "do you think the test that you've been developing could be rolled out to all the base personnel?"

"No," Lam said. "Not yet. We'll need access to a large number of known negative samples to determine the rate of false positives before using this test to make any kind of determination about how trustworthy someone may or may not be in the absence of any other clinical—excuse me—in the absence of any other contributing factors. It's certainly not been vetted nearly enough to use as a screening tool."

"How long before you have the data you need?"

"Two months," Lam said. "Maybe more, if there's some kind of emergency that requires the mobilization of medical personnel and resources."

"This should be one of your top priorities," Landry said.

"Understood," Lam replied.

"Let's move on," Landry said. "I have new tactical information regarding the current status of Anubis' second offworld base, located on P3X-124."

Young's eyes remained fixed on Landry, but in his peripheral vision he could see Jackson go utterly still, the plastic lid of his coffee cup rested on its edge, held steady between unmoving hands.

"SG-14 has been split up and embedded undercover with the Sixth House of the Lucian Alliance for four months now," Landry said, "following the successful extraction of Colonel Telford after his cover was blown."

Everyone in the room looked at Young. He shifted, sending a jolt of pain that ran from his back down his leg.

"They report that, as of fifteen hundred hours yesterday, Lucian Alliance ground forces overwhelmed the local Jaffa garrison and the supplemental personnel we had stationed on P3X-124 in an overt attempt to take and hold Anubis' lab."

Landry's pronouncement fell on the room like a bucket of water.

No one spoke.

After a moment, Landry continued. "Attempts to communicate with our personnel on the planet have been unsuccessful. The Jaffa council has dispatched ships to investigate what happened to their garrison and we should be receiving reports sometime in the next twenty-four hours, but I think it's likely, very likely, that we've lost control of that lab."

"Well," O'Neill said into the silence, "that's not good."

"No," Landry growled. "It isn't."

"If the Lucian Alliance is in control of that lab," Jackson said urgently, "*and* they have Dale Volker—"

"Which house," Young said, speaking over the archaeologist, "was responsible for taking Volker? Which house was responsible for the foothold here?"

"Sixth," Landry said. "We know now that it was Sixth that took him."

"They could have already tried it on him," Jackson said. "They could have already—"

"Yes," Landry said. "That seems likely."

No one spoke.

"The recommendation of this committee," Landry said carefully, "will carry a great deal of weight in the decision of whether to devote resources to retaking the planet."

"Such an act might be considered a declaration of war against the Lucian Alliance," Jackson said carefully.

"Yes," O'Neill said quietly.

"They already consider *themselves* to *be* at war," Young said, "if they're moving openly against us like you described."

"We *cannot* survive a war with two fronts," Jackson said. "We will not."

"We're *in* a war with two fronts," Young said. "Based on everything I read in the files you gave me—we're already there in everything but name."

"The possibility of a diplomatic solution *exists* with them," Jackson snapped. "It does *not* exist with the Ori."

"If we leave the LA in control of this device," Landry said, "then they are the ones who will be able to fully access the potential of the ninth chevron address."

"They'll also have more incentive to take our people," Lam said.

"We don't need that planet. We don't need that *device*. We'll find Merlin's weapon," Jackson said. "We'll find a way. A way that doesn't require using something built by Anubis."

"Daniel," O'Neill said.

"We don't *know* this address will help us," Jackson said, "and to get there we have to use something *evil*. We have to do something that's *wrong*. We choose these roads only when we know their value and only when we know that there is no other choice."

"What other choices do you see?" Landry asked. "Because I'm looking. I'm looking damned hard and I'm seeing none. The Ori are tearing through this galaxy. It's only a matter of time before they reach Earth. The Jaffa are our allies—they're already paying a heavy price for what we brought here. We lost Dakara, the weapon there was destroyed—the wolf is at the *door*, Jackson and we need more options."

"I will find," Jackson said, his voice ragged, "Merlin's weapon. I will find it."

The room was silent.

Lam smoothed the papers in front of her, her hands subtly trembling.

"If we attempt to take back P3X-124," Young said into the silence, "I think it should be done with the intent of using the device. We're spread too thin to hold it against a determined assault by the Lucian Alliance. And we know they want it. They want it badly." He didn't look at Jackson, but he could feel the heat of the other man's fixed gaze.

"Agreed," O'Neill said.

"That being said," Young continued, with the slow deliberation of spreading cards over an unassuming table, "I agree with Jackson. I don't think we should *use* this device. At least, not yet. There's no point in subjecting someone to the thing if we haven't even unlocked the address that we're supposed to be gating to."

"Your neighbor's gotten five chevrons out of nine in, what, the eight weeks he's been in Colorado Springs?" O'Neill asked. "This is starting to look like a sure thing."

"Well," Young said, "it also seems like a crap idea to experiment on the guy who's unlocking the door for you."

"Well put," Jackson said, shooting Landry an icy look.

"I concur," Lam said. "Given the physical risks and the ethical problems inherent to even asking for *volunteers* for an assignment such as this, I think that all discussion of using the device on *anyone* should be tabled until such a point that dialing the gate is a practical possibility."

"Colonel Telford would disagree," Landry said.

"Colonel Telford isn't here," Jackson said, the evenness of his tone doing nothing to remove its air of subtle victory.

"That doesn't render his position invalid," Landry said. "Leaving that base in the hands of the Lucian Alliance not only grants them a valuable means to furthering their own objective, it also increases the likelihood that they will make more attempts to access to our intelligence *and* personnel. Their insurgency tactics have been honed *formillennia* beneath the goa'uld and we have *never* encountered anything so damned effective. Leaving the base under their power makes Nicholas Rush an outstandingly valuable target. Because by gaining access to *him*, they can achieve both the unlocking itself and the best known chance in the entire galaxy of gaining access to what lies beyond that gate."

Young tried to ignore the feeling of dread that Landry's statement produced.

"That is exactly why he should be sent to *Atlantis*," Jackson said. "It's the only safe place for him."

"We'll talk about it," Landry growled, "after he unlocks the chevrons. He can't do it from Atlantis. He told me so himself."

For several long seconds, no one spoke.

"I come down with Colonel Young," O'Neill said into the silence. "We don't move on P3X-124 until we're ready to use the device, and, right now, we're not ready."

"Then it looks like you've got something to take up the chain," Landry said, his voice flat.

"Looks like it," O'Neill replied.

"Unless there are any other pressing issues," Landry said, "I say we adjourn with that. In the interim, all of you should review the incident reports from the Jaffa garrison on P3X-124 and the material from the SG-3 debriefings conducted by the NID."

"I'd like to talk to Telford, Reynolds, and Ramirez," Young said.

"You can talk to Telford," Lam said. "He's on base. He's due to be released from secure confinement following final clearance by medical. He has a low-grade viral infection. Ramirez and Reynolds are being transferred to Area 51 at the request of the NID for further questioning."

"Low grade viral infection?" Young asked.

"Yes," Lam said. "It's in my report. It's an alien strain of EBV that we've seen in the past, including in those with no Lucian Alliance connections. I believe it's unrelated to the period he spent with the LA, as he certainly contracted it before he was captured."

Young nodded.

"Any further issues?" Landry asked.

No one said anything.

O'Neill and Landry stood in tandem.

"Please return all your paperwork to me," Harriman said, putting down his pen. "No one is permitted to leave until all typewritten pages have been accounted for."

Young leaned forward to slide his papers and Lam's across the table to Jackson, who passed them to Harriman in a disorganized stack.

"So I heard that they're resurrecting Dr. Levant for the *Wormhole Extreme* movie," O'Neill said, looking at Jackson. "Congrats."

"Do not even start," Jackson said, in a mock-threatening singsong as he determinedly contemplated his empty coffee cup.

O'Neill looked fondly unimpressed. "You're more *bossy* than I remember," O'Neill said. "That's because Mitchell lets you walk all over him, isn't it?"

"Not true," Jackson said.

"Maybe a little bit true," Young said, as he stood, collecting his coffee cup and Lam's mostly full cup of cold tea.

"Meh," O'Neill replied, watching Landry help Lam out of her chair. "Not a criticism. You walked all over me most of the time."

"You both pick your battles," Jackson said.

"Is that right?" O'Neill said, his tone turning abruptly serious, his eyes fixing on Jackson.

"Maybe you should learn to do the same."

Young watched the pair of them, his expression neutral.

Jackson flashed a smile at O'Neill and Young was reminded powerfully of Rush.

"Never," Jackson said.

O'Neill sighed and looked away.

Several hours later, Young sat next to Lam in front of the thick, one-way glass of the secured medical isolation room, looking in at David Telford. Mitchell hovered behind them, edgily pacing the back of the room.

Telford looked strung out and pale and displaced in a pair of dark blue medical scrubs that seemed to emphasize the circles beneath his eyes. He had lost weight. On the floor near the door was his untouched breakfast, perfectly intact on his tray. He was sitting curled on his bed, halfway through a book of monstrous proportions.

"He looks terrible," Young said.

"Everyone looks terrible these days," Mitchell said, coming forward to lean against the glass, glancing at both of them. "Haven't you noticed?"

Lam smiled faintly at Mitchell and then turned her attention to Young. "The NID debriefings are—stressful. In the extreme. They are meant to elicit doubt. They can create a sense of guilt even when none is there."

"I'd like to talk to him alone," Young said. "It's bad enough that he's stuck in here like a lab rat. He doesn't need to be grilled by another panel, even if it is a friendly one."

Lam nodded.

"Let me give you a ride home," Mitchell said, helping Lam up. "I've got to go buy Teal'c and Vala some ice cream on my lunch break anyway."

"You have a unique leadership style," Young said. "You know that, right?"

"Can it," Mitchell said. "Jackson and I lost a game of two-on-two basketball yesterday, and—"

"You and Jackson lost to Vala and Teal'c?" Young asked, amused.

"Jackson is *not* good at sports," Mitchell said, "and Vala's pretty speedy."

"Okay," Young said. "I take it back. I could see it."

"So, anyway," Mitchell said, chivalrously extending his elbow toward Lam. "Ride home?"

"Sure," Lam said. "Thanks."

Young watched them go and then turned back to Telford. He hit the controls for the one-way glass and transformed it into something wholly transparent.

Telford snapped his book shut and looked up, his eyes locking on Young. He stood, approaching the glass.

Young flipped on the intercom as he watched Telford drag the room's single chair into a position in front of the window.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey," Telford replied with a desperate relief, his dark eyes locking onto Young. "How are you?"

"I'm good," Young said.

"Well you look awful," Telford replied.

"You too," Young said.

They smiled crookedly at one another.

"What's going on?" Telford asked finally. "Can you tell me?"

"Not all of it, no. I can tell you that they made me your second in command."

"Icarus?" Telford asked, his tone guarded.

Young understood his implicit question.

"Across the board," he replied.

"For the next sixty days," Young continued, "I'm filling your shoes."

"*Sixty days*," Telford echoed, trying to contain his dismay and failing. "They're going to keep me in here for—"

"Not in here," Young said quickly. "You're going to be on mandatory medical leave."

Telford released a shaky breath. "But sixty days?" he asked. "A lot can happen in that time."

"I know," Young said.

Telford looked away. "I'm glad it's you."

"What happened out there?" Young asked. "What happened to you?"

Telford shut his eyes. Their lids were dark and bruised-looking. "It wasn't—" he broke off, his voice closing.

"David," Young said.

"It wasn't as bad as the first time," Telford said. "The time you pulled me out. They—they didn't know who they had. Kiva wasn't there. Her people weren't there. They didn't *know* me."

"Good," Young whispered. "That's good."

"We were just a means to an end," Telford said, his voice rasping. "Have you read the NID documents yet?"

"Not yet," Young said.

"But you're cleared to read them."

"Yes," Young said.

"I destroyed the Tel'tak," Telford said. "I triggered the autodestruct when I knew they were planning to take us. You can tell, you know? They target the drives. Then they can scan the interior. But I was too late. They beamed out the people on the bridge with the fucking slice. We ended up on their vessel with half the bridge instrumentation and half of *Lieutenant fucking Yang*," Telford said, his voice cracking against the man's name.

"God damn it," Young said.

"I'm sure the self-destruct killed Giles," Telford whispered. "It must have. But no one will tell me."

"It killed her," Young said.

Telford nodded, looking away.

"You'll get an SGC debrief once you're cleared by medical," Young said the words hitting the air like the offering he'd meant them to be.

Telford nodded. "We were tortured for information," he continued, "but without the kind of precision that—ah. That we know they're capable of. They needed us only for the possibility of our return. Only to throw against the iris. Only to generate the kind of signature that a demolecularized human makes when it fails to rematerialize. Only for that. I think."

"David," Young said.

"That's all," Telford whispered.

"David," Young said again.

"Did they get what they came for?" Telford whispered, his eyes glittering.

"They took an astrophysicist," Young said. "Dale Volker."

Telford brought both hands to his face for a moment and then dropped them, looking at Young with a haunted expression. "Anyone else?" he asked.

"No," Young said.

Telford nodded.

"Did we loose anyone?" Telford asked.

"Don't worry about that right now," Young said.

"It's all I think about," Telford snarled. "If you can tell me, then tell me."

"Two new recruits from SG-19," Young said. "Lieutenant Thomas. Sam Carter took a chest shot, point blank with no vest, but survived. Dr. Lam injected herself with naquadah to save her, and lost both her kidneys because of the heavy metal deposition. She just had surgery. She's on dialysis now."

Telford stood, walking away from the window, his back to Young, his head bowed, his hands in his hair.

Young looked at the floor. At the place where it came together with the low cement wall beneath the chemically treated glass.

After an uncounted interval, Telford straightened and walked back toward Young, his expression set.

"David," Young said quietly.

Telford just looked at him.

"It's not—" Young began.

"I'll carry it," Telford said, cutting him off.

"This isn't on you," Young said.

"It is," Telford said quietly, "and I'll carry it." He looked away, his expression cracking out of his control and then reforming.

Young said nothing.

"They told me I was clear," Telford said, his voice very nearly attaining the brusque control that Young had always found so reassuring. "They told me that they didn't find any sign of coercive persuasion."

"Yup," Young said.

"So, why am I on medical leave for sixty days? I'm going to die of cabin fever."

"It has something to do with the test," Young said. "There's two parts to it. They can't detect the marker in your blood, but anti-drug, anti-agent, anti-whatever antibodies might show up any time in the next sixty days."

"There's a blood test now?"

"Yup," Young said.

"Do you think they know?" Telford asked.

"Know what?"

"The ones who are brainwashed. Do you think *any part of them* can tell?"

"I have no idea," Young said.

"No one does," Telford whispered. "That's the horror of it. Even if it happens to you, you might never know. You have to rely on other people. On what they say. On tests that are experimental."

"Yeah," Young said. "But we do the best with what we have."

"Yeah," Telford echoed. "We do."

"What are you reading?" Young asked, hoping it wasn't Kafka or something equally unsettling for a man trapped in a semi-transparent cell.

"*Les Misérables*," Telford said. "Jackson left it for me."

"Jackson?"

"That man," Telford said with a grim admiration, "is a historical bottleneck wrapped in a capable package of moral absolutism, and if he fucking gives me a fucking book I'm damn well going to read it."

"Maybe he's just being nice," Young said, slightly taken aback.

Telford gave him a half smile. "Maybe. That too."

"Hang in there," Young said. "You'll be out of there soon."

"Yeah," Telford said. "Keep an eye on your neighbor. He can get pretty wrapped up in the math."

"You don't say," Young replied dryly.

When Young arrived home from work around nineteen hundred hours he didn't even bother walking down to his apartment before he knocked on Rush's door.

He braced himself for the inevitable invective.

The mathematician flung open his door and swept his hair out of his eyes. "What?" he demanded.

The guy looked exhausted.

He'd looked exhausted for days.

"You say that like you're surprised to see me here," Young said, "when actually I show up at your door *every day*."

Rush sighed, leaning his head against the dark wood of the doorframe. "I can't decide if you're an optimist or you have a learning disability."

"Those don't sound mutually exclusive," Young said, leaning on his cane.

Rush smiled faintly.

"You like that?" Young said raising his eyebrows. "Jackson's been giving me pointers on logical fallacies."

Rush shook his head trying to pretend not to be amused and doing a terrible job. "Has he? I suppose he would know. He's a walking fallacy of some kind. Definitely not a logical one."

"Clever," Young said. "You know, when *you're* not around, he says *complimentary* things about *you*."

"I don't doubt it," Rush replied, with an indolent shoulder roll. "I suppose I'm going to have to classify you as an optimist."

"I think that might be the nicest thing you've ever said to me," Young replied.

"Don't let it go to your head," Rush said, hooking his fingers over the back of his neck.

"Come on, hotshot," Young said. "I don't have all day. I've got reports to read."

"I'm not at your fucking beck and call," Rush snapped. "I'm otherwise engaged."

Crap.

He could tell from the shift of Rush's weight and the crack of the man's diction that he was one unnecessarily slow sentence away from getting the door shut in his face.

"I know," Young said. "So bring your math." He shrugged. "I'll cook you dinner. I owe you twenty-four meals at this point."

Rush shut the door in his face.

Young sighed. He figured there was a fifty percent chance that the man would emerge with his laptop but without his signal scrambler and phone, and a fifty percent probability that he wouldn't emerge at all.

It took over a minute, but Rush finally showed up, his laptop under one arm.

"Phone?" Young said dryly. "Signal scrambler?"

"My phone is in my pocket and the building has scramblers," Rush said, pushing his disdain right out to the bleeding edge.

"Yeah because *those* have never gone down before."

Rush turned around in fluid defeat without putting up any further argument.

Young felt vaguely guilty, though he wasn't sure what exactly he felt guilty about.

Rush reappeared with all his necessary equipment and stepped into the hall, pulling his door shut behind him. As soon as the door clicked shut, Rush shut his eyes and leaned back against it, his expression one of suppressed vexation.

Young studied him for a moment.

Rush didn't move.

"You just locked yourself out, didn't you," Young said, caught between amusement and empathy.

"Yes," Rush replied, sounding demoralized.

"Cheer up, hotshot," Young said. "It's not the first time and I'm pretty sure it's not gonna be the last."

Rush sighed.

"Come on," Young said, starting down the hall. "You can call a locksmith while I make you dinner."

"Call a *locksmith*?" Rush echoed.

"Yeah, I took the key to your apartment away from the superintendent after the last time this happened. The SGC threat assessments just—overlook the obvious sometimes."

"Can't the Lucian Alliance just fucking *destroy* my door if it comes to that?" Rush said. "I prefer to have access to a spare key."

"You can have convenience or security," Young said, as he unlocked his own door, "not both."

"It seems like I actually have neither."

"You have the best balance that we can give you," Young said, deciding not to mention how close Rush actually was to being annexed into the protective custody of the NID. "I'd try not to rock the boat too much if I were you."

"So you've mentioned," Rush said darkly, following him into his apartment, squinting in the red-orange light of the setting sun.

"The days are starting to get shorter," Young said as Rush closed the nearest set of blinds with a pained expression.

"Marginally," Rush commented. "How do you people live like this?"

"Like what?" Young asked, shutting his door.

"Does it never rain here?" Rush asked. "Is it never fucking *overcast*?"

"It rains," Young said, following Rush toward the kitchen. "It snows plenty. You'll see. July's over, August—well, August will be hot, but after that it will get better."

"It snows," Rush repeated flatly.

"Didn't you do any kind of research before you came here?" Young asked. "I don't understand how *snow* in the *Rockies* can be a surprise to you."

"Yes well," Rush said, depositing his electronic devices in a gentle slide of technology over the surface of the table as he looked away from Young. "I was otherwise engaged."

Young glanced at him. Something about the man's manner had changed. "What do you want for dinner?" Young asked cautiously.

"Nothing that you're capable of making," Rush said, still not looking at him.

The words fell far, far short of the acidity that Young was certain Rush had intended to lace them with and the emphasis was wrong, placed too much on Young's identity and not enough on his capability and—as if Rush knew it, as if he had run out of energy and willpower—the mathematician sat abruptly, folding into the nearest chair, his elbows propped in the table, his face in his hands.

Well fuck.

Young looked at Rush and pieces that had been coming into apposition for weeks snapped irrevocably into place.

Someone was dead.

Or someone was lost.

Because this was grief.

It had always been grief.

There was no mistaking it. Not now, not when it had taken a form that Young could recognize. He knew the line of those shoulders, he knew that revealing impulse to turn away, the need to control the unconscious, instinctive twist of features and the closure of the throat. He knew all of those things.

Young sat down next to Rush at the table.

"Nick," Young said.

Rush's hands came away from his face and he lifted his head.

"What?" Rush said, not looking at him, the word uncharacteristically flat beneath the weight of whatever it was that allowed such tight control of face and voice.

Young wanted to ask him what had happened to his wife.

"Are you okay?" he asked instead.

"Yes," Rush said, his hair lit up in streaks of red where oblique rays of the setting sun crept through small gaps in the closed venetian blinds. "I'm tired."

Young shifted, feeling the spark and slow fade of agony along his back.

He thought of Telford, locked behind glass.

He thought of Jackson, the sharp edges of distress he smoothed by filling his hands with things he gave to other people.

He thought of Lam, whose fearless voice did not match the terror in her eyes and of Vala, whose cracked armor was maintained with constant misdirection of word and face and hands.

He thought of Carter, who could not laugh and Mitchell who tried to make her do so.

He thought of Rush, who was the focal point of hopes and fears that went unstated in the midst of a war with two fronts.

"Yeah," Young said quietly. "Me too."

Chapter Thirty One

Rush needed sunglasses or he was just not going to fucking *survive* the drive to the base, he would die of a photosensitive headache on the way there, either directly as his fucking cerebral vasculature disintegrated like tissue paper, or indirectly as he drove his fucking car off a fucking cliff in a fit of blinding, blinded agony.

Young knocked on his door.

Rush tore open the third box of the early afternoon without looking, searching for sunglasses by feel alone. The air was unnecessarily dry and unnecessarily bright.

"Rush," Young called through the door, "we're going to be late."

What the fuck did he care if they were *late*.

He didn't want to fucking go to this fucking meeting anyway. He hated meetings generally and he *especially hated this* meeting, he couldn't think of a meeting that he hated more than this one, not even UC Berkeley faculty meetings regarding the administrative ephemera that were the gaudy trappings of any organization that received money from a federal funding agency. But this meeting, *this meeting*, was specifically focused on *him* and not just on him but on the colocalization of him and *useless tasks*.

The only thing he hated more than stupidity was forced participation in a stupid affair.

The sunglasses were a lost cause. Or maybe just lost. He was tempted to ignore Young's insistent knocking, to keep going, given that he'd already devoted so many resources to finding them. The urge to maintain his stranglehold on the goal of a world more shaded was almost too much for him to bear.

He gave up. He picked up the bag that held his computer, phone and signal scrambler and opened his door.

"Nice," Young said, friendly and uniformed and leaning against the doorframe.

"What is?" Rush asked.

"The suit," Young said.

"Oh," Rush said, looking down at his jacket through the glaze of his headache. "Yes well—" he started to pull his door shut.

Young stopped him with a well-placed boot. "Keys?" he asked. "Phone? Signal scrambler? Laptop?"

"Yes yes yes and yes," Rush said. "Do you have extra sunglasses, possibly, by any chance?"

If Young said no, there was a possibility that he might expire before reaching the base.

"You can have *my* sunglasses," Young said, pulling a pair out of his pocket, "if you let me drive."

"Done," Rush snapped, taking the proffered shades and slipping them on with alacrity, feeling them take the edge off a photosensitive headache so edged that it approximated a diamond razor blade.

"Are you—hung over, hotshot?" Young asked slowly.

He wasn't. But he felt like he was. Close enough. "Yes," he said.

"No you're not," Young replied, limping after him as they proceeded toward the elevator.

And Young thought *he* was a lot of work? He hit the elevator button with more than the requisite force, hooked a hand over his shoulder, and tried to pretend that his brain was not trying to change phases into a new state of matter. He wished it luck. Really he did.

"Okay, so here's the plan, hotshot," Young said.

Oh there was a *plan* was there?

"You just sit there and look pretty, while—"

Rush pulled his shades down and fixed Young with a distinctly unimpressed look, which he found painful but worth it for the extremely satisfying effect it seemed to have on Young.

"You just sit there and look like an overextended mathematical rock star," Young amended, with so much composure that Rush suspected the other man might have been baiting him, "while Dr. Perry and I do the talking."

Rush repositioned his borrowed sunglasses in a fluid upslide. "I don't understand why you're even going to be there. Aren't you in charge of people with guns? Do you know a god damned thing about MMORPGs?"

The elevator door opened. Rush motioned Young forward, one hand against the doors.

"Right now I'm in charge of *everything*," Young said, as he limped into the pitiless glare of the fluorescent elevator interior.

Rush had no idea what the scope of Young's professional responsibilities were—past or current. It was possible that he was not exaggerating. It was also possible that he was

exaggerating, though the fact that Young had been invited to this absurd meeting indicated that the former possibility was more likely than the latter.

"As for MMORPGs," Young said, "well, I read the report. It seems like a decent idea in exchange for about ninety million dollars from the senate appropriations committee."

"Were they planning on giving those ninety million dollars to *me*," Rush said, "then perhaps you'd have a point."

"I can see *this* is going to go well," Young muttered. "Can you please be polite to the United States Senator who controls resource allocation for the *entire* Icarus project?"

"When am I not polite?" Rush asked dryly, his fingers digging into his shoulder, his head tipped against the back wall.

"Hotshot, if you use the word 'please' and the word 'fuck' in the same sentence, that doesn't count as 'polite'." Young sounded amused but he looked disapproving.

"It's neutral," Rush replied. "The polite and the profane cancel out."

"Nope, I'm pretty sure 'fuck' always wins," Young said.

The elevator doors opened into a shaft of natural light coming through the glass doors of the building.

"Oh god," Rush whispered, one hand coming to his head.

"You feel like shit," Young said. "Don't you."

It wasn't a question, so he didn't have to answer it. He could just walk forward into the light, trying to move his head as little as possible and think about how fucking amazingly obsequiously, terribly, embarrassingly, grateful he was for the existence of Amanda Perry who seemed to:

a) Genuinely be excited about *Astria Porta: Prometheus* in the depths of her strange, joyfully ironic heart, because it was a game that sounded, to *him*, so incontrovertibly stupid that he couldn't even *describe* it in the abstract, the stupidity had to be experienced as a visceral, subjective phenomenon.

b) Have enough scientific connections that he would have to do nothing other than the mathematical rendering of the cypher set.

c) Want to make his life easier for reasons totally obscure to him. Maybe he seemed like he fucking needed it, though that, of course, was not the case. He needed his life to be harder in some kind of demonstrable way; it was too easy to drown in one's own mind in an impersonal apartment thinking about nothing but mathematics.

He made his way over to Young's car, some black, aggressive-looking thing with more accelerative capacity than seemed, in any way, necessary.

"You remembered my car," Young said, with unmistakable surprise.

Rush found this excessively irritating. "Is there a reason I *wouldn't* remember your car? Do you have me confused with a stereotype you've invented regarding the scientific community?"

"Take it easy over there, hotshot," Young said, unlocking his car. "You need coffee?"

"We're late," Rush said.

"We're not that late and I'm pretty sure it's going to be worth it."

"Possibly," Rush admitted.

Rush sat in the mercifully dim briefing room, watching Young wrap up an overview of the Icarus Project tailored for the masses with level one security clearance or less, except in this case it was for a mass of two—an overly opinionated senator and his senior aide, who seemed in no way 'senior' other than the fact that her security clearance exceeded his own.

He found this unsurprising.

He glanced at Perry and found her looking at him.

She widened her eyes meaningfully.

Unfortunately, he had no idea what he was supposed to be taking from her expression.

Perhaps he looked uninterested.

Perhaps he looked *impolite* in some way.

He straightened marginally, but not enough to imply that he thought that any of this was, in any way, a good idea or a good use of his time. He had several objections to this entire *concept*, none of which he had been encouraged to voice, and several of which he had been expressly advised *against* voicing by both Young and Perry. He deeply despised the idea of any kind of intellectual stricture placed upon this kind of work, especially the kinds of strictures that were time consuming and a waste of academic assets—not only his own considerable talents which could, unquestionably, be better employed, but it was also a waste of Perry's assets.

Perry was certainly a valuable resource.

He drummed his fingers against the table once. The senator's aide looked over at him. Perhaps repetitive finger movements were frowned upon by the American political establishment. Better put a stop to *that* then.

He had, to this point, avoided thinking about the request being made of him, but given that he was uninterested in Young's slightly modified version of Dr. Jackson's: *Historical Highlights of the SGC* funding pitch, Rush found that that he had little else to think about. He had a difficult time focusing on cryptography when trying to actively suppress intense aggravation.

Essentially what was being asked of him and, by extension, Dr. Perry was the encoding of the cyphers within the gate into a form that would be computationally decipherable when turned over to a private company with no security clearance for incorporation into a game popular among shiftless young people who lacked ambition. In return, the SGC would gain a monetary sum used, presumably, to further their mission.

The idea was worthy of ridicule on several levels.

Young made his pained, stoic way back to his seat as Dr. Perry began speaking.

There were—he looked at the ceiling, trying to estimate—there were perhaps ten people, give or take nine people, on the planet who would have been able to take a cypher set that was encoded in a foreign language—in a *foreign computer* language with incredible cryptographic breadth, built for and into the hardware of an Ancient device—and transpose it into something that a terrestrial programmer would be able to make *any* kind of fucking sense of. None of those people were at the SGC.

Well. McKay, *possibly*, could have done it. For a physicist he had a good instinct for code and, apparently, an interest in computational complexity theory.

McKay's skills were not the point. The point was that Rush *sincerely* doubted that Senator Armstrong had considered the plausibility of his ludicrous request before making it. He leaned back, braced an elbow against the arm of the chair and pressed two fingers against his temple in an unobtrusive manner. There was no reason Rush could see that might justify such a ridiculous request, even given how uninformed he was regarding the likelihood of success. What was the point of harnessing the untapped genius of the anonymous, unmotivated, proletariat when one had a *perfectly adequate* resident cryptographer who—

Right then.

There was an *outstanding* reason for doing what they were doing.

This was a contingency plan.

It must be.

A contingency plan against his own abduction by the Lucian Alliance.

A contingency plan that was being assembled in a desperate, unfocused manner.

This didn't send a very reassuring message about their assessment of his success in avoiding an abduction attempt or in their own abilities to keep him out of Lucian Alliance hands. But at least they were thinking. At least someone was thinking critically about contingencies. He felt like standing up and shaking Senator Armstrong's hand in the middle of the fucking briefing.

The pained sludge of his thoughts was difficult to see through, to think through, because *this* had never been his life—he had never been a resource on a vast scale, he had never been threatened by something with this kind of scope—he had always been slow to trust but that propensity he had recognized as some kind of psychological spandrel from the fucked up places he had clawed his way free of, not a way that he had *truly needed to live*, but he could not help wondering—

Who had known about this?

He hesitated, torn by opposing mental forces for a moment, before marshaling all of his intellectual capital to tip himself over into a savage pleasure with whomever had devised this particular strategy. Asking him to code these chevrons into a game was to ask him to essentially craft the performance interview for his successor.

He could see why they might not want to have such a discussion with him openly. Such a thing would be in atrocious taste. It would be utterly without tact. It would be extremely—impolite.

He felt a muscle in his cheek begin to twitch. His headache began to recede under a second, equally merciless pressure. The urge to cut into this thing and lay it bare was overwhelming. But he could wait. When it was necessary, he could wait. He was certain he'd be presented with an opportunity. The meeting was winding down. The deal, to put it colloquially, had already been struck. It had been struck days ago, weeks ago.

Even if he could have, he wouldn't have stopped it.

Perry glanced at him, in the middle of a confirmatory sentence about projected turnaround times and she faltered, the words fading into nothing as she looked at him. Soon, everyone was looking at him.

"Dr. Rush?" Landry asked.

He realized then that he was smiling. His expression felt subtly twisted. He doubted that he looked even remotely amused. "No," he said, leaning forward in time with the word in one smooth, slow pull. He rested his forearms against the edge of the table and pressed his fingertips together. "Not at all," he said. "I'm very much in favor of contingency planning."

Landry's expression didn't change, but for a slight bilateral lift of the eyebrows. As if he were making a reassessment of some kind. As well he might.

Perry's eyes widened in an obvious prompt for him to explain himself.

Young betrayed nothing.

The senator watched him steadily. His 'senior aide' looked away, smoothing a piece of hair behind her ear.

"Contingency?" It was Perry who spoke. "What do you mean by 'contingency'?"

Rush didn't look at her.

"It would be a terrible shame if you were to *lose* your cryptographer," he said. "It would be a significant setback to the project. Militarily. Financially. Strategically. The part that has me puzzled is what the ninety million dollars is for. Was that supposed to be for my psychological benefit? So it appeared to be a *quid pro quo*? The money for the game? Or was it simply the senate appropriations committee purchasing a controlling stake in the trajectory of the project?"

No one spoke.

Young and Perry looked at one another, then at him with nearly identical expressions of dismayed comprehension.

"Dr. Rush," Senator Armstrong began, "please understand that—"

"I understand," he said, perfectly smooth, perfectly calm. "I understand completely. In fact, I *agree* with you. I think it's a dead brilliant idea. You get the one person who can unlock the thing to create a mechanism for his own replacement."

"That's not what's going on here," Young growled.

"I think that's exactly what's going on here," Rush said. "But tell me I'm wrong." He smiled at Landry in a quick flash of teeth.

Landry said nothing.

Rush waited, his eyebrows lifted, his gaze sweeping the room. No one said anything. "I'll do it for you," Rush said into the weighted quiet. "Of course I will. But I want something in return."

"What?" Landry asked.

He considered asking for level two security clearance, but didn't think he'd get it. He was certain that, given the current climate at the SGC— He would get very little. He didn't have the political astuteness of Dr. Jackson, but there was some chance that by asking for limited information he could get an increased understanding of the power structure concealed in the rafters of the SGC.

"The name of the person who came up with this particular strategy," Rush said.

"It came from my office," Armstrong said.

"A name," Rush said, with ruthless control over his diction.

"I'm responsible for this particular initiative," Armstrong said.

"It was me," his aide answered in nearly the same moment, her eyes frightened but her chin angled up. "It was my idea."

Well. *That* was unexpected. And probably not useful. The girl looked like she should be in graduate school, not sitting at the bottom of a mountain waiting to fall on top of her.

"And you are?" he said.

"Chloe," she whispered.

"Chloe—"

"Chloe Armstrong."

That was *also* unexpected. And possibly useful.

"Ah," he said. "Well, Ms. Armstrong, you seem cleverer than the company you keep. Consider graduate school before politics ruins your mind and you get lost in pointless, endless machinating. Do something of real value. Join a gate team. Prove a theorem."

She sat unmoving, regarding him with dark eyes and a neutral expression.

Rush stood. "We're done," he said.

"Dr. Rush," Landry said. "This meeting is *not*—"

He abandoned his coffee cup and his papers, shouldered his bag in a sweep before anyone could stop him, before he could give into his fear that they *would* stop him. But

no one barred his way and he entered the elevator, where his headache reasserted itself like a persistent, consciousness-seeking leucotome.

He fucking shouldn't have let Young drive in exchange for sunglasses. What had he been thinking. Rush pressed the button for level eighteen. The elevator doors closed.

He stood alone in the fluorescent box, in no way upset.

It was fine.

He liked their plan.

He did.

He liked it.

He approved of it.

It was practical.

It fulfilled an important function.

But what had happened to the astrophysicist?

He liked it.

He liked it.

He did.

What had happened to Volker?

He liked it.

It was a good plan.

He did not *mind* the implicit inevitability of his eventual abduction, it did not bother him *per se*, but he hoped it would be *later* rather than *sooner* because he would like to solve this thing before he died or at least make some kind of attempt at it. This was why he wouldn't go to Atlantis, why he couldn't go there because if it weren't for the cyphers than what was the point of *any* of it? One might as well just lay down on a Lantean pier and die, but now, *now*, he wasn't sure if he would even be *allowed* to go if he expressed any such preference or if it was just some kind of beautiful vision of Jackson's that existed in a haze of hopeful sanguinity, out of phase with reality.

Jackson was like that. Hopeful. Out of phase.

He liked their plan. He did.

The elevator opened and he walked out, heading toward Jackson's lab in a blur of fluorescent light and irresolving edges. He stopped in front of the man's door, hook his

hair out of his eyes and, for his trouble, was nearly blinded by the resultant spike in his headache. He knocked.

"Come," Jackson called.

Rush opened the door to see the man seated cross-legged on the floor with an array of candles spread out in front of him, evidently in the middle of something profound and/or absurd. Rush didn't fucking know. He didn't fucking *care*. He definitely did not want to be here right now, nor did he want to interrupt a member of the formerly ascended to fucking drive him home in the middle of a day when clearly, clearly he was busy.

"Nick?" Jackson said.

Rush shut the door and turned around. He wasn't sure where exactly he thought he was going to go. Anywhere would be acceptable. Perry's office. That sounded reasonable. He would wait for her. He needed to speak with her anyway.

One of the green-fatigued blurs that surrounded him reversed direction as it drew level with his position.

"Hello gorgeous," Vala murmured, threading their arms together as she changed their trajectory. "Shit day?"

"Yes," he whispered.

Forty-five minutes later they sat on the floor of Vala's quarters, a chessboard spread between them.

Vala considered the arrangement of pieces, her eyes narrowed, and then advanced a pawn.

He pushed her pawn back and tapped the one adjacent to the piece she'd selected.

"If you did *this*," he murmured, "it would be an opener called the Latvian gambit. It's risky, but may suit your style of play. It's likely to unnerve your opponent, given that said opponent is capable of recognizing it."

"I like the sound of *that*," Vala said. "I believe the infrared spectroscopy unit is quite experienced when it comes to chess."

"When is this tournament happening?" he asked.

"In a few days," Vala replied, staring down the board as though she were memorizing the arrangement of the pieces. "The ISU has been playing speed chess in the mess at peak mealtimes in a flagrant attempt to intimidate us."

"That seems ostentatious," he said, beginning to construct his own pawn skeleton, two fingers trying to press the migraine out of his temple.

"I'm terribly put out that no one informed of this tournament until *last night*," Vala said. "How am I supposed to acquit myself in any kind of reasonable manner with only five days of practice time?"

"Consider using your inexperience as a strategy," he said, his eyes shut, his head turned into his hand.

The room was very quiet.

"Gorgeous," Vala whispered, "even if they take you, which is not a given, despite the tactless machinating of the American political establishment, we would never *leave you* with them."

"What about that astrophysicist," Rush said, opening his eyes. "Volker. It appears that *he's* been left."

"And what do you think you know about it, hmm? There's an entire team devoted to finding him," Vala said as she advanced her bishop.

"A team of four people?" Rush asked dryly. "Forgive me if I'm unimpressed."

"He isn't you," she said.

He couldn't say whether that made things better or worse, or whether it was meant to simply state ontological fact. In any case, it was hard to argue with.

"Do you have any advice?" he asked her.

She looked at him from beneath a sweep of dark hair. "Have you asked anyone else," she said quietly, "for—advice?"

"I asked Colonel Young. He counseled against being abducted in the first place."

"That's the institutional line, I think," Vala said, still looking at him.

"Yes," Rush said, moving his knight.

"No one else will say this to you, gorgeous," Vala murmured, "but I would advise that you do what's required to survive. If that means that you give them what they ask for—then," she hesitated, looking away, "you give them what they ask for. They have ways of getting what they want regardless of your best intentions. But if you give it to them," she continued, her voice pained, her eyes distant, "you control how much you give. You manipulate them into keeping you alive. The rest will follow."

"Something like this has happened to you before?" he asked.

"No, of course not. I read about this in *Cosmo*."

She flashed him a brief, bright lie of a smile that pulled out something matching in him.

Someone knocked on Vala's door.

"I'm sure that's Daniel," Vala said.

"I'm sure it's Young," Rush countered.

"Care to make it interesting, gorgeous?"

"Interesting how?"

"I'll put an adorably hand-tailored but yet tastefully masculine SGC-issued jacket on the table," she said.

"I don't think I need any such thing," Rush said dubiously.

The person outside Vala's quarters knocked again.

"Just a moment," Vala called, "I'm changing."

Rush shot her a look over the tops of his glasses.

"Come now," she said. "Don't give me that. If you don't want a jacket then propose something requiring equivalent effort on your part but that you think that I'll be equally uninterested in."

"I'll show you how to cook a dish of your choice using Colonel Young's kitchen."

"Done," Vala said, delighted. She got to her feet. "Let's see how this turns out, shall we?"

He leaned back against the foot of the bed.

Vala flung open the door to reveal Young *and* Jackson both standing the frame.

They looked at him, then at Vala.

Jackson cleared his throat. "Changing?" he said.

"Yes darling, we were playing one of your Earth games known as 'strip chess'."

"Strip chess," Jackson repeated, caught somewhere between skepticism and dismay.

"Is that not an accepted variant?" Vala asked. "Gorgeous," she turned in a swirl of hair, "how roguishly disingenuous of you."

Rush shrugged, opening a hand.

"You know," Jackson said, looking at Vala with what could only be characterized as evident disapproval, "the United States government has a *name* for this kind of thing. That name is 'sexual harassment'."

"Yes," Vala said. "I do feel terribly victimized by the strip chess."

"You are definitely the harasser. Not the harassee."

Vala turned back to Rush. "Am I creating an unsafe workplace environment for you, gorgeous?"

"You?" Rush said, pressing his fingers to his temple. "No, I don't think it's *you*."

An uncomfortable silence descended, during which everyone seemed to fix their attention on him. For his part, Rush tried to prevent his skull from suffering explosive decompression under the pressure of his headache. He tried to pretend to himself and others that he was currently in Vala's room, sitting on the floor in front of a chessboard, because a) he had known where her room was and he had come here purposefully, b) they'd had a previous appointment regarding the finer points of an intellectual Earth-based game, and c) he had in no way been upset by anything that had happened this afternoon least of all the subtle and sensitive plans of senior aides to United States senators.

"Did the two of you *want* something?" Vala asked. "We're in the middle of playing out the Latvian gambit here." She made a sweeping gesture at the chessboard.

"You're—doing what?" Jackson asked, cocking his head and walking forward to scrutinize the chessboard.

"The Latvian gambit," Vala said, enunciating in a manner Rush thought might be meant to convey subtle insult. "It's *extremely advanced*, darling. I'm not surprised you haven't heard of it."

Rush stood, removing himself from the sphere of Jackson, Vala, and the Latvian gambit.

Young was leaning in the doorway, his cane aligned unobtrusively with his good leg.

"I actually don't know very much about chess," Jackson admitted.

"Oh really," Vala replied, "because based on the way that you were advising Colonel Mitchell I had the impression that—"

"I'm better than *Cam*," Jackson said.

"You want to get out of here, hotshot?" Young asked quietly, with an expression that Rush was going to label as 'concerned'.

"You're better than Cam," Jackson continued.

"I need to speak with Dr. Perry," Rush said, trying to radiate a sense of imperturbability that he did not feel.

"A *potted plant* is better than Cam," Jackson finished.

"Um, what are you planning on saying to her?" Young asked.

"Is *that* a matter of national security?" Rush asked, with all the acidic poise he could bring to bear.

"No," Young said, "but she looked pretty upset after your dramatic exit."

"Dramatic," Rush repeated, fixing Young with a cool look over the tops of his glasses.

"Well," Young said, looking faintly amused, "you pretty much created a whole bunch of political capital and then basically set it on fire when you used it to intellectually harass the daughter of a senator. I'd say whatever bridges you had to the American political establishment are pretty much burned."

"I gave her a piece of unsolicited career advice," Rush said. "That's all."

"Colonel Mitchell has a great deal of *enthusiasm*," Vala said diplomatically.

"Yeah, well, it was *not* a fun room after you left," Young murmured. "You realize," Young said quietly, "that none of us *knew*, right?"

Rush looked away.

Jackson and Vala had grown quiet.

"I didn't know," Young said, "Perry didn't know. Jackson didn't know."

Jackson said nothing, his gaze direct and transparent.

"As if any of you would come up with something so practical," Rush said coolly. "It doesn't matter to me who knew that the fucking game was a fucking front for a fucking desperate scheme to replace me in the event of my inevitable abduction. They should have come to me directly. I could have given them names of people to contact. In fact, I *will*. I plan to provide Ms. Armstrong with just such a list. Do they think that cryptographers spring *de novo* from the fucking ether? Do they think *anyone* is going to solve the series of gate cyphers in their inane game? Do they think that even if, in the astronomically unlikely event that someone *did* solve the cypher set in game, that those rendered cyphers would translate flawlessly to the real world? In actuality, solving a cypher, on at least one occasion, physically transported the solver to a new location in order to obtain a second factor. How the fuck would one build such an

outcome into a virtual interface and expect it to function as even an *approximation* of its real world equivalent? By determined application of willful ignorance? By misguided wishing? By praying to the gods of determined patriotism?"

"False gods, gorgeous," Vala said, quietly. "All the gods around here are false."

Rush took a deep breath. "I like their plan," he said finally. "I like it. I do."

"I hate it," Jackson said.

"Me too," Vala said.

"Can't say I'm a fan," Young added.

"That's because all of you have terrible taste," Rush said. "I need to speak with Dr. Perry."

"Text me when you're good to go," Young said. "I'll give you a ride."

"Yes yes," Rush replied, brushing past him to leave the room.

"Hotshot, do not even *think* of calling a cab," Young called after him.

Rush ignored him and stalked down the hallway towards the elevators.

Chapter Thirty Two

The lights in the bar weren't on, but the sixteen hundred sunlight came in slantwise and sufficient through the open windows, gleaming off the keys of the piano in the corner and off the polished wooden surfaces of bar and barstools. In the back, vacant pool tables waited for the inevitable, incoming crowd from Cheyenne Mountain.

"This isn't really a thing that I do," Jackson said, the words barely audible over the irregular rise and fall of happy hour at O'Malley's.

Young took a sip of his beer and checked his phone for something like the eighth time in fifteen minutes. "What. Happy hour? Leaving work before seventeen hundred hours? Drinking beer, generally? Taking an interest in eccentric mathematical hotshots?" he asked.

"Yeah," Jackson said, staring at a bottle of a local, limited-edition microbrew.

Young was also drinking a local beer.

It was called '*Coors*'.

Young looked around the room, taking in the thickening crowd of SGC personnel. SG-14 seemed to be at the center of some kind of expanding knot of celebration. There were matching T-shirts in abundance that showed a sequence of four items: the number 14, a carrot, a wrought-iron representation of a picket fence or some other bullshit, and then a worm on a fishing hook.

"These T-shirts are getting really obscure," Young said.

Jackson glanced across the room. "Fourteen-carat 'gate bait'," the other man said, without missing a beat.

"You," Young said. "are just *lethal* at crossword puzzles, yeah?"

"Eh, I'm hit or miss," Jackson replied, still staring at his beer. "I'm better with abstruse wall carvings."

"Wall carvings," Young repeated, taking a sip of his beer. "Yeah. Seems like those tend to rouse a hell of a lot of hell around here."

"I should have been a cruciverbalist," Jackson agreed, his thumb rubbing the edge of the label on his beer bottle.

Young picked up his phone and texted Rush. ::You're still on base, right?::

"How are you doing with all of this?" Jackson asked, his gaze directed at the surface of the table.

Young sipped his beer, studying the defeated line of the other man's shoulders, wondering who Jackson was when he wasn't the place where the galaxy piled its problems and its anger and its injustice. He wondered why Jackson had wanted to come here. Was it to ask Young the question he had just asked—or to ask him something else entirely.

"It's fucked up," Young said. "No two ways about it. How are *you* doing?"

"Me?" Jackson said, glancing at Young. "I'm fine."

"Yeah?" Young said.

"I hate it," Jackson said, quietly conversational.

"Their plan?" Young asked. "The game?"

"*Mathématique*," Jackson said, closing his eyes and letting the word wrench its way out of him in an accented cascade. "Not just the expansion pack, but all the psychologically poisonous ephemera that accompany it. The entire project is grounded in the wrong place. Not in exploration, but in warfare. In fear. In desperation."

"I'm getting that," Young said.

"I should have seen this coming," Jackson said, edging his thumbnail beneath the label on his bottle of microbrew and teasing it up. "I should have seen it coming and warned him. I *would* have—I just—I don't pay attention to anything associated with that stupid *Wormhole Extreme* franchise. Not the movies. Not the merchandise. Not the game. But this—encoding the actual cyphers into the thing—I should have realized. I should have known that this was something else."

"I don't think I'd have seen it at all if he hadn't pointed it out," Young admitted.

"He's perceptive," Jackson said, peeling off a strip of the label on his bottle.

"And a little too much of an impolitic ass for his own good," Young added, his eyes sweeping over the array of half-filled bottles of Scotch and Irish whiskey behind the bar.

"I wonder," Jackson murmured. "You heard what Sheppard said at the post-Altera debriefing."

"Underestimated in every regard," Young said. "Maybe."

"I think it's probably true," Jackson said, "but that assessment didn't do Rush any favors."

Young's phone vibrated.

::No, catching a lift to the fucking Andromeda galaxy::

"You ever think," Young began cautiously, "that we should just—let the guy do what he wants to do? Let him be who he is?"

"It's already too late for that," Jackson whispered, peeling away another strip of multicolored label. "He is—he was—he didn't *want* this. He said no. When I approached him, he said no."

"Yeah," Young replied, "but he changed his mind."

"When they see the gate," Jackson whispered, "they all change their minds. I did. Sam did. Lam did. Volker did. No one has ever said no. Telford showed him the schematics. The software and the hardware."

"I remember," Young said. "It was in the files."

"The 'hard sell,'" Jackson murmured, working his thumbnail beneath a wide swath of the label on his beer bottle. "How well do you know him?"

"David?" Young asked.

"I wish you hadn't come," David whispers, choking on ash, a dark silhouette in turbid air. "I wish to god you hadn't."

Jackson nodded silently.

"Well," Young said. "Very well."

"Do you think that there is *any* chance," Jackson said, his eyes closed, his expression twisted, "that Telford is the one who—"

"No," Young said quietly. "*David?* Do you—" his throat closed. "Do you know," he said, regrouping, his voice a rough whisper, "how *much* he hates them? Do you have *any* idea? I've never met anyone who hates them so much."

"He's not the one who came back with a broken spine," Jackson said, penetrating. Steady.

"There are worse things than a broken back," Young said. "Things much, much worse."

"Oh I know," Jackson said. "I know that."

"Yeah," Young said, unable to meet the other man's eyes. "I guess you would."

"I know what they did to him," Jackson whispered. "I've been tortured by the goa'uld. I've been murdered. I've been brought back to be tortured again. I've been toyed with. I've been manipulated. I've been forced to act against my will. And I know—that hatred, that real," Jackson paused, the word fading down into a sound of strangulation, "*real* hatred, grants you immunity from nothing but peace."

Young couldn't speak.

Jackson peeled another strip of label away from his beer bottle.

"Yup," Young said finally.

"He—" Jackson said, "David is a consequentialist. He judges the morality of an act by its consequences and I can't—" he looked away, running a hand through his hair, "I can't say he's wrong. I can't, categorically, say he's wrong to do that. Not now. Not when we can't trust ourselves, our motives, to really be our own. And even if we *could*—I've made similar choices, I—I—I've weighted outcomes, I can't *claim* anything, I can't know anything for sure, I can't—" Jackson broke off, his gaze fixed on the half-empty bottles above the bar.

"But you're not like that," Young murmured. "A consequentialist, I mean."

"Of *course* I am. I'm no better than anyone. No more trustworthy. No less selfish. Deontology is the provenance of blind ideologues and wishful thinkers." Jackson peeled away another strip of label. "David is right about me. I created the situation we find ourselves in. I attracted attention. I indirectly made your neighbor the resource he is. I see a box labeled 'do not open', and what do I do? I open it. That's what I do. You know where the word 'sin' comes from? The root is 'sons'. It comes from Latin. It comes from Ancient. It means guilty."

"The only thing you did is what we all do," Young said. "What we *all* do. Every day."

"He's going to unlock it," Jackson whispered. "Your neighbor. I know he'll do it. I can feel it."

"I don't think we can stop him," Young said. "I don't know that we should."

"One day we will open the box that will unmake us," Jackson said, shredding the peeled remains of his label. "It's happened before. In other realities."

"Well," Young said, sipping his beer, "we're a box opening people. It's what we do. I'd rather people like you and Carter and McKay open them than anyone else."

"Maybe," Jackson said, completing his stepwise removal of the label.

"Daniel," Young said, "don't go looking for a sword to fall on. They're all over the place these days."

"The trick," Jackson said, absently toying with his pile of shredded paper, "is picking the right sword."

Young's phone vibrated again and he flipped it over to reveal another text from Rush. ::15 min::

"You ever think about—talking to psych about any of this?" Young asked. "I hear Mackenzie is pretty good."

"Haven't you heard?" Jackson asked. "I don't talk to psych."

"Okay," Young said.

"Don't suggest that again," Jackson whispered.

"Okay," Young said. "I didn't mean to imply—"

"I know," Jackson said, looking away. "It's all right."

He found Rush in Perry's office, his feet on her desk, gesturing vaguely at a midair display. They glanced at him when he appeared in the doorway, but did not interrupt their discussion. Young leaned against a wall, listening to them go on about fluid turbulence in a way that suggested some kind of mathematical innuendo. Or, maybe it was just mathematical puns? He wasn't sure. Fluid turbulence wasn't really his area. Whatever they were discussing, it was pretty clear that both Rush and Perry looked significantly less upset than they had earlier in the afternoon. Young shifted, trying to take his weight off his left side.

"I realize your schedule is somewhat chaotic," Rush said, "but I'd appreciate at least a partial differential of the available possibilities regarding solution sets that might fulfill the defined criteria for describing turbulence in the event horizon."

"I'd be Stoked to contribute," Perry replied, looking strangely pleased by Rush's mostly incomprehensible sentence. "My schedule may be chaotic but I Navier said it wasn't fluid."

"That's atrocious," Rush replied, giving Perry a half smile. He glanced up at Young. "I have to leave. Do try to streamline things for me, won't you?"

"If by 'atrocious' you mean 'worthy of envy'," Perry said. "I'll work on it continuously. I'm sure it will all go smoothly."

"Yes I'd hate for you to run into any kind of turbulence."

"Oh I doubt that will happen," Perry said. "I know how it goes. Big whirls have little whirls that feed on their velocity, and little whirls have lesser whirls and so on—"

"To viscosity," Rush finished, settling his bag over his shoulders. "Write me a textbook on wormhole physics, won't you? I know next to nothing about the operating principles of ninety percent of Ancient technology."

"Do you *need* to know?" Perry asked. "Go write a formal proof and win another medal. Leave the practical applications of fluid turbulence to the real scientists."

"You realize that *mathematics* is the apex of the quantitative hierarchy, correct?"

"But physics is cooler." Perry shifted her gaze from Rush to Young, her smile widening fractionally. "Am I right, colonel?"

"Um," Young said, "I prefer ice hockey myself."

Rush and Perry looked at him in disappointed silence before switching their gazes back toward one another.

"Besides," Perry continued, "it's not a hierarchy, it's a pendulum, and pure math swings back around to land right next to abstract art."

"It most certainly does not," Rush said, sounding affronted.

"And on that note," Young said, "I think we should get out of here. Before you guys get started with pendulum-related puns."

"Please. We only periodically pun," Perry proclaimed. "Besides, pendulum puns are pretty paltry. I mean, you can't do much with a 'massless rod' or a 'rigid body problem'. Nowhere to take *those*."

"And let's keep it that way, shall we?" Rush asked, looking at Perry over the tops of his glasses. He stepped carefully past Young and out into the hall, heading toward the elevators.

"Bye," Perry called after him. "I guess."

Young looked after him, but did not immediately follow. "He's not really a guy for pleasantries, is he?"

"No," Perry said, clearing her throat. "But I'm not complaining."

"You think he's okay?" Young asked Perry quietly.

"I don't know," Perry replied, looking back at him, serious and still across the clean expanse of her desk. "That project—I had no idea."

"Are *you* okay?" Young asked.

"I don't know," Perry whispered.

"I get *that*," Young said.

"You'd better go," Perry said, tilting her head in the direction of Rush had gone.

Young nodded and peeled himself away from the doorframe. He limped through the halls, barely avoiding a stressed civilian kid who had no doubt just translated his first civilization-level death threat. He caught up with his neighbor in front of the central elevators. Rush had one hand pressed to the side of his temple and was using the other to dig through his bag.

"How's it going, hotshot?" Young asked. "You get all your stuff done?"

"Pointless meeting, check. Chess tutorial, check. Fluid dynamics consult, check," Rush said, pulling Young's sunglasses out of his bag. "Do you have cooking wine? I feel like lighting something on fire."

"Um," Young said.

"Rum, also, would be acceptable."

"I *do* have rum," Young said, "but I don't think my kitchen is really the kind of kitchen where you can just go lighting pans of things on fire—"

"Yes I'm sure you do think that," Rush said, his eyes fixed on the closed doors of the elevator, the sunglasses held ready and unfolded in his hand.

Young considered pressing Rush into talking about what had happened that afternoon, about what he thought of the SGC and its institutional cruelties and kindnesses, what he thought of Jackson, what he thought of Telford, what had happened to his wife, why he was here rather than on Atlantis, which seemed like the only place in the universe where he might have a chance of anything approaching a normal existence—

But he said none of those things.

"Headache?" he asked.

"Yes," Rush replied.

"You get an awful lot of headaches, hotshot. You ever get anyone to look at that?"

"Yes," Rush said.

"And—"

"I'm prone to headaches."

"Maybe if you'd *sleep* on a regular basis—"

"Excuse me, did I solicit your advice at some point and then suffer a memory lapse?" Rush asked politely.

"Not really, no," Young said.

"Well, given that we've set a precedent of unsolicited advice, I suggest you content yourself with silent contemplation of your incipient dinner, or 'ice hockey', or whatever it is you think about when not speaking."

"Young seven, Rush four."

"I didn't say it," Rush said, glancing at him with narrowed eyes.

"Hate to break it to you but, 'I suggest you content yourself with silent contemplation' is just 'shut up' with some verbal window dressing. I'm wiping the floor with you here, hotshot."

"Paraphrased, bastardized, or otherwise altered versions of the words 'shut up' were not covered under your initial description of the rules of this game and if you want to implement them I'm going to need fair warning."

"Fine," Young said. "Consider yourself warned."

"Noted."

The elevator opened.

"So," Young said. "Lighting things on fire. Why do I get the feeling that this is a longstanding hobby of yours?"

"I can't imagine," Rush replied.

After the drive home though the scorching remains of the day, after the steak Diane and the minefield of dinner conversation with Rush, after the phone call to Mitchell and the three shots of Jack Daniels it took for him to force his mind into a state where he could sleep—

After all of that, he dreamt of David Telford.

Telford leans against the skimmer's inner door, his skin pale where it's not covered with blood. His hand, trembling, is pressed against his face as they speed over the darkened, ash-choked surface of the planet toward the place where their concealed ship lies in wait for them.

Telford does not speak. Maybe he cannot.

"I came to get you out," Young whispers, his voice too loud in the stillness of the small craft.

"I know," Telford says, his voice a ragged smear across the thick and turbid air between them. They proceed with a quiet whir of engines toward the source of the darkness that spreads over the city.

Behind them reddish light throws dark structures into chiaroscured relief.

"I'll never be able to thank you. To repay you."

"Things aren't like that between us," Young says. "This falls outside the bounds of debt. Outside repay."

The defenses on the city limits activate. Warnings flare in gold; goa'uld script ignites beneath his fingers as he directs the craft. Behind him, a swarm of drones and speeders fades in and out of ash-filled air. He stays ahead of them, a deft hand atop the bright controls. The only person who has ever matched him when it comes to piloting is Sheppard. He's light years, thousands of flight hours, and endless Earth-based simulations ahead of the best that the Lucian Alliance can offer. On any other day they wouldn't be able to touch him.

But he's low on fuel.

And there are so many of them.

His sensors are choked with ash.

"It wasn't supposed to happen like this," Telford says, his eyes dark, his expression agonized. He is shaking as he shifts to look at the displays beneath Young's hands.

A slantwise glance reveals the bleeding, blurred insignia of Sixth House, cut crudely into the other man's chest before Telford shifts the remains of his jacket to shield it from Young's view.

It will scar.

It's meant to.

"I know," Young replies, his eyes on the sensors. "Did they give you the drug?"

"I don't think they did," Telford says, "but then, how would I know?"

Young says nothing.

The whir of the small craft becomes a whine as the ash in the air thickens. He can feel the motor struggle with a valiance that seems out of place for an engine trapped beneath the ostentation of the goa'uld. The controls have become sluggish.

The forces of the Sixth House arrayed behind them begin to fire.

"Where's your tel'tak?" Telford asks conversationally, as if he's merely curious, as if nothing crucial rides upon Young's answer.

"Nearby," he says, the word a calming pull.

Telford smiles but his eyes are haunted. One hand is pressing down upon the mark that has been cut into his chest.

Young knows it's not the only such mark he bears.

A well-placed shot by their pursuit silences the overburdened engine. Silhouettes of darkened rocks consume his field of view. He does all that he can to keep the craft aloft, to keep it from rolling, to twist it, to align himself, instead of David, on the side that will meet the unyielding rise of red-black slopes.

When he regains consciousness, he is lying on his back in dust.

"Oh no," Telford breathes. "Oh Christ. Oh shit. Oh fuck." Ash falls like snow, atop the rock, the metal. It settles over the dark of Telford's hair, a pale corolla. "They're coming."

The land is red. Like rust, or ancient blood. The air is choked, debris-flakes fall in windswept waves.

Young had chosen this direction for two reasons.

One—he had hoped they wouldn't follow.

Two—if they did follow, there was still a chance that the Alliance would not succeed. There was a chance that they would all die here. While not ideal, it is an outcome with which he can live. At least—for now.

"They're coming," Telford repeats, but his voice has calmed and hardened. "Where did you leave the ship?"

Young spits blood into the reddish dirt and swallows. "Where do you think?" he replies with a trace of real amusement in a smile that can look nothing but ghastly. His eyes flick upwards, toward the steep slope of the active volcano ahead of them.

Telford follows his gaze, shaking, bloodied, barely on his feet, but undefeated, and then looks back down at him, the corners of his mouth quirking upward. "You know, you're a priceless son of a bitch at times."

Young laughs and he feels the pain from his spine to his toes.

"Which way is it going to be?" Telford asks, not looking at him. "The hard way, or the hard way?"

"The hard way," Young grinds out. "It's always the hard way."

"Yeah," Telford says, bracing his shoulder against the twisted wreckage of their downed craft. "Good answer." He pulls out an alien first aid kit, but Young shakes his head.

"No," he says. No use, is what he doesn't say.

Telford pulls him up and the pain is unbearable, untenable, unbelievable, past endurance, and he cannot stand, he cannot speak, he can only dig his hands into Telford's uniform. Telford, who is injured, who has been tortured, who has been pushed past any ledge that words might name, who can barely support himself.

They are back upon the ground.

"What was I thinking," Telford chokes, trying to breathe through ash. "We're doing this the hard way."

"The hard way," Young repeats, tasting blood and sulfur. "What's the hard way?"

"Clawing, crawling your way to an objective," Telford rasps, his hand closing over Young's as he drags them forward. "The struggle in the dirt."

Young's fingers dig into loose earth. He drags himself through the darkening landscape, up the steep slope.

Their progress is slow, hand over agonizing hand while his bad leg trails uselessly behind him.

"I wish you hadn't come," Telford whispers, choking on ash, a dark, dynamic force in turbid air. "I wish to god you hadn't."

"It's too late for that," Young replies.

The atmosphere is searing.

Beside him, Telford coughs, his fists tightening uselessly into gray dust, trying to gain traction. Failing.

"We are not going to die here," he says.

Young coughs. "No?"

"No," Telford replies. I will not allow us to die here."

"It's not looking good," Young says.

"Yes it is," Telford says. "Because you know—" he breaks off, shielding his face from a blast of heated air.

Young has never been in this much agony.

He is cold.

He is hot.

He cannot breathe.

But he must move.

He must keep going.

He must keep going or kill himself.

He cannot wait for the Lucian Alliance.

Neither of them can.

Because the Alliance will not kill them.

"I think Sanchez might have a crush on me," Telford says, dragging him, shoving him up the barren, rocky slope. "What are your thoughts—" he breaks off, coughing in the acrid air, destroying the cadence of his question, "—on this."

"You wish," Young says through blood, his free hand sliding easily over stone as fingernails scramble for purchase on loose rock.

"What do you mean I wish?" Telford asks.

"Everyone—" Young seizes up with a wave of pain, "wants to date a combat engineer."

"Yeah," Telford says, barely audible, barely visible through obscure air. "Short though. I don't know about the hair."

Young inhales slowly, trying to breathe past blood. "You're a dick. Anyone ever tell you that?"

"I save your life, and this is the thanks I get?"

"Still a dick," Young rasps.

Telford's breathing is irregular and harsh.

"If you make it back," Young says, "and I don't—"

"Shut the fuck up."

"Keep an eye on Emily, yeah?"

"Yeah," Telford gasps, "but no. We're both going back. That's the deal."

"That's the deal, is it?"

"That's the deal."

Young woke, sitting with a reflexive, agonizing pull of his lower back, his hands coming to his chest, trying to soothe the ache in his lungs that was nothing more than a memory.

It took him a moment to orient himself in the unfamiliar dark of his apartment.

He was on his couch, covered with sweat. In the air he could still smell the lingering traces of the dinner Rush had cooked, hours before.

Emily's absence was more acutely unbearable than it had been for months.

He buried his face in his hands.

Chapter Thirty Three

The wind came from the west. Rush stood at his open window, looking into the quiet dark. The night spread out below and before him like a thing made liquid, shadows pooling in places where the sterile sheen of streetlights did not penetrate. He rested his elbows on the narrow sill and reached back with one hand to thread fingers beneath the collared neck of his dress shirt. The pale glare of the material reflected and smoothed the stroboscopic tremor of the lights below. Even with the glow of edgeless light pollution, the stars were overtly apparent. The central plane of the galaxy cut faintly through the emptiness of space like the specter of a road.

Somewhere, miles from here, the mountains were on fire. Young had told him that such things happened often in late summer, when rain had been infrequent and the wind was strong. Smoke-scented air flowed around and past him, creating turbulent eddies at the edges of dark corners in his spartan apartment. The breeze was dry and warm and troubled the ends of his over-long hair and the uncuffed edges of his shirt before stirring lightweight ephemera in the room behind him. He had opened every window he possessed. The wind was something he could listen to.

The sound of the wind was like the sound of the sea, but it was possessed of a merciful irregularity that could not be completed or anticipated by his mind. He shut his eyes, blocking out the silvered glaze of streetlight and starlight, as he listened to the rush and ebb of the air interacting with his clothing and his skin. It had cooled the wooden paneling beneath his bare feet. The pressures of air were delicate and immaterial when compared to the coarse forces of water. He—did not like the water.

The *air* though was a different matter—volatile, so diffuse that it was invisible to the human visual system, scattering blue light, venerated as a classical element, studied by the alchemists who granted it an iconography derived from systems ancient and Ancient, until finally it had been parsed and studied and reclaimed for rationality by Black, by Priestly, by Cavendish, and by Lavoisier.

We must trust to nothing but facts.

He tried to work out the pain in his neck through the careful and limited application of one-handed pressure. It wouldn't work. It never did. He'd had his current headache for a long time. It had been over a week since the meeting with Senator Armstrong and, he wasn't certain, but he couldn't remember shaking it at any point in the intervening interval of days. He might finally banish it if only he could sleep—really sleep, rather

than succumbing to short bursts of exhaustion that overtook him in the shaded hours of the morning.

But it wasn't necessary. His current raging insomnia was comfortably classified as acceptable. Because he was nearly done. On the wall near the window, the outline of his solution to the seventh cypher stood out in dark streaks of permanent ink atop a deformable surface of layered paint. It would take him less than a day to convert it into something Carter could give an empirical try.

The coding required for *Mathématique* had been laid out over the course of three careful days and nights. It was now finished and turned over to Perry, who had, in return, offered him a solution to the eighth cypher. The one he'd outsourced to her. And so. Academic dregs were all that stood between him and the ninth chevron. The final piece.

He would gather those trailing threads of theory and thought and braid them into something practical, something that someone like Carter or Perry could unravel and reweave into the architecture of systems that he doubted he had the time or the security clearance to learn before his default affiliation was stripped from him in an abduction attempt that, if he was correctly interpreting the institutional policies of the SGC, seemed something just short of inevitable. But perhaps he was wrong about that.

He ran a hand through his hair, and looked out over the uninspired parking lot. This was not a place that he had ever wanted to be, this suburban, unattractive waste of spatial resources built atop a dry and directionless landscape. Rush preferred San Francisco with an intensity that was identifiable to him only in retrospect. Spread out over hills in a glittering technological crescent that encompassed Berkeley and Stanford and Silicon Valley, it unfurled from the shore of the sea in the closest equivalent to Altera that humanity possessed. It was where he had belonged—at the merging edge of the biological and the mechanical. He belonged there still.

Extending one hand into the darkness of the open air, he felt the wind pass cool and laminar over the plane of his palm. For the first time in a long time, he ceased the fight against the inherent proclivities of his subconscious. She would have hated it here. Gloria. Perhaps that was why *he* hated it now.

There would have been nothing here for her, had they come here together, had she followed him, *again*. He wasn't sure she would have. She hadn't been happy in San Francisco, hadn't been happy in America, hadn't been happy so far from her family and from everyone she had known and almost everyone she had loved.

What was it that was the difficult part—that made it nearly impossible to do and think the thousand things that it was nearly impossible for him to do and think—what was it that infected the chopping of vegetables, the presence of a continuous tone, the torturous intolerability of music, the acquiescence to a daily routine—

What was it.

He would like to know.

Grief should be reductive, like everything else. Grief should lend itself to parsimonious analysis. It was nothing but the biochemistry of separation coupled with a conscious understanding of loss and there was nothing, *nothing* so fucking mysterious about that—it was simply a heuristically hellish and meaningless state of mind that everyone said would get better with time. There was no resolution to grief. No solution set, no moment of insight, no result at the end of grinding, miserable endurance. There was only a slow, inglorious fade, which was, itself, another kind of loss. He was uninterested in any such dénouement. Such a thing seemed, to him, nothing but disrespectful. It was best to continue. Truth was laid bare in the process of abstraction and that was a pursuit that did not end, that never would, that could not be taken from any inquiring mind by vagaries of circumstance.

He was certain that mathematics was the kindest fucking thing in the known universe.

She looks out into sheeting rain, lit up in a glittering curtain by reflected streetlights. Her hair is plastered to her forehead in self-organizing tendrils. The raincoat she wears is a pale blue.

"It's really chucking it down out there," she says, glancing at him and then away, into drenching darkness.

"Too fuckin' right," he says.

She raises an eyebrow with arresting, amused disdain, as if she has seen so much of the world that she can bin even what she doesn't like with a detached, ironic affection.

"Too right," he amends, catching her gaze and holding it, already climbing out of the bin she's put him in.

She looks down and then back. "Are you a student?" she asks.

"Yes," he says, remembering to give the word the crisp elocution it deserves. "You?"

She nods. "Magdalen," she says.

"Floreat Magdalena," he replies.

"Quite," she says, and looks at him in evident expectation.

"New College," he says in response to her unasked question.

"Manners Maykth Man," she replies.

"Yes well, if only I had an umbrella to offer you."

"You're right round the corner," she says. "You'll be out of this mess in no time." She looks again at the sheeting rain.

"I'm not going back," he says.

They are silent for a moment, looking at one another.

"You realize that sounds terribly—" she says.

"Somewhat dire, yes," he finishes. "What I mean is, I'm already late for work."

"Thank god," she says. "I'm through with interventions for the night."

He raises his eyebrows.

"Long story," she says, looking at the rain, "featuring a rubbish pianist."

"Typical," he says.

"What is?" she asks.

"Disappointment," he says, giving her a crooked smile.

"You've an awfully nice smile for a cynic," she says, smiling back at him.

"I prefer 'pragmatist'," he replies. "What've you got there, then?" he asks her, his eyes flashing toward the case strapped across her back.

"A violin," she says.

"You study music?"

"Yes," she says.

"Mmm," he says.

"What," she demands.

"Nothing," he says, shrugging. "Seems a bit useless, that's all."

"Music is the final abstraction," she snaps, "the last, thin, sensory barrier between you and universal truth."

He smiles at her then, really smiles, and if there is a faintly predatory edge to it he cannot help it—it's who he is.

"No," he says. "That would be maths. What's your name?"

"Gloria," she says.

Right then. Of course it is. Gloria. Who names a child Gloria?

"Nicholas Rush," he says. "Tell me, is it terribly difficult to become a pianist?"

"Yes," she says.

That settles it.

"I'm sure I could do it."

"I'm sure you couldn't."

"You need a new one," he says. "A new pianist."

"I don't," she says, but she's turning away, her mouth twisting with the smile she's trying to hide. "I don't."

They look out at the coruscating curtain of rain.

"It's not likely to get better," she says. "I should head back."

"I'm going your way," he replies, even though he is not.

Rush looked up, pulling himself forcibly out of spreading memory, grounding himself in the press of a planar surface against his elbows braced atop the windowsill and in the heel of one hand dug into his eye socket as the wind flowed over and past him through his compartmentalized rooms.

He missed the rain.

It hadn't rained once during his tenure here.

Not once.

Every day was the same.

Hot and bright and merciless.

It was all right.

The problem was only that—

"I can see you working your way to spontaneous human combustion," Gloria whispers in his ear, her hair finding its way inside his collar as her fingers close around his elbow. "I have six words for you, sweetheart."

He doesn't move, and they stand motionless in the midst of the fluxing knot of human boredom that ebbs and flows around them with varying tangential shear. "Last summer," she says, her lips grazing the shell of his ear, "set theory, six hours."

Well yes. She has a point. She usually does.

"Be charming," she says, "or, failing that, go tell the man with the purple tie over there that you detest Brahms and see what happens." She raises that damned eyebrow at him.

He flashes her a smile, quick and wild, as he acquires a flute of champagne from a passing tray with a deftness that surprises the circulating member of the wait staff. He looks back at her, readjusting his glasses. "I don't detest Brahms," he says archly.

"Yes you do," she says, the words a melody of provocation. "Of course you do."

She abandons him with a conspiratorial tightening of fingers before being swept into a hug by someone who is Russian and large and like as not plays the fucking bass.

He shakes his hair back and sets his sights on the authoritative figure in the florid purple tie.

Biochemistry.

That was all that this was—the biochemical sequelae of loss.

He took a deep breath, trying to offer no resistance to the dry darkness of the air.

Everyone died.

That was the way of things.

It was not an observation that carried any kind of material profundity.

Gloria was dead, and he would follow her.

This was a fundamental truth of human existence.

Perhaps it had been different for the Ancients.

For some of them.

If he had stayed on Altera, if he had joined with the presence that called to him from the center of the city—would that have been a death, or would it have been something *else*, some alternative pathway that preserved his wave function past the point of its physical dissolution.

He was grateful he'd had the cyphers in these past weeks, grateful that David had shown them to him, grateful that he'd found another thing to anchor to the sphere of human knowledge, even if the ninth was the rock upon which he would most likely scuttle his mind. He examined the idea of holding nothing in reserve and found that it appealed to him. Removing oneself from the subjectivity of one's own subjective experiences seemed ideal, if it could be managed. Subjectivity did not matter. That was what made it subjective.

Sheppard is dead upon the floor, the center of a bloodied halation that never seems to dry. Rush will shortly join him. He looks at mirrored features, calm and unafraid, on the other side of a triple-bladed Ancient knife.

"I despise you," he breathes against the blade. His hands have closed around a frame, a wrist, that is his own.

He tries to redirect the downward pressing edge.

"But how could it be otherwise," his doppelgänger asks, "when you despise yourself?"

"Your culture is a cruelty," he gasps.

"And yours is not?"

"No," he breathes.

"Liar," his opponent says, and his eyes are dark. "What happened to your brother?"

He cannot speak against the blade.

He flinched in the night air, his hand coming halfway to his throat before falling away and returning to his shoulder as his wildly beating heart began to slow. Subjectivity did not matter. That was what made it subjective. His logic was becoming circular. This was never a good sign.

What Gloria would have thought of this—what she would have thought of him here, caught in a hideously impersonal set of clean white rooms with the trappings of a life he couldn't bear to think of boxed behind a door he tried not to enter—was now immaterial.

What his *brother* might have thought was even more irrelevant.

One could not disappoint the dead.

That was true.

That was axiom.

The dead were beyond disappointment, or compassion, or fucking pity.

Because they were dead.

That was the point.

He chews mercilessly on the tip of a pen, contemplating the spread of mathematics in front of him, trying to stay focused and fucking quit smoking at the same time, which he finds mostly impossible. It's never going to take; he knows it.

"Nick," Gloria says.

He does not look up.

"Nicholas," she says.

He still does not look up.

"Sweetheart," she says.

He still does not look up.

She flicks an elastic hair band at him.

He flicks it back at her, keeping his eyes on the pages in front of him.

"Pay attention to me," Gloria says, "you useless excuse for a spouse."

"I'm busy," he says around the pen in his teeth, doing an absolutely shite job at keeping a straight face. "Terribly, terribly occupied."

"Oh," she says, standing. "I see. Yes, you very much have the look of a man who's turning information security on its head. I'll just start supper, then, shall I?"

He catches her wrist as she walks past him, a fast and unerring closing of fingers around the fine knit of a pale blue jumper.

"Make something fair fucking pretentious, will you?" he says, shoving his chair back with the judicious press of his left foot and pulling her into his lap. "What do the American Intelligentsia eat?"

"I don't think there are American Intelligentsia," she says.

"Just try to think of them as the Scottish diaspora," he replies.

"Not better," she replies harassing the collar of his shirt under cover of straightening it.

"By all means," he says, "crash ahead. Insult my people. See what effect such comments have on the remainder of your evening."

"You have a firmly established track record of absolutely no follow through in the 'nebulous threats' department," she pronounces.

"That's it," he snaps. "To the kitchen with you. I have maths to do."

"But—" she breaks off as he stands, forcing her to her feet in a reactive slide of displaced concert violinist.

"I expect something extremely impressive," he says, sitting again, and readjusting his glasses.

"But—" she says,

He points at the kitchen with his nicotineless pen.

She does not go to the kitchen. Instead, she steals his papers.

He chases her.

He leaned forward, pressing his elbow against the sill of the window and driving his hand continuously into his eye as the wind created cool pathways over his skin and through his hair and under his shirt. He could tear himself apart against anything that suited him. And he would. Objectively, it did not matter. This was why it was time to begin to consider his visceral avoidance of music. This was why it was time to attempt some kind of recovery or, failing that, at least some kind of damage control. In order to attempt an untangling of the intricacies of Ancient crystal resonance frequencies, he was going to need his own, atypically considerable, grounding in the subject.

Sound and silence.

Melody and harmony.

Rhythm, dynamics, timber, and texture.

It had been a thing both closed and unknown, and so it had become a thing that he had wanted.

He is not certain what proper audition protocol might be. More to the point, he's not certain that there is a protocol for attempting to usurp a position that is not technically open or advertised in any way. He is also late.

These reasons, though there may be others, are probably why nearly everyone who is in the room when he arrives looks either fair fucking vexed or pure dead pitying, as if he has no idea that he's about to get either his heart or his arse handed to him on a platter. However. He considers such an outcome to be un-fucking-likely. He says nothing, because anything he says is just going to compound everything about this situation that is inappropriate.

He stalks through the hostile room, sits down, and bursts into the opening of Schubert's Impromptu in G-flat major, his left hand fluttering through broken triads and his right hand creating melodic space. He is not flawless but he likes to think there is some artistry in the way that he has circumnavigated portions of the piece that he did not have time to perfect and in the way he fades it straight into Beethoven, transitioning over with a bridge of his own design that seems to cause some stir in the room. Perhaps such things are frowned upon.

"Who are you, really," is all Gloria says when he is done, in a way that implies she does not expect an answer.

"I expect I'm your new accompanist," he says, answering her anyway.

"This is highly unconventional," her tutor says.

Privately, Rush agrees. The medieval solution to a problem such as this would have been to break the accompanist's hands. Oxford prides itself on its medieval roots. But he has no such nostalgia for bygone barbarism. "I heard there was a difference of opinion," Rush says, "and I thought I might offer my services."

"And I accept," Gloria says, before any institutional interference can keep them apart.

"That's your prerogative," her tutor says.

The former accompanist leaves with poor grace as Gloria hands Rush the sheet music to Schubert's Grand Duo. "An auspicious title," he says.

"I've always thought so," she replies.

She would have been able to help him, he reflected, leaning out his window as the wind tormented his unfastened shirtsleeves.

She would have done it in two ways.

The first was the most crucial.

If she hadn't died, he wouldn't find the idea of resonant frequencies mentally intolerable. For him, music had always been both desired and difficult to bear. He wasn't wired for it, or that had been that's what he had presumed. It had turned out that in fact his problem was the reverse. He was wired for it too well. If he had begun the study of it when he had begun his study of mathematics—well, there was no point in speculating. There had been no fucking chance of that, because he'd been born in a place uglier than the one he'd clawed and charmed his way into, a place where the precocious were not given lessons, at least not of the musical variety. So, he'd started late. He'd begun to play at eighteen, and, as a consequence, everything he'd tied up to music was tied up to her. He hadn't realized that. Neither had she.

That might have been the thing that would have distressed her most about his current situation. That, or being an intergalactic abduction target. Yes well fine, she likely would have considered the latter to be more of a material concern. If she'd *had* concerns, which she *didn't*, because she was *dead*.

The second way she would have helped him was obvious.

Given a piano, he could reproduce Alteran chords and construct at least a part of Ancient musical theory from their intervals, but *she* would have been better. She would have been *much* better. They could have collaborated. She would have liked that.

He sits alone in the study at the front of the house, his eyes burning, staring at the screen of his laptop, meticulously unfolding his thoughts in a logical progression, waiting for the flash of lateral insight that accompanies such mental origami.

The logical base and the lateral step—both are equally important.

Relativizing, natural, and algebrizing proofs have, thus far, been insufficient. He finds the demonstration that $IP=PSPACE$ somewhat heartening but he also agrees with the consensus in the field that arithmetization is not going to be workable when approaching the $P=NP$ proof.

"One in E minor runs through my head," Gloria whispers in his ear.

He startles so violently that a slow avalanche of scholarly miscellanea hits the floor in a protracted cascade of pens and paper that he doesn't see, he only hears, because he has his eyes closed in valiant attempt to calm the fuck down.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," she says, her voice no longer a whisper, now pitched as something overtly soothing. Her hands close over his shoulders as she manages to insert herself between him and the back of the chair, pressing herself against his back as she straddles the wood in a position that can't be comfortable. "You just make it so easy."

"Yes well," he says, unable to mount any kind of verbal defense after having been so abruptly diverted from his train of thought. His attentional focus has its own inertia and, in the absence of considering computational complexity, it's not entirely sure where it should direct itself.

"You would not survive as in a hunter-gatherer society," she says, hooking her chin over his shoulder and wrapping her arms around him. "Some mastodon would come by and eat you while you were inventing the lever."

"I don't think mastodons ate primitive man," he replies, looking at the disordered admixture of paper and writing implements on the floor next to him.

"True," Gloria says. "You're right of course. I'm sure primitive woman was much more delicious."

"You know how I feel about factual errors."

"Even when they're made purposefully as a set-up for gender based witticisms?"

"Hmm," he says disapprovingly.

"You realize you look a bit mental in here in the dark, don't you?" she murmurs, her fingers smoothing through his disarrayed hair. "Why didn't you turn the lights on when the sun went down?"

He looks up, and realizes that she is indeed correct. The only source of light in the room is the illumination of his laptop and the oblique glow from the hallway.

"I was busy," he says.

"Make me supper, you ludicrous man."

He can feel the weight of her hair over his shoulder.

"I'm going to need some kind of quid pro quo," he replies.

"In return I offer you a devastatingly stylish and extraordinarily necessary haircut."

"I fail to see how such a thing would benefit me. You're the one who has to look at it."

"I'm convinced that only your remarkable hair and notable wardrobe prevents you from completely sucking all will to live out of undergraduates with mathematical aspirations."

He finds this suggestion completely ridiculous.

"Regardless of the state of my hair," he says dryly, "they'd do well to be revising, as they sit their Discrete Maths final tomorrow."

"Then it is most assuredly time for a haircut," Gloria pronounces.

He will have to do it alone.

He will have to do it without her.

He knows this.

He has known it all along.

*It will be easier with a piano. He will reproduce the chords. He could do it on paper, he could do it right now, but to mentally reproduce them with the required accuracy will require more concentration and sustained mental energy than he is capable of turning in the direction of anything tonal, if the unfortunate incident at the funeral and then the even more unfortunate incident in Young's apartment were anything to judge by. If he can *play* the notes, perhaps he won't have to *think* them, and that will be easier and so he needs a piano.*

Once the chords are reproduced, he will extrapolate to the underpinnings of their musical theory and he will recreate the polyphonic textures that he heard on Altera,

which is another thing he *could* do without a piano but prefers not to. With that as groundwork, he will look at the architecture of the code and he will try to map out the correspondence between software and hardware and then he will begin trying melodies and harmonies.

It will be easier with the piano.

It has always been easier with the piano.

A-flat major and a triplet rhythm. Number eight in C minor. Opus thirteen. She sits next to him. Right there on the bench. She says nothing. Not until he finishes the second movement. Then she says, "I think we should discuss this," before he can start the third.

"Yes," he says, dropping his hands from the keys. "I agree."

"Have you looked into any of the information that they provided?"

"No," he says. "Not yet."

"I—" she says, looking at the blank expanse of the opposite wall.

He says nothing, looking at the piano.

"I don't think you should read it," she says.

"You don't think I should read it?" he echoes.

"No," she says. "I can tell you the bits you need to know. The clinical options aren't difficult to navigate, they're all algorithmically optimized.

"Really," he says, trying to determine how this would be the case—every impression he's ever gotten from medicine has been one of hopelessly muddled anecdotal evidence. "I don't see how that's possible."

"That's what they have randomized controlled clinical trials for, darling."

Right. Usually death was an outcome in those trials. He does not want her to be part of a dataset that determines the next round. But she will be, no matter how it goes.

"Why don't you want me to read anything?" he asks, his eyes narrowing slightly as he looks at her.

"Well, it's just very straightforward," Gloria says, her pose casual but her voice wavering, "and you're very busy."

"That's ridiculous," he says, hurt. His tone is scathing, full of a savage disdain.

She flinches.

"That's ridiculous," he repeats. This time the words are defensive and he is abruptly, acutely afraid that it is not ridiculous.

She turns away from him. That's—not ideal. She does that when she cries. He is being an unmitigated bastard. Mainly that's because he is an unmitigated bastard. He wants to leave, so that he does not need to see the turned-away curve of her shoulders. But he does not leave. He can fucking hold himself together for this. For her. Probably. Probably he can. There is some probability that he can.

"I'm not—" he begins, feeling inadequate and guilty. "I don't want you to think that I—"

"Don't read them," she says, after he trails off into a morass of self-loathing. Her voice is high and tight and now he knows she's crying. "Don't read them," she repeats, the words mangling even further. "I don't want you to."

The lateral press of foot to carpet slides him sideways so that they sit, shoulder to shoulder.

He faces the piano.

She faces the void of the room.

"Why not?" He says the thing he should have said the first time.

"Because, sweetheart," she says, "it doesn't look good."

"Ah," he says silently. It must look extremely bad.

"But those reports—well, they're just numbers," she whispers through tears.

He doesn't trust himself to say anything in response to that.

"They don't mean anything," she says.

They mean something extraordinarily specific, actually, but he does not say this.

"Outcome data from other people don't necessarily translate perfectly to an individual case," she says.

"True," he says.

This seems to reassure her.

It in no way reassures him.

He twisted his fingers through his hair, trapping chunks of it in and around the closing of his fist as the wind tore past. He shut his eyes to block out the light that was, even at night, too bright for him. He was nearly done. His existence would not be the same following the cracking of the final chevron. He felt certain of that. It would not be like it

was now, this hellish confinement, broken only by his dinner plans with his lonely and damaged neighbor.

Perhaps—

Perhaps Jackson was right.

Perhaps once he solved it, perhaps then—

Perhaps he would be let go.

Perhaps the mathematics would let him go.

Perhaps the SGC would let him go.

Jackson would help him.

Perhaps he could go to Atlantis. He could work with Sheppard. He *liked* Sheppard; with his quiet tenacity, his genuine joy in maths and his strange, sad love for a strange, sad city that Rush had never seen.

Perhaps he could go wherever the Icarus project went. He could work with Telford. He *liked* Telford; with his savage drive and his hard eyes and his endless, boundless willpower.

He didn't think he'd care to find out what employment opportunities were like with the Lucian Alliance.

If he solved it, then he would move on. To something else.

A-flat major and a triplet rhythm. Number eight in C minor. Opus thirteen. He is perseverating on a musical theme. He is trying to get it out of his head, but it will not go.

"You've been playing Beethoven lately," Gloria says, from her position in the doorway, putting a mild gloss on six weeks of intense and unrelenting obsession with the Sonata Pathétique. "I always get suspicious when that happens."

"Suspicious?" he says.

"Extremely," she says, but does not explain herself.

It is dark in the room and he does not have to see how frail she has become.

He continues to play.

Rush abandoned the window and he sank to the floor, his back against his too-painted wall, the newest cypher in black relief above him. He propped an elbow on his knee and pressed the heel of one hand against his temple as he looked up and out at the distant spread of stars. He listened to the wind. Sleep would not come easily, if it

came at all. He could generally sleep in the morning, when the sun was on the other side of the building and the asphalt was the color of shade. Night was harder.

"Nick," she says. "What happened to your brother?"

"Why do you want to know?" he looks out across white expanse of snow that blankets Rochester, Minnesota. It glitters beneath moonlight on the other side of the closed window. He does not look at her; he does not look at her hair, dark and unfamiliar and artificial, spread out across the pillow, but he can see it reflected in the window, a dark superimposition over the iced landscape. "It doesn't matter."

For a long moment she says nothing. When she speaks, her voice is strained. "It matters to me. It matters to me very much."

"Why?" he asks, not looking at her, already thinking of chevrons and things that are locked away from him. Thinking of cyphers and gates and the warping of space-time and the things on the flash drive that David Telford had given him months ago.

"Because I don't want to be like him," she says.

He shuts his eyes. "Like who?" he asks, when he can speak.

"Never mind," she whispers.

It is a long time before he can turn away from the window.

When he finally does, she is watching him. "Come on, sweetheart," she says. "Let's go down to the lobby and be unforgivably posh. You can replace the mediocre volunteer pianist."

She cannot hide her fear from him, and it bothers him that she tries.

He steps forward, extending both hands, and pulls her out of her hospital bed.

He turned away from the window and faced his wall. After getting to his feet with dubious coordination, he drew a line beneath his previous work and he wrote 'do not repaint,' with an upward directed arrow, in case he forgot. Then he sat down again and swapped his marker for something with a finer tip.

He drew a series of five parallel lines along the wall at the level of his eyes and looked at them for a moment before setting his pen down. It was possible that he'd need to invent an alternative form of notation to facilitate indications of resonant frequencies.

That was something he'd need to consider.

He held his hands lightly over the floor near the wall.

He lies on his back, looking up at the dimly lit ceiling. It is not dark here. It is never dark here. It is never quiet, and he does not sleep. "You can take it off you know," he murmurs against the smell of artificial hair. "This thing." He tugs gently on the smooth, even, brown lengths.

"I know," she says, lying on top of him. "But I don't like to."

"Yes well," he says, running his hands along the subtle, sinusoidal projections of her vertebrae, "you've always been terribly vain, sweetheart."

"It comes with the profession," she says, and he can feel the subtle changes in her facial muscles against his shoulder that indicate that she is smiling.

He feels like he is the one dying. And he wishes he were. "How do you feel?" he asks her.

"Fine," she whispers. "Tomorrow I'll feel wretched."

"I know," he says.

They are quiet. She breathes so softly that it is difficult for him to tell if she is asleep. It has always been that way.

"Nick," she whispers. "You haven't forgotten him?"

He cannot control his facial expression, and he hopes she is not looking at him. He doesn't think she is. "No," he says, when he can force sound past the locked gate of his vocal chords.

"You won't forget me?" she whispers.

He cannot answer, but his hands tighten around her.

Needing a piano, but lacking one, and unable to sleep, he felt that there was only one option left to him. It would be a mistake, a drastic mistake to begin without control. Quietly, he whistled a C major scale as he played it out along his floor near the base of his wall, perfectly synchronizing pitch and finger movements.

This would be fine.

This would be workable.

He could transition into this in a slow and logical progression.

He would get himself to the point where he could solve this cypher in careful increments.

He could do this. It would be no problem.

With deliberation he began a C minor scale.

"Whistle me an A, darling, someone walked off with my tuner. That or I lost it."

"Admit it," he says. "You married me for my ear."

"You married me for my hair, I don't see the difference."

"I did not marry you for your hair," he says, deeply enmeshed in trying to follow the logical progressions of a handful of struggling graduate students, but he complies and whistles for her.

"You're a terrible liar, sweetheart," Gloria says, leaning in the doorway, her arms crossed over her chest, her violin beneath one arm, 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.

Through the night and into the early hours of the morning, he sat on the floor of his unpacked apartment, waiting until seven o'clock, at which point the parking lot was its usual uninspired gray, the distant mountains were a hopeless umber, and Young was likely to be awake.

He needed a piano.

Young could make that happen.

There must be fucking pianos in Colorado Springs.

After a blind and desultory attempt to order his hair, he stood and proceeded to Young's apartment.

He knocked on Young's door for an interval longer than was typical.

The door opened fractionally and then more completely.

"I thought we were doing brunch," Young said, as he swung the door wide. "It's—" he stopped talking abruptly.

Rush noted he was dressed in a t-shirt and cotton pants with a subtle blue plaid pattern. "This is a bad time," he concluded. "You were sleeping." Perhaps it was the weekend.

"Why don't you come in," Young said.

"I don't need to come in," Rush clarified. "I need a piano."

"Come in," Young said again.

Rush stepped forward.

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