Beg, Borrow, or Steal

by auburn

Summary

Atlantis and Earth could help each other, if politics, plots and murder don't get in the way. Power is always the name of the game.

Sequel to Gypsies, Tramps, and Thieves

Notes

SGA/SG-1 AU Crossed over with NCIS and NCIS LA.

The big sequel I once thought I would write, didn't, and now have. A third sequel is in progress, while this one is complete and being beta-ed by the wonderful Harmne and posted in chunks according to no predictable schedule.
Prologue

George Hammond

George relished most aspects of his retirement. Coming home to West Texas satisfied him down to his bones. He'd bought back the ranch that once belonged to his Hammond grandparents. It felt good to live in a place so connected to his past and his family. He loved his grand-daughters with an uncritical love that couldn't exist between parent and child and the girls loved him back. He missed his wife, but he did not feel alone. He did not miss waking each morning to the back-breaking weight of being responsible for the lives of the men and women under his command and eventually the fate of the planet.

He remembered every soldier he'd lost, but he'd served long and with honor. It was time to pass the burden to younger, stronger shoulders, and he had done so.

No regrets, but he missed the people who had become more than subordinates. He would admit to missing the adrenaline that came with danger and the rush of relief when it was faced down, and, God knows, he missed knowing about those dangers.

Every time he spent a day with his grand-daughters – and he was grateful beyond words that they and their parents came back to Texas with him – he couldn't help but wonder how close threats most people on the planet had no – clue existed were looming. He still had most of his clearances, but Hank Landry was a territorial jackass, who did his best to make sure George didn't know much of what went on under the Mountain any longer.

Jack O'Neill had become a friend and not just a soldier George respected. They'd shared a glass of whiskey on the worst nights, when they'd lost people Earth could not afford to lose, and toasted them. Feretti, Kawalsky, McKay in his irascible brilliance, Jake Carter, Samantha and all the Atlantis Expedition when the months stretched to years with no contact, and Daniel, Janet Frasier and the Novak girl, when he'd lost *Prometheus* and the last chance to reach Pegasus.

He knew Jack would warn him if things ever went too far south. If Jack could. George knew how fast things could go from situation normal to all fucked up. These days, he found out about things after they'd happened.

He considered whether to make his dinner now or take a glass of whiskey out to the deep porch that wrapped around the old house and watch the sunset first. After years buried deep beneath Cheyenne Mountain, the flat empty stretch of the landscape made him feel like he could breathe, so though many wouldn't have considered the view much, he took it in regularly. It helped him relax as much as the whiskey did.

The knock on his door mad George jolt. There had been no telltale rumble of a car rolling up the long gravel road from the nearest highway. If he'd been down south near the border, he might have worried about coyotes and cartel smugglers, but his stretch of Texas was too far from the Rio Grande to ever reach on foot. The lack of any audible vehicle dinged his internal alarms.

His heart beat a little faster as he walked to the door, detouring to his desk to retrieve a handgun – Jack had offered to smuggle out a zat for him, but George had demurred. Too much danger of it falling into the wrong hands. The hardwood floors creaked under his feet. There was one way he knew about that most people didn't for someone to show up in the middle of nowhere without a sound.
He straightened his shoulders and put on a calm face before opening his front door. Panicking wouldn't do any good for anyone.

Jack O'Neill's hair was even more salt than pepper than even the last time George had seen him. Little surprise. George had chosen him to take over the military side of the SGC because he knew Jack would take it seriously. Like the presidency, the SGC was a twenty-four-hour job that aged a man fast.

Another familiar form, lurked behind Jack. George's eyes weren't as good as they'd been even two years ago. The glare from the setting sun kept him from recognizing the man, until he shifted and squinted and the light glinted off wire-frame glasses.

"Jack," George said and held out his hand to shake and then, warmly, because his worries weren't gone, but a feeling of relief still bloomed in his chest. "Dr. Jackson."

"General," Jack said. He shook hands firmly then stepped aside. "I thought you'd appreciate some good news. Danny's back!"

"Dr. Jackson," George repeated, his voice choked. He wondered what this meant for Frasier and Novak. Where they alive too? He stepped back and gestured both men to come inside. "It's damn good to see you, son."

"General Hammond," Jackson replied with one of his tight smiles. He scuffed the dust off his boots. Jackson raised his eyebrows in silent question to whether he should remove his boots. George smiled at him and gestured to his own worn cowboy boots. Without his wife to fuss over it, he didn't care to much about the floors beyond keeping them clean. "Sorry to just show up."

"I've seldom had a better surprise."

"Yeah, this isn't an 'all is lost, flee' visit," Jack said as he strolled in. He had his hands in the pockets of his BDUs. Jackson had on a mixture of boots, a black t-shirt, leather and homespun that George could guess he'd picked up on some other planet.

Jackson looked good though: healthy and at ease. Not like he'd endured any of the hells George had known he might face after the piracy. He didn't carry quite as much muscle as he had while he'd been running around hell and gone with SG-1, but he was fit. It was terribly good to see him, safe and alive.

"Thor beamed us both right down," Jack said. He stopped in the living room, taking in the fieldstone fireplace, the Charlie Russell prints on the walls, and the comfortable furniture as if he'd never seen it before. "It's good to be back."

"Back from where?" George asked.

"Oh," Jack waved a dégagé hand, "Pegasus."

"Atlantis," Jackson clarified.

George felt his eyebrows lift higher than normal. The *Prometheus* had been bound for Pegasus when it was taken, but they had no clue where it had disappeared. How had Jackson made it to Atlantis after all?

"I feel like this is going to be a long story," George said. "Take a seat. Dr. Jackson, would you like a beer or something else?"
"Oh, a real beer sounds good."

"Me too," Jack added with a near pout. He dropped down onto the leather couch George's daughter-in-law had picked out and then rubbed one of his knees. "Danny's finally come around to appreciating a good beer."

Jackson sat down at the other end of the couch. "They have beer in Pegasus. It's just not very good. Ruus wine, though, I should have brought some bottles."

George fetched beer for all of them and sat down in his recliner.

Jack took a long swallow and said, "Sit back, George, because this is a hell of a story. When Thor got the Jacob Carter to Pegasus, we found Atlantis right in the middle of fighting off some real baddies called the Wraith. Looked like they weren't going to win, but the captain of the Prometheus –"


Jack snorted loudly. "Whatever. Mal Doran is slick. She tricked that Wraith Hive into following her right into the Death Moon's kill zone. Atlantis had already taken out one hive, which just left one. After they suicide nuked it –"

"And you let everyone think Jehan was dead."

"I like to play my hands close to my chest." Jack had that look George recognized; he'd screwed the pooch somehow and wanted to skip as much of that part as possible. Jackson had always been good at calling Jack on his mistakes. George might as well sit back and enjoy the show.

"You were going to use him as a hostage to get the Revenge back and while Meredith already hated your guts, you nearly made an enemy out of everyone else on Atlantis."

Ah. There it was. George sighed and decided he was grateful Jack's faux pas were no longer his problem. He turned to Jackson. "Doctor, maybe you could tell me what happened? Briefly."

Jack opened his mouth and then closed it. Jackson took over smoothly, providing a quick precis of what had happened from the time the Prometheus was lost up to the arrival of the Jacob Carter as a coalition of Pegasus natives, pirates and the Atlantis expedition survivors led by Samantha Carter defended themselves against an attack by the Wraith — a species that had driven the Ancients to flee Pegasus and abandon Atlantis.

George sighed to himself. Of course, they'd found a new enemy. That was just what Earth needed.

Jackson twisted his bottle between his hands before nodding. "Janet and Lindsay are both okay. Janet stayed on Atlantis, Lindsay's on the Revenge."

Revenge. No longer the Prometheus. George had winced when he realized the ship had been taken by just two pirates. At least they hadn't treated the people they kept badly; Jackson sounded nearly fond of them.

"The little Napoleon gets to rule over an entire city, a defense satellite, a warship and anyone else she can get her hands on," Jack added. "My ass still hurts from the needle she got me with for Kurzen –"

"Kirsan."
"– Fever."

"They stole the ship to rescue their regular engineer from the Oranians," Jackson said.

"Honestly, you'd think the Oranians would have been happy to get rid of him," Jack remarked.

"You know, that attitude is why he nearly broke your jaw."

There was a lot more to this story than Jackson's summary had included, George could tell. He'd have to just relax and piece it together from what slipped out while they sniped at each other. "Really, Jack?" George teased. "Are you getting old?" Jack seemed to have got off on the wrong foot with the people in Pegasus to judge by his sour expression. "Can't duck a punch?"

"Hey, I wasn't expecting it from him!" Jack protested. He rubbed his hand over his jaw and looked a little shame-faced. "I sorta deserved it."

"I'm not the only person who isn't dead after all," Jackson explained. "Rodney McKay is alive and well and third in command of the Revenge."

George tensed at the implications. The Tok'ra had lied. "The Tok'ra told us he was dead when they admitted he was a host." He'd never been satisfied with the Tok'ra explanations, but there had been nothing to do when McKay was already dead. Another failure on George's part.

"Actually, they told us Jolinar was dead," Jack said. "They never mentioned McKay either way. We assumed." He'd never liked the Tok'ra. George had considered them a necessary evil and reserved his judgement. Earth needed allies and intelligence – the Tok'ra had provided both at little cost to the Stargate Program. Maybe they'd all been too willing to write off their doubts about the Tok'ra under exigencies of war.

George wasn't one to curse often, but this rated it. "God damn it to hell."

Jack nodded. "Pretty much where he told me and the rest of the SGC to go after he punched me."

Cheery as Jack had been playing it, the rest of the story turned grim. The Wraith would be a major threat to Earth and the entire Milky Way if they ever reached it. They'd defeated the Ancients. Sumner had chosen death over betraying Earth's coordinates to them. Expedition scientists had been coerced into building nuclear weapons for another group. George had seldom disliked a group as much as he disliked what he heard of the Genii. Dr. Jackson, the calmest and most sympathetic and understanding of men, obviously felt the same. He described the Genii as thugs, "Authoritarian and fascistic. Oh, and obsessive and paranoid."

"Yeah, they're the bad guys," Jack added. "Good thing no one likes them anymore."

"We didn't like them before. No one likes them now." Jackson smiled nastily. "It was Vala's idea to spread the word the Genii were behind the bomb on Dagan and that was what woke the Wraith."

George suppressed a smile, but worried. He wasn't surprised that Dr. Jackson had taken the chance to reach Atlantis. But he clearly identified with the people now holding it, including the pirate crew. There would be questions from the IOA over his loyalties.

"Jehan's ATA gene lit up Atlantis the minute we came through the gate," Jackson said. He glanced at Jack. "It's stronger than Jack's expression."

"And Jehan is…?" George prompted, because Jack looked constipated at the name.
"Vala's second in command. He helped her take the *Prometheus.*" Jackson leveled a mocking look toward Jack. "The one Jack tried to hold hostage."

"Really, Jack?" George gibed. Jack rarely got off on the wrong foot, but it sounded like he'd done it spectacularly this time. George had no sympathy for the pirates, but he'd shaken hands with worse. Jack knew better than to provoke potential allies.

"Yeah," Jackson said quietly. "Jehan may as well be an Ancient as far as Atlantis is concerned. He's Mer's partner. Mer – Rodney. Without them, Kolya would have killed everyone." He swallowed. "I watched Kolya's man peel the skin off Mer's arm to get him to give up who had the ATA, but he wouldn't. And without Jehan, we'd all be dead. Letting us think he was dead made Jack really unpopular."

Imagining the Rodney McKay George had known enduring torture was difficult, but he had to have changed. He'd been left for dead and survived on his own. It was the SGC's loss.

Dusk settled its purple cloak over the Texas plains. George switched on small lamp and let its glow light the room, but left the corners in shadow.

Jackson went on with his narrative. They'd established themselves in Atlantis, restored a defense satellite, and braced themselves for a Wraith attack. The pirates had stayed to help defend the city.

Jackson sighed and glanced at his empty beer bottle, clearly searching for some excuse to leave so Jack could talk to George privately. "Sir, if you don't mind?" he asked.

"You only rent beer, Danny," Jack told him. He'd barely touched his own bottle.

Jackson sighed as if in exasperation, a silent 'why are you such a child' writ on his face.

"Down the hall, second door on the left," George told him.

Jack waited until Jackson had gone and the quiet sound of the washroom door closing sounded. "There's something else, sir," he told George seriously.

"Something Dr. Jackson doesn't know?"

Jack spat it out fast. "Jehan abd-Ba'al is from Earth. I don't know if Danny knows or not. Jehan made it damned clear he wants nothing to do with the Tau'ri or Earth."

"The pirate second in command, the one with the ATA gene," George asked to be sure he was clear, "is from Earth. How? There are no unaccounted for personnel."

"Apophis' Jaffa took two of our people when he showed up, remember? Before the program."

George remembered. Not many in the SGC would, not the way the men they lost to Ra were remembered or the gate team casualties, but George had been in command of the Mountain. He'd written the condolence letters.

"Sgt. Kettering and Major Sheppard."

"Sheppard," Jack confirmed. It felt like a leaden weight taking up a place behind George's heart, next to the guilt over Rodney McKay. It took up the place the news that Dr. Jackson, Janet and Ms. Novak along with most of the Expedition were alive had vacated. He winced as Jack spat out the rest. "Apophis gave him to Ba'al as a gift. A couple years ago, Vala stole him from Ba'al – him and
a ship. She likes to brag about both."

"Dr. Jackson made it sound as if Dr. McKay is very close to him."

"Yeah, they're… close." Jack looked uncomfortable. "Real close."

Ah. That… that really didn't matter. George had never cared about that sort of thing. In face of enslavement by the Goa'uld, after what the man had gone through, how could anyone? He squeezed his eyes shut, faced his own guilt, and opened them to meet Jack's gaze. "We never looked for him," he stated. Just like McKay, except McKay had known what he was facing going through the stargate. Dear God. Did their ignorance excuse them? Him? "I suppose he's bitter."

"He never told Ba'al where he came from," Jack explained. "Never told him anything. He's a closed-mouth bastard. Didn't have any chance to escape because he knew fuck all about the stargate when they took him. He had no idea how to get back, didn't even know Earth had survived until they hooked up with McKay."

"Did you bring him back with you?"

"I'd have started a war if I tried. Sam's not giving up Atlantis to anyone without a fight. Novak's gone completely native. Frasier stayed, like Danny said. I brought back bodies and reports and fifteen people, mostly scientists. The rest of them – the only way they're coming back to Earth is as prisoners."

"I don't envy you explaining this to the IOA," George said.

"Yeah, that's going to be a blast." Jack sighed. "I could use your advice, sir. On the IOA. And on Sheppard. I don't have absolute proof Jehan abd-Ba'al is Major Sheppard. Should I just leave it? What good would it be to tell his family, well, what the hell would we tell them?"

Sheppard had a father and brother, but they hadn't been listed as his legal next of kin or heirs. George remembered dealing with the paperwork.

Jack was mumbling sardonically: "It's all classified, folks. He's alive. He wants nothing to do with you. No, we can't tell you where he is or how to contact him."

George understood Jack's dilemma. "I can't tell you what to do, Jack." Even if he was willing, he sorely doubted the IOA would agree with his opinions.

"But, sir, that's why I came here first," Jack protested. "What would you do?"

"Could knowing who he is help the SGC at some point?"

"I don't know."

"Did he want you to tell his family?"

"Nope. Made it clear as glass he wanted nothing to do with anyone from Earth, in fact. Tried to shoot Teal'c too."

George turned it around. "Could you knowing and no one else help the SGC at some point?" Revealing Major Sheppard was alive would make the SGC look bad, but holding onto the knowledge might, eventually, be an ace up Jack's sleeve. That was what Jack wanted to do or he'd never have come to George about it. It was no more or less a problem than Novak's defection or the Expedition members refusing to return. Some days George was very glad to be retired. Even
good news generated paperwork, but there was no more paperwork and meetings for him.

Jack narrowed his eyes and began nodding. "Thank you for your advice, sir," he said as Daniel came back into the living room.

Jack rose to his feet from the couch. "Think it's time to go, Danny Boy."

"General, it was very good to see you again," Jackson said.

"I feel the same, Doctor."

He walked them to the door and watched as they went down the porch steps. They were engulfed in a white column of light an instant later and then gone. George lingered in the doorway a few minutes longer. The smell of sage and dust was stronger after dark and the sun had set while his visitors were inside. The stars were diamonds spilled across the arc of the night sky, so bright he could see by their light. They'd been out of reach once, in George's living memory. Now they were just a step through the stargate.

Looking up, he still felt awed by their implacable presence, fierce as the sun no matter how far away they seemed.

He straightened his posture, though there was no one to see him slump, and gave a small nod to himself. He returned the pistol he'd kept on him throughout their visit to his desk. When he poured himself that whiskey he'd meant to sip while watching the sunset, he raised it and toasted everyone from Jack and Dr. Jackson's story, even the pirates.
Meanwhile, Back at the Farm...

Sam

The group stood on the bridge deck: Sam, Vala, Jehan, and Mer, together with the crew of engineers, scientists, and mechanics who had restored the ship to fighting fitness. It was time for the *Hippaforalkus* to lift from Atlantis' pier and return to space. It was time for her to have a new captain. Sam knew who she wanted, but she had a sinking feeling she wouldn't be getting him. He wasn't interested, either in command or in anything that smacked too much of the Ancients.

She sighed and reminded herself again to start calling them the Alterans. It wasn't just a sop to the Pegans who now had to deal with realizing the 'Ancestors' weren't *their* ancestors. Everyone who had come from Earth held the 'Ancients' in too much awe as well. It was just smarter to call their predecessors in Atlantis by the name they'd used for themselves.

One person who never called them Ancients or Ancestors was Jehan. Alteran tech might love Jehan but Jehan did not love it, for reasons Sam did not quite understand.

"She's as spaceworthy as the day she was commissioned," Mer declared. He patted the nav console.

"Yeah, well, how worthy was that, anyway?" Jehan replied with a smirk that promised to set off one of Mer's rants.

"Guys," Sam said before they could start up. When they weren't under the gun, she found that Mer and Jehan spent most of their time teasing each other. They could completely lose track if not steered back to the subject. The smug, arrogant, obnoxious asshole that she'd divorced hadn't changed that much, but everything that had driven her to fury just amused and endeared Mer to Jehan.

They looked her way with specious innocence.

"So, what's next?" Vala asked. "Who gets to fly the ship?"

Sam sucked in a deep breath, because if she succeeded, Vala was going to be peeved. "I was hoping Jehan would take command with Ro – Mer as his second."

Mer looked interested. She'd thought he would be. He had taken point on restoring the *Hippaforalkus* after the Taranians contacted them about the mothballed Ancient warship on their world and the supervolcano getting ready to blow its top.

Vala glared at Sam.

Sam was more interested in Jehan's reactions, though, which were hard to read. He only trusted two people: Vala and Mer. Trust in anyone else was qualified, though Teyla came closest and he clearly liked Ronon, Novak, Miko and Zelenka.

Jehan glanced around the bridge, the smooth pale metal, the graceful curves and angles, and his expression closed off, then shrugged. "No, thanks."

She gritted her teeth and went for some persuasion. "It would be your own ship –"

"It's *your* ship," he disagreed. "Not interested in joining anyone's military."
Again, she heard in the beat of silence that followed. As far as Jehan was concerned Earth and its military had betrayed him into slavery. He wasn't interested in offering up his service or his loyalty to any organization. Vala had it, because she'd rescued him, and Meredith had it because he loved him, but at the same time Jehan was still free. Neither of them would dream of commanding any sort of oath or obedience from him beyond what he offered of his own free will.

Mer and Vala were watching them both with sharp eyes. They were the ones Jehan would listen to. She should have corralled Mer somewhere and got him on her side first. Vala wouldn't be persuaded; she wanted to keep her best pilot and second-in-command.

"We've barely enough crew to handle the *Aurora*. Your gene is strong enough that you could handle command, especially if Meredith was with you. No one else has anything close to your ATA expression," Sam said. "I know I can't persuade you to stay on Atlantis, but this would be completely your own ship. Not our navy, though I would hope we could remain allies." It irked her to offer the *Hip* like that, but they couldn't have salvaged her from Taranis without the *Revenge*. Jehan could do more with it than any of their people.

He was already shaking his head. So much for persuasive. "Your ship. Atlantis' ship. Your people crewing it."

Sam had hoped that he'd had enough time with Atlantis and the expedition members to include them in his circle of trust, but it had been a long shot. Jehan had been broken and put together again, and the result might be stronger and beautiful for the breakage, but some pieces were just gone. The irony of the man with the strongest ATA expression disliking using it hit her again.

Well, fuck, she thought to herself. They'd have to start figuring out how to rebuild the *Hip* and any new ships to do without the ATA security and mental interface. Because they just did not have enough people, never mind trained people, to crew more. There probably weren't enough ATA positive people in the entire Pegasus Galaxy to make up full crews for both the *Aurora* and the *Hip*. The Alterans hadn't mixed much with the humans in Pegasus and the Wraith had culled for anyone with the gene, Ancient or human, for the last ten thousand years. Damn it. There had to be another way –

Beckett had theorized about a gene therapy to give to people who had an unexpressed, latent ATA gene; a therapy that would boost its expression to usable levels. But Beckett, damn him, was still screwing about on Hoff. Sam didn't know if his Hoffan wife, Perna, had married him for to keep his genes and genetic knowledge on Hoff without holding him prisoner, or because she had fallen for him. As far as the Atlantis expedition was concerned, it had the same result: they didn't have the brilliant geneticist they'd brought to Pegasus. Instead, he was stupidly going along with a lunatic plan that, even if it worked, was going to blow up in everyone's face.

It was another thing Sam could not do a damn thing about it. She wasn't stupid enough to think forcing Beckett to leave Hoff would get them anything beyond making the Hoffans their enemy. Besides, stupid or not, Beckett had a right to make his own choices.

So did Jehan, annoying as that was too.

She grimaced and waved her hand. "Fine. I had to offer and ask. I can take no for an answer." She'd have to. She couldn't force Jehan to do anything without turning into Kolya. She turned back to Vala and held up her hand. "I know I just pissed you off, but it was the best option. I had to try."

Vala narrowed her eyes, but didn't start yelling, so Sam continued. "For the same reason you want to keep them, I had to try to get Meredith and Jehan for Atlantis. Since I can't -- " she grimaced, " – I'm hoping you're still willing to work with us. Because, even with – especially with the ships, we
will need power and people."

"Potentia," Meredith agreed. "We really need more. The ships could use them as well. The Revenge could use one."

Sam sighed. "At this point, I'd be damned grateful for half a dozen naquadah generators."

Vala loosened her shoulders with a shrug. "Well, where might we get those?"

Sam felt weak with relief that hit her when Vala said we. She'd been dreading the day Vala decided that sticking with Atlantis to fight the Wraith was not profitable. The pirates had done more than their share taking Atlantis back from the Genii and then repairing the defense satellite and standing to fight against the hives. Without the Revenge, Atlantis would have been lost.


"It also has ships, right?" Vala asked and Sam's mouth fell open. Was Vala suggesting they raid Earth?

"It does," Sam agreed. She wasn't positive Earth's ships could stand against the Revenge as it was now certainly not against the Revenge and one of the Alteran warships, and the rest of Earth's defenses would be hard pressed. For all they knew, the Antarctica base might even have a Friend or Foe recognition program that would keep it from firing on an Alteran ship.

"Hmm."

"Bad idea," Jehan added. He still had his arms crossed, but looked thoughtful. "Remember the people there won't be cowed the way ignorant villagers and slaves are."

"They would fight, even if it meant losing big," Meredith confirmed.

Vala let loose a put-upon sigh. "I suppose they're like the rest of you."

"And there are more of them than you can imagine. Earth has a population of billions," Sam said.

"Plus, we've already made nice with O'Neill, which means the SGC knows about us," Meredith looked as intrigued by the problem as Jehan did, though.

"Trade, though?" Vala asked. She made it sound a bit scandalous. Sam caught Mer and Jehan's quickly-hidden, quirky smiles. Honest business, how shocking.

"There's two, maybe three things, they always want," Sam admitted. What did the Tau'ri offer the rest of their galaxy except guns and war and a condescending refusal to even allow anyone in while they scrambled for every piece of technology or weapon they could scavenge? A few medicines here and there in exchange for priceless artifacts.

They could not give Earth control of Atlantis. She knew what the Expedition had been meant to do, she'd known before she stepped through the Stargate, but that was before she came to Pegasus. Sam wouldn't let Earth pillage what should belong to the people here.

"Naquadah," Mer said. "Just like everyone else in the Stella Via."

"There isn't much naquadah, even as raw ore, in Pegasus," Jehan said.

The Alterans had moved beyond naquadah to zero-point energy. Only they hadn't left enough charged modules behind or instructions how to make or charge them. Damn them, there had to be some method of recharging them on Atlantis, but until they discovered it, naquadah generators could power the critical systems. It made no sense for a starship like the city to not be able fuel itself when it could travel beyond any supply lines.

Of course, Atlantis wasn't an exploration or a military vehicle. Even aircraft carriers and nuclear subs had to return to port for fuel. Maybe the Alterans hadn't foreseen that they would ever move it beyond reach of their support network. They certainly did plenty of things that seemed flat out stupid to Sam and made Mer and Radek froth at the mouth.

Atlantis' database was proving to be incredibly frustrating. It followed no logic anyone could discern. Either Alterans thought radically differently, despite the obvious physical resemblance to humans, or they had deliberately scrambled and hidden part of the database before sinking the city.

"I'm sure the Lucian Alliance has plenty of naquadah," Vala said casually. Excitement brightened her eyes.

Mer groaned.

Jehan grinned and bumped his shoulder against Mer. "It's not like they can want us dead more than they already do."

"They can offer a bigger bounty!"

Vala's wolfish smile made Sam stand up straighter. Jehan and Mer both snapped their gazes to her as well.

"Then we take the bounty," Vala looked at Sam. "The Lucian Alliance is no friend to the Tau'ri. We'll steal their naquadah and trade some to the Tau'ri for generators, materials, and recruits."

Sam pressed her lips together. Any recruits acquired through the SGC would be vetted by the IOA and instructed to do whatever they could to take Atlantis back for Earth. She knew the drill. She'd once been part of it, after all. The SGC and IOA didn't give a damn about the people of Pegasus. She'd seen too many less powerful allies screwed over during her time on SG-1. It couldn't even be blamed on the Trust, though they were the most egregious example. It was symptomatic of Earth and the SGC was part of the system.

It wasn't everyone on Earth, or even everyone in the military or the Program, but some people were so blindly Earth-first that they abandoned all ethics in regard to anyone else. Those would be the people who the IOA would send to Atlantis: the blindly loyal, the fanatics that the IOA could be certain wouldn't defect to Atlantis.

There might be a way around that. A Vala sort of way, she admitted, but all was fair and this was definitely war.

Sam wasn't ready to commit to such a plan yet, though.

Bates

The Atlantis gate activation alarm sounded nothing like the one at Stargate Command. The gate itself lit up but made no noise, no bone rattling, heavy kerthunk as each chevron locked in place, just a lot of pretty lights. It still shivered through the city though. No matter where someone was,
they could feel when the gate opened and closed, ATA gene or not.

Eugene Bates was trying to sleep when it activated this time.

Eugene spent most of his time preparing for the worst. He included sleeping in that preparation: a well-rested Marine was a better fighter than a dog-tired one. That didn't mean he slept a lot. Dog-tired was about as good as it got since they'd come to Pegasus. Shit just kept piling on and they just kept running on empty. Losing Sumner could have broken them. To give credit where credit was due Carter had kept them together, kept her eyes open and figured out the Genii were a major threat while baby-faced Lieutenant Ford hadn't had a clue. Not that Ford was a bad Marine or a bad officer, he just didn't have the years of experience seeing plans go tits-up.

Fuck the brass for sending them a butterbar. The kid might have been on a gate team before, but he hadn't commanded one. Well, the shine had worn off by now, though the lieutenant was still too nice for Eugene's taste. Officers.

Fuck gate alarms too. Eugene was up and jamming his feet into his fatigue pants and boots before he consciously registered the cause; radio headset hooked to his ear next. Unscheduled gate activation. Like there were ever any scheduled ones. Atlantis ran from crisis to crisis. For the first months in the city, he'd slept with his fatigues on. He'd only recently quit. Shine was off that too.

He pulled on his uniform blouse, buckled his belt and slung his personal weapon over his shoulder. It was still dark outside, but time of day meant jack on the Stargate networks, when every world was at a different point in its day. Morning was midnight was lazy afternoon and you could step from a burning desert to a whiteout blizzard.

"Sergeant Bates to the gate room," the radio in his ear commanded, Chuck's voice unruffled. Eugene didn't even know what branch of science the man had covered for the expedition. He'd taken over coordinating all communications since they re-occupied the city, handling command and control with an aplomb Eugene admired. He admired all the scientists who had made it this far. He had expected the marines to stand up, and they had, but the eggheads had surprised him.

Eugene tapped his mike. "Bates. On my way," he said as he reached the transporter. He'd shaved before he hit his rack, so he'd look decently put together, though he knew his old DIs would be unimpressed. None of them had faced off with the shit Bates' Marines had, though. He stepped in, tapped his destination and closed his eyes. If you timed it right the white flash wouldn't leave you blinking. Eugene had made his marines and the auxiliaries run drills without activating the transporters until they had the timing down to reflex.

He opened his eyes and stepped forward as the transporter door opened.

Carter was on the command level, standing behind Chuck at the main console. Ford would be down at the building they'd taken over as marine barracks – they didn't let both commanders stay in the same room when they had the time to separate them these days. As soon as Carter arrived at the control room Ford would have booked it.

Carter would have been sleeping, but she looked at least as awake as Eugene.

Two marines were stationed on the upper level, not even trying to be unobtrusive. Eugene scanned the rest of the gate room. He had a squad divided, with a fire team guarding the two ingress/exits from the gate room floor and the third in the control room.

He jogged up the stairs to join the command staff – such as it was.
"Sergeant," Carter greeted him. She was always polite when she could be; the Chair Force had taught her well. Her frame had filled in a little since they settled in the city, but nothing would erase the lines of exhaustion or the perpetual bruised look that came with worry and lack of sleep. No real bruises though, since they took Atlantis back from the Genii.

Hadin't that been a giant goatfuck. Eugene had been forced to revise his estimate of McKay. The man was an asshole all right, but also tough as nails in a pinch. Eugene was a big enough man to acknowledge that.

The pirates had come through, to his surprise, and then stuck around to help when the Wraith came. They weren't marines, but they had balls. So did the Pegasans making up his auxiliaries. He'd rather have them at his back than almost anyone else.

"Ma'am," he said as he came to a halt beside her. The final chevron had lit up on the stargate and the billow of energy had settled back into a rippling mirror. Nothing had come through yet.

"Shield," Carter ordered. Chuck danced his fingers over the console and the shimmering wall of energy closed over the open gate. Eugene braced himself for the sizzle-thunk that punctuated someone trying to come through the wormhole and hitting the shield.

Quiet held in the gateroom.

"I'm getting a radio signal, ma'am," Chuck announced. He glanced up.

"Voice?"

"In clear."

Not the Genii. They tried the gate once or twice a week. Eugene didn't think they were sending men through, either. Bombs more like. Last time the shield had shivered under the force of whatever they sent, so they'd probably put together another nuke. Eugene didn't understand wormhole physics, but he hoped the bomb blast had backwashed on them. Everything had been quiet since then

Carter kept her cool. "Put it on speaker."

Scratchy static and a half audible mumble ramped up to something coherent – Chuck had set the speakers to minimum then brought the audio up to avoid deafening them.

"This is Carson Beckett. To anyone on Atlantis. This is Carson Beckett. Hoff is under Wraith attack. To anyone on Atlantis. This is Carson Beckett."

Carter glanced him, eyebrows rising. She looked unhappy in the same way Eugene felt unhappy: the Hoffans weren't their responsibility but as decent human beings they still wanted to get out there and stop the Wraith. They had nowhere near the numbers they'd need to make a difference, though. She leaned forward, placing her hand on Chuck's shoulder. "Put me through."

Chuck said, "Dr. Beckett, Atlantis is receiving."

"This is Carter, Dr. Beckett. What's the situation?"

"The Wraith are culling Hoff, but now they're – they're – it's devastating. They aren't culling anymore, they're killing everyone, even down to the babes and children." Beckett choked, an ugly sound, half sob and half gasp for breath. "The cure, they're determined to stop it before any other planet can try it."
"I'm not surprised," Carter said flatly. Eugene wasn't either. The Hoffans were obsessed and psychological traumatized to the point they couldn't see beyond stopping the Wraith feeding on them, but Beckett was criminally naïve. Anyone looking at the situation from the outside could have predicted how the Wraith would react.

Eugene knew Carter by now. Even if Atlantis didn't need people, she'd give sanctuary to people under attack. He turned away to quietly call for security to the gate room, another squad to handle moving people out of it, and a runner to alert the mess hall and medics. They'd need to open a big enough area to house the incoming refugees too. Some of them would be military, so they'd have to stay on top of that. He knew Carter as a commander now and could anticipate what she'd want.

"I'm begging you for these people – let them come through the gate."

"Open the shield," Carter told Chuck. The energy over the gate flickered out. She raised her voice. "Start sending people through, Beckett – you first, I want you to consult on dealing with the Hoffans once they're here."

"Thank you, lass, thank you."

"We've still got the cots the expedition brought through," Chuck suggested. "Get Kanaan on setting them up or at least blankets for them to sleep. One of the big empty rooms in sector three, maybe. The cots had been left behind along with most of the large of equipment when they had to leave Atlantis as soon as they arrived. They were still stored away. Eugene glanced at Carter, who nodded. Chuck went on, "That red building we cleared three weeks ago has enough plumbing to handle large numbers and limited exits if we disable the transporters inside. We can put a security patrol on it, keep everyone contained if necessary."

Eugene nodded in satisfaction. Chuck's plan made good sense.

"Do it," Carter murmured.

Chuck rolled his chair down to a second console and started talking, probably to Lt. Ford.

"I want a squad on security in case any wraith come through the gate with the refugees. Use zats, though."

Eugene grimaced. He understood Carter's choice. A zat wouldn't wound any panicking civilians who got in the way. But it took two shots to put down a wraith, as they had discovered. He was grateful to have the Goa'uld weapons courtesy of their pirate allies, though. And Carter was smart, realizing they might get individual wraith. That had slipped him. He'd been thinking about crowd control options.

"On it," he promised. He opened the marine command frequency and started giving orders.

Hoffans surged through the gate, some running, some carrying others or children. They had packs and carts, Eugene noticed immediately and determined they'd have to be searched, but the contents looked like mostly books. Beckett and a pale blond woman rushed up the steps to the control balcony and then Eugene was caught up in the midst of it, directing the rushing tide of panicked people to the door where more marines and auxiliaries would direct them to the holding building until they could be sorted. The all-city speakers echoed past the gateroom announcing the influx of refugees and directing everyone to remain calm and do their jobs; they were not under direct attack. The announcement was repeated it in Tarani, Olesian, Athosian, Trade Speak and the debased Alteran everyone was picking up from dealing with Atlantis' systems.
Thirty-some minutes later the gate closed. Eugene looked up and took a breath. They'd been taking more families and strings of children the last ten minutes. So far, no visible military in uniform except one man who had joined Beckett and the woman with Carter and the LT. He hoped that meant the Hoffan military were holding the gate, trying to do whatever they could to save whoever possible and not that they'd panicked and run or were already all dead.

In his earpiece he caught snatches of the quick and dirty debrief going on upstairs, filtered through the command channel Carter had left open. The gateroom floor was a sea of near chaos, a cacophony of shouting and wailing echoing off the windows, boiling with terror. He saw one of the refugees knock into a marine and wrest his zat away from him. Eugene plunged through the crowd, trying to find a clear line of sight to zat the panicked Hoffan.

One of the auxilaries got their first. Ares tackled the Hoffan and had the hefty man face down the floor in a flurry of movement. He tossed the zat back to Private Ericson and pulled the man back to his feet, sending him forward with a hard shove.

"Good job," Eugene told him as he arrived at the trouble spot.

Ares nodded and moved back to his post. The gateroom had gone from packed to move to just over-crowded in the pause after the gate closed.

Eugene turned to Ericson. "Next time, use the god damn zat, that's why you have it. Don't you ever lose your weapon to a possible hostile again."

"Yes Sergeant!"

At least the kid hadn't called him sir.

The gate activated again and Eugene held his breath. Would it be more Hoffans or had the Wraith taken it? How long did it take a Hive, if it was just one, to wipe out the human inhabitants of an entire planet if they weren't culling them? Culling had to be slower. Destruction was always faster and easier.

The first fire team tasked with gate security raised their weapons and aimed, waiting. Second team urged the refugees out of the gateroom faster. No one needed to tell them to get the civvies out of the line of fire. Eugene felt a jolt of pride in them all. He held his breath and only released it when more Hoffans poured through the gate.

These people looked battered, like they'd been out in it, but seemed less panicked. A few were wounded military helping each other or more civilians along. Some civilians carried scavenged or improvised weapons. No one carried books and personal things. These people had had to run for the gate. It made Eugene think of all the people on Hoff too far from the stargate to have any chance at evacuation.

Most of the Hoffan population, he realized, would never make it to the stargate.

This wasn't like the kids from Ares' homeworld that they'd immediately brought in after re-taking Atlantis from the Genii. There had been less than a thousand of them even before the Genii stole their ZPM and left them vulnerable to the Wraith.

Stargates weren't made for mass movement or volume. That would be why the Alterans had given the city a stardrive and kept building warships. A stargate made a perfect chokepoint. The gateroom was overwhelmed already and they had only the tiniest fraction of the Hoffan capitol city population.
Between five and eight Hoffans were coming through the gate per second by Eugene's estimate. At first, they were pressed shoulder to shoulder, jumping through at the edge of the circular rim, throwing themselves through at a run, pushed by the numbers behind them, trampling each other. But the numbers were already dropping. The stargates had thirty-eight minute windows, but during the first gate activation, they had lost time before Carter dropped the shield. Eugene suspected they wouldn't get a full thirty-eight minutes this time. When the first wraith came through they'd have to raise the shield. The numbers already through were overwhelming enough he couldn't let himself think about them. Thousands of people, but they were just a fraction.

His voice was hoarse from shouting to directions. Exhaustion weighed down on him. Why the fuck hadn't he gone back to Earth with General O'Neill? At the moment, he thought he must have been crazy, but he knew there would never be anything like Atlantis, like Pegasus, for him again. Nothing would ever matter as much and no one, not even in the SGC, would ever know what it was like.

Going back, Earth would have been just another alien planet.

Eugene steadied an older woman who had a basket full of roots strapped to her back, a baby at her hip and another child clinging to her leg. Utter despair had wiped any hint of expression from her features. "Straight ahead, through those doors and follow everyone else," he told her. "Just keep moving, the worst part's past."

He lied and knew it, but it got her moving, clearing space, as the Stargate coughed up a gout of Hoffan military backing out of the event horizon, still firing their weapons, and a bolt from a Wraith weapon sizzled through the gateroom and hit the back wall. The refugees screamed and scrambled for any escape. A child flew through, wailing in terror, thrown from the other side, and a woman carrying a man over her shoulders crawled through, yelling, "They're coming, they're coming!"

Ericson darted forward and dragged them away from the gate.

The first Wraith drone was halfway out of the event horizon when the shield shimmered back into place. It sliced off the back of the drone's skull, part of one leg and shoulder. The drone staggered and the fire team assigned to the gate zatted it one, two, three. The shield flared again and again and Eugene learned something he would rather never have known: the Atlantis gate shield sounded the same as the iris on SGC's gate when a body hit it.

The Revenge dropped out of hyperspace beyond Wraith sensor range. Her speed had been calculated and achieved before they made the jump, so the momentum of her sublight engines remained as they re-entered real space. The ship fell into the Hoffan system's gravity well while powered down to nearly nothing. Vala and Mer and Jehan were good at this, running the ship dark and cold and silent; nothing but minimal life support and a cloak operating as they waited in ambush. They knew how to hunt and how to slip a hunt. Unless the Wraith had sensors scanning exactly where the hyperspace window opened, they would never know the Revenge was there.

It was a dangerous gambit though.

With their shields off, Jehan sat at the pilot's console on constant alert for anything they had to
dodge. They were using strictly passive sensors, which limited how far ahead they could navigate. The Hoffan system didn't have an asteroid belt, but most star systems had random debris.

As the hours passed, the ship cooled steadily, and the crew bundled into cold weather gear and CO\textsuperscript{2} masks. There was no real reason to run silent, since noise didn't transmit through vacuum, but voices were muffled and any loud sound made everyone wince, hardwired primal hunting instincts on alert even in the high-tech expanse.

Hoff's star reeled the Revenge in closer and closer, the dim dot of light growing brighter and bigger in the monitor displays, heating the hull where the light touched while frost rimed the ship's shadows inside.

Mer and Lindsay stayed in the engine room, watching the sensors, monitoring the temperature drop and fussing over anything freezing up too hard to restart. Throughout the ship, metal ticked and groaned, contracting from the cold, testing the atmospheric seals near their limits. Jehan wondered if the Alteran ships like the Hip did the same – Goa'uld ships knocked and squealed if they lost power and temperature control.

Vala alternately paced and checked the weapons console set up every time she sat down, flexing her fingers and ghosting them over the sequence that would bring the ship's defenses alive. The dim red emergency lights gave a bloody shine to her dark hair. The flicker of the green-lit monitors, dialed to their lowest settings, reflected in her pale eyes. Her painted fingernails looked black.

Comms were shut down to avoid any intercepts and the Revenge only had hard lines to weapons and the engine rooms. Teyla prowled through the ship checking for anything going wrong, going too fast or too slow, anyone having trouble with the cold or the wait, coming back to report everything was okay. Melena was in sick bay doing a totally unneeded inventory on surgical kits and Ronon had been exiled to the corridors, where he was doing calisthenics. Anyone else not actively on duty was huddled together in the rec room for warmth. Their tight little crew barely impacted the empty expanses of the ship. They really needed more people to crew the Revenge, instead of ceding some of them to the Aurora and the Hip.

Jehan watched his boards and not the display monitor. Anything on the display was already too close to react to in time. He noted a chunk of rock the size of Ceres and hit one maneuvering thruster to angle the ship for more clearance. Long minutes later, they watched through the bridge ports as they sliced past the rogue asteroid, close enough for human eyes to see its brown-gray surface veined with ice heaves, lava splattered and pocked with impact craters. Every shadow was razor-edged sans atmosphere and without any shields between them.

"Fuck me that's close," Stackhouse whispered.

"Too close," Vala said, her face tipped up to watch. "It's new, isn't it?"

Jehan plotted the asteroid's course backward. It didn't have an orbit yet, was still moving out, away from Hoff's star. Away from Hoff's orbit. Away from where Hoff should have been. He found more debris blowing out from the same point. "Yes," he said and began firing thrusters to contort their path through them.

"Power up, engines to full now, all shields!" Vala commanded, her hands pressing on her console's boards like she could make them respond faster by pushing harder. "Route back-up power from the cloak to shields. Now, now, now!"

"Shields up, sublights ready," Mer shouted over the intercom. "You've got full power in six, five,
Revenge leaped under Jehan's hands, energy rushing through the ship once more, the deep thrum of the sublights, making the hairs stand up on his arms. The hum of the shields, the hiss of the environmental systems balancing the atmosphere inside once more came together. Thereturned heat from the decks and the air vents caressed his bare face and fingers and made his toes sting in his boots.

"Hard ping," Vala said.

Stackhouse had the comm console and long-range sensors on his board. He initiated a sectored active sweep. The collision alarms blared before the sensors caught up with the lag at their farthest reach, shunting adrenaline through his veins. Jehan lit up the sublights and the maneuvering thrusters, using both to shift the Revenge three dimensionally through space increasingly clogged with thicker debris than most asteroid belts. The shields flared white with impacts from dust, gravel, boulders, and bigger chunks moving at cometary speeds right at them. The biggest pieces filled the monitors like walls as they streaked by.

Jehan cursed under his breath in a mixture of Goa'uld, English and Alteran. On the intercom, Mer was cursing too, shouting that the shields were taking more power than they had. "What the fuck are you doing to my ship, you submoronic spicacephalic shit monkey!? Are we under fire? Are we at battle stations?" Mer demanded. "I'm not a worm-loving god damned magician!" More power fed the collision shields, though. "Tell me what's going on!"

"Trying to save us from taking the kinetic impact of a planetoid, here!" Jehan yelled back. He either had to use the sublights to outrun the expanding sphere of planetary debris or make a hyperspace jump. He flicked his gaze to the range scans and made the call.

"Going to hyper," he announced and hit the engage control. Revenge micro-jumped, shuddering into and out of the false blue of hyperspace, and exited on the far side of the Hoffan system, a calculation he'd been running for an emergency exit through the entire approach to the planet.

Jehan always ran a similar mental calculation, but he had never needed except under Goa'uld fire.

"I'm going to pluck you naked, spit roast your dead body over my overheating engines and feed you to the giant fucking space whales, you ass-eating lunatic!"


The intercom went silent, then hissed, before Lindsay's voice came over it. "The engines are stable and at 99%. Meredith is on his way to the bridge."

"Thank you, Lindsay," Vala told her.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," Stackhouse muttered under his breath. Teyla, Til, and Vala didn't get Jehan's reference, but they didn't need to: the sensor display showed the data still coming in, telling the story of Hoff's destruction. "Shields back to 99.7%. Chemical thrusters at 43%. No damage."

"Environmental at 67% and rising," Teyla reported. "All readings good." With Teyla, that meant within normal operating parameters.

The bridge doors only opened half way before Mer bulled through. He still had on a heavy parka, the fur collar framing his jaw, and he was flushed with either with fury or exertion. He yelled, "No
way do the Hives have enough power to destroy a planet, Jehan!"

"We don't know what weapons the Wraith have," Vala pointed out. "They wouldn't have any reason to deploy planet killers when they want to maintain their food sources on them. But Hoff – the cure made Hoff poison. They had to wipe it out so it didn't spread to other worlds."

Mer had stopped at the center of the bridge and was reading through the information scrolling on the screens to each side of the main display. His eyes widened before he looked back up. "Shit," he said in a small, horrified voice. "They blew the Stargate."

He looked at Jehan. His mouth worked before he could speak again.

"They overloaded the Stargate, but... even a Stargate won't destroy a planet." He scanned the sensor numbers again. "There must have been naquadah or naquadria deposits on Hoff. It's the only explanation."

Vala shifted restlessly. "Take some time, get all the data you can, but I want to jump out of here as soon as possible."

Mer nodded, "Yeah, yeah, Sam and Radek will want as much information as we can gather. No one's ever seen the aftermath of a blown Stargate before... "
Short post tonight.

Jennifer Kim is a canon guest character who appeared in NCIS: LA S7 episodes 11 and 22, *Cancel Christmas* and *Granger, O.*

This is an AU, which means that occasional characters who died in canon may appear in it.

Jack


*Be careful what you wish for when you go to Hetty Lange,* Jack reflected as he sat down at the table with the North Korean spy.

Jack's espionage fairy godmother had handed the file on her to him, along with the keys to the transport van. Jennifer Kim was going to disappear. She'd been caught through a fluke and there had been no trial. Even after cooperating with NCIS to stop another North Korean agent, she was meant to languish in a black site until the US needed a pawn.

She looked pretty and sweet-faced and barely in her twenties, but then so had Jenny Shepard been when Hetty brought her in to work with him and Jethro. They hadn't been much older and Hetty had already been ageless.

They'd all been old on the inside by the time they made it out Russia. It was the mileage, after all, not the years.

*Completely capable,* he said to Hetty, because you didn't write it down, you didn't even say it out loud: *'I want someone who will kill to build their cover.'* Kill to maintain it.

It was one of the reasons he didn't want any iteration of Western law enforcement for the job. The US military and law enforcement tried to screen out the sadists and murderers; the ones left sometimes hesitated when it was time to make their bones. Even the soldiers who had been in combat sometimes balked at assassination. Besides, most soldiers could not do undercover, never mind long term deep cover.

Jennifer Kim wasn't military and hadn't grown up with the sort of socialization that crippled many operatives. Of course, she had zero commitment to any of the values Jack had spent his life upholding. He couldn't appeal to her patriotism; her loyalties lay with North Korea if she had any.

Hetty had handed him a grenade with the pin out. *Thanks a lot, Hetty.*

But Jennifer Kim had the skills and no matter how hard any moles or enemies looked, they were never going to find a connection between her and Jack O'Neill or the Stargate Program. Jennifer
Kim had never even met Hetty Lange; all her interrogations had been conducted by Owen Granger and if anyone ever wondered why she never made it to the black site, Granger would be the obvious suspect. Granger was the one who had been obvious in his efforts to have her released.

'She's his daughter,' Hetty had murmured as she handed over file and keys. The driver and the guard had been reassigned, under the impression someone else had taken their place. It would come back on Granger if it was exposed; the orders were under his authorization. Not Hetty's. Not Jack's. Their fingerprints wouldn't be on the op.

You did what you had to with the tools you had. You had to admire Hetty; she'd managed to do a favor for Jack and put Granger under her thumb in one move.

Jack hadn't played the Great Game in person in years. The last time had been when he lied to his team to do the Tok'ra's dirty work. This was a little better; he was the one in charge.

He'd simply driven away with Jennifer Kim in the back of the transport van. Nothing marked the van as anything special and his little Asgard doohickey made sure no one could track it if it had ticks. Two hours later he switched to a faded Bronco, zatted Kim once she was in the back seat, and abandoned the van with the keys in the ignition. Two hours after that, they reached the old fishing cabin as Kim was coming around. Jack had gone to flight school with the man who built the cabin and helped him truck in the stove and fix the roof on one leave. The property belonged to Ed's daughter now, but she might not even know the cabin was there.

Kim, being a smart girl, had figured out something was going on when they switched vehicles. She was quiet and watchful, waiting to make a move until she had a better idea of the situation, when Jack led her inside. In reward, Jack had let her use the facilities by herself, with the door half-closed, listening but not watching.

He manacled her leg shackles to the table. It was a big old thing, solid wood, with carved lion paw feet that would keep her from sliding the manacle off even if she could lift it, but given enough time, she could escape. He could, after all. He'd never liked seeing a dog chained up and he didn't care to trap a human being where if he left and didn't make it back she'd die of dehydration.

Other than the washroom, it was a one room cabin with no electricity, just a generator and a water tank. The roof leaked in one corner; Ed and he were pilots, not carpenters. It had a cot, a couple of straight chairs, the heavy pine table, and a sink and counter along one wall, with open shelves above it, and the small woodstove in the corner. Dry fire wood had been stacked next to the stove. An old chest at the foot of the cot had held blankets where mice couldn't get to them. He'd stashed a case inside it, under a moth-eaten Hudson Bay blanket, when he checked out the cabin. He'd stocked two jerry cans of diesel for the generator, a case of MREs and bottled water, and a gate team medkit.

Jack took two of the bottles of water and brought them to the table. One for him, one for Kim. He didn't bother using the file Hetty provided as window dressing. Instead, he laid a zat along with the Asgard jammer on the table before he sat down. The jammer went with him nearly everywhere. He tapped it on. In his office, he only used it intermittently, sometimes randomly, so whoever was listening – someone was always listening – would chalk it up to bad equipment.

"I'm Jack O'Neill. No point fucking around with false names," he began. "If you agree to work for me, it's likely you'll learn about me from your target."

"Why would I work for you?" Kim asked. She didn't inflect it with scorn or contempt nor with eagerness. Jack wouldn't have bought the latter. Kim just sounded mildly curious. "If I did, why would you trust me?"
Jack nodded. "Good questions. The answer to both is: enlightened self-interest. And, hell, I never said I'd trust you."

"Still wondering why me." She gave a little more interest.

Jack rewarded her with a smile.

"You're a North Korean spy. You're dedicated enough that your superiors allowed you to operate in the United States, even with your connections here."

"You mean my father."

Jack shrugged. "The connection won't do much for his career if it comes out."

"So, I'm to disappear."

"You knew the risks. Don't knock us for being as dedicated to our country as you are to yours." He would have had a beef with her if she'd been raised as a citizen of the US and been turned by her mother's people – the old 'old country/your real people' schtick that so many people who should have known better still fell for over and over. But Kim wasn't a traitor, she was an enemy combatant, even if the field of combat was the smoke and mirrors world of espionage. Jack could respect that.

He sipped his water. A little mineral-ish for his taste, but at least it hadn't been treated with a truck load of chemicals. Every time he drank the water in DC, he remembered Daniel's lecture on why everyone drank so much beer in the Dark Ages.

He picked up the zat. "This is a zatnik'el. Take a good look." He turned it around in his hands, holding it so Kim could look it over.

"It's some kind of stun gun."

"A little more than that."

"It looks ridiculous."

Jack chuckled. "Pretty much." He aimed the zat at the firewood and fired. Kim jolted in her seat. "If that was a person – or any living thing – they'd be out like a light. I used it on you. The hangover you've got will wear off in another four to eight hours. You never get used to it."

She gave him a skeptical look. Jack fired the zat a second time.

"That would have killed. One shot scrambles the electrical signals in your brain and nervous system. A second shot before the stun wears off stops it completely, and you're dead." He considered that. "Of course, if you've been zatted at all, your luck already went down the toilet. It's mostly the bad guys who use these."

"So far all I see is a toy."

"Ya think?" Jack turned back and zatted the firewood a third time. The firewood disappeared.

Kim gasped and her leg shackles clanged. "What – "

"Third time unbinds your molecules. So, I think you understand now, if I want to disappear you? You will really disappear." Jack set the zat back down on the table. Kim stared at it like it was a snake – which was close enough. "So."

"It must be highly classified," Kim said carefully.

"Very," Jack agreed.

"My country would do much with such technology."

"I'm sure, though you'd need some goddamn geniuses to figure out how it works. Our best people say there's no way to manufacture them here, anyway."

He watched for the flicker, the tiny changes in her face, muscles tightening or relaxing under the skin, and saw her put the implications of his words together.

"If your country did not make that, who did?"

"I knew you were a smart kid," Jack said. "Aliens."

Kim started to protest and stopped herself, her gaze settling on the zat, studying its ornate and inefficient exterior. With a rattle of her manacles, she picked up the other bottle of water and gulped some down.

"Yeah, they're out there, and despite a lot of good people dying to prevent it, at least one of those snakehead fuckers is here, on Earth."

"Aliens," Kim said. She didn't believe him yet. Might never believe without seeing a Goa'uld light up the host's eyes. Maybe not even then, some people just couldn't reframe their idea of reality. Jack figured a deep cover agent would be flexible, but the North Koreans didn't encourage a lot of thinking outside the box. It was a toss-up. If she wasn't the one for the job, he'd be using the zat three more times.

"These aliens are sentient parasites who can take over a host – that would be a human – and use the poor bastard as their puppet," Jack explained "They call themselves Gou'ald. They consider themselves gods and humans are useful only as hosts or slaves. The one that's here, now, on Earth, is one of the worst."

"Why?"

"Because he's smarter than most of them."

She went still then, and thoughtful, so Jack let her consider it.

"Enlightened self-interest, you said."

Jack nodded. "Saving the entire planet from an alien that wants to make us all its slaves would be just as much in your, and North Korea's, self-interest, wouldn't you say?" And if even she didn't really believe him, she might still do the job for the chance at snatching the zat tech. Daniel might call him a cynic, but Jack had never gone wrong betting on self-interest. It wasn't called sacrifice because it was easy. Most people preferred easy.

"Why me?" She didn't argue his point.

"Because there are people working for this Goa'uld – he calls himself Ba'al – he's one of the remaining System Lords, and I'll brief you on all of it before I send you under if you agree – who don't know what he is or don't care or are convinced he's going to win." Jack despised the last two almost as much as he hated Ba'al. "Some of them are willing to sell out the whole damn planet to be on the winning side." Jack needed to uncover which ones were traitors to the entire human race.
Otherwise, he'd go after Ba'al guns blazing instead of this softly, softly catchee monkey plan. "He's already got sources inside the government at this point. I can't move until I have enough to bring them all down."

Kim tipped her head. It sent her straight brown hair sliding over her shoulder. It was clean, but dull; Federal lock-up didn't run to fancy shampoos and conditioners.

"You want me to take him out?"

"I'd love to triple-zat the bastard myself, but the truth is there are too many eyes on me. Ba'al and I have tangled before. I'd never get close. He's expecting me."

But not little Jennifer Kim, North Korean spy and assassin, who was supposedly either stuffed in a black site hole or already dead. No one was looking for her. Jack just had to sell it to her.

Hetty wouldn't have given her to him if she hadn't thought Jack could do it; she wouldn't have given Kim this second chance if she didn't think Kim would be able to grasp the real threat and respond appropriately. Jack had spent a decade with the USSR in his gunsights, and the last decade coordinating with those same Russians as part of the Stargate Program. The best of the Russians had managed to look beyond petty national posturing. They did it, men like Chekov, scientists like Markova. Jennifer Kim could make the same conceptual leap – he hoped.

Hetty thought so and Hetty was rarely, so rarely wrong. (And it went so very, very badly when she was; blood in the snow and Jethro hadn't spoken to Jack since.) But even Hetty had feelings and Jack wondered if she hadn't been doing four favors in one. Of course, where Jack wanted to send Kim would be no favor at all, but there were things even Hetty didn't know and Poland had long since been replaced in Jack's nightmares.

He sipped his water and waited. He'd learned patience over the years. The art of keeping his hands off, as he thought of it, and letting people come to their own decisions, do their own work, show their own colors. He might hate the desk job, but he handled Homeworld pretty well, though how long that would last with the new president… but that was why he was risking this op, wasn't it?

"I want every damn thing you can get on him and his operations and then… " Jack shrugged to himself. In for a penny, in for a pound, what was murder if you were technically committing treason? They couldn't give you more than your life as a sentence or an execution. Even torture ended when you died. Unless someone had a sarcophagus. He'd been there, done that. "Then, yeah, kill him if possible. You'll be the one to make the call."

"And afterward? What happens to me after I've assassinated your enemy?" Her expression didn't give much away, but she still had a survival instinct. It was pretty hard to eradicate, especially in the young.

"Our enemy," Jack corrected. He tipped his head and considered how to answer her question.

"So you say."

He didn't fault her skepticism. Not yet. The zat wasn't proof enough.

Time to wave the carrot. "Well, if you're successful, I'll give you a new identity and money and leave you the hell alone to do whatever you want. Hell, if you want to try buying your way back into your old master's good graces with news about aliens and whatever intel and tech you can steal from Ba'al's organization, I won't even try to stop you." He might not like the North Koreans and he wasn't in a hurry to let them in on the biggest secret ever, but they were still human. Jack would
take even them over rule by the Goa'uld, for damn sure. He added, "You do this, and it's your get out of jail free card. You do this, and I'll give you a job with me. Hell, I'll take you through the Stargate if you want." That would be a bitch... but he could pull it off. Or ask Thor for a quick ride on the Jacob Carter.

Kim stilled again. "The Stargate?"

"A fancy wormhole thingie that connects us to other planets." Jack waved his hand, dismissing the science of it. "There are other humans out there. The Goa'uld took them from Earth as slaves centuries ago, but a lot of them are free now." He bared his teeth at her. "There are other races, too. Nox. Asgard. Some others besides the Goa'uld, but those are the big players."

"Why should I believe you?" Kim sat back in her chair. "About any of this?"

"What have you got to lose?"

She looked at the zat again. "Show me more."

"Yes or no?"

"Yes." Yeah, she didn't believe him but she was going to play along. Good enough.

Jack picked up the zat and slid it inside his jacket. Then he went to the chest and opened it, taking out the aluminum-sided case he'd left there before starting out this morning. The case required a fingerprint and retinal scan along with a combination. The science boffins might not be up to manufacturing zat'nik'tels en masse, but they'd managed to hand make a modified one that would leave nothing behind inside the case if someone forced it. It was also shielded against scanning and tracking.

Inside was a tablet with no network or internet capability. Not that there was any connectivity at the cabin – another benefit. He set the tablet on the table in front of Kim. "Password's Buckle Up, Rudyard. You try to transfer anything from it, it wipes. The screen's treated, you can't take any pictures of it. Read what's on there." He and Daniel had put the brief together at Jack's fishing cabin, while supposedly relaxing and celebrating Daniel's return – alive – from Pegasus. "I'm not giving you a zat. Someone finds one of those on you, your cover and your connection to the SGC is blown. I'm not giving you a gun either – you can damn well find one for yourself."

"What's my cover?"

Jack considered her. He hadn't really sold her on aliens or saving the world. But did it matter? She didn't need to believe him about that, she just needed to get in, find out Ba'al's plans and kill the bastard. Did he care if she thought he was cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs? Not if she did the job.

He said, "Legal temp. It should get you in the door. Two of their regulars are going to be unavailable. One's clearance is being pulled over a drug charge after a drunk driving stop. The other is luck – she's pregnant and has to go on bed rest."

He pulled out a fat envelope. "Two hundred fifty thousand cash for operating expenses. Anything you don't spend is yours." It was drug money beamed out of a stash house uncovered in the course of a leak investigation. It couldn't be traced back to Homeworld. He placed the envelope next to the tablet. The next envelope was thinner. "Identity, with a history that will hold up to background checks. It includes a bank account with just under fifteen thousand in savings and checking account with eight thousand. You've also got around two thousand in credit card debt and you're still paying off your student loans." The papers were courtesy of The Birdman, a forger and hacker.
whose work was peerless. He'd once hacked the SGC and Sam had tracked him down, but they'd kept the report off the books and the Birdman as a useful contact.

Jack worried more and more about how much had to be done covertly, not just to keep the Stargate secret, but to get anything done. Wasn't that how the Trust probably began? A bunch of people in the know deciding that they knew better than the authorities what needed to be done and doing it?

Exigency excused all sins.

He lifted the last item out of its cut foam packaging. It looked like a stainless steel coffee travel container. It took a thumb print to open the top though, and then a password typed into the tiny keyboard beneath that. He held it in his hand. Inside it held a stack of blue-filled glass discs. Each one held enough symbiote poison under pressure to spread through a city the size of New York. Drop one, throw one, just squeeze hard or snap it like a potato chip and the gas would explode out. A host didn't have to breathe it in, skin contact was sufficient. It had been modified to linger over a month without breaking down and could last longer in low-lying, shadowed areas.

"Symbiote poison. This is what you'll use to take out Ba'al and any other snakes with him. The container opens to your thumbprint and mine. No one else."

"What's –"

"It's in the briefing on the tablet."

He would have preferred to brief her in step by step, answering questions and expanding on what was in the reports, but there was only so long the general in charge of Homeworld Security could vanish from the grid without raising too many questions. Sgt. Calloway was running interference for him in DC, the way she always did when Jack slipped his leash. Hollis Mann was in Colorado Springs on schedule, double-checking the deep background check on the latest candidate to take over command at Area 51. That was the idea, that nothing out of the ordinary routine was going on.

He pulled a final item from the case. It looked like a perfume spritzer. Basically it was, but this perfume had an extra ingredient.

"Spritz this on once or twice a day."

"Why?"

"It neutralizes the Dargal chemical. No one's supposed to have it outside Area 51, but better safe than sorry."

"Safe from what?" Kim seemed calm enough, but it was her life they were talking about.

"The Dargal chemical brainwashes you into seeing and believing whatever the person administering it tells you. A whiff of it and you'd think Kim Jong Il was Kim Kardashian if they told you so." He gestured to the perfume spritzer. "That's formulated to break the effect. Put it on and it lasts about twelve hours if you don't wash it off. You can spray it in someone's face and break the illusion if they've been alien-roofed, too." Kim gave the spritzer a jaundiced look. Jack had a feeling she didn't believe it was what he said. It was just in case anyway; Jack figured Ba'al didn't have the Dargal chemical or they'd already be screwed six ways from Sunday.

"How do I report in and how often?"

He'd recruited Elkins, one of the marines who came back from Pegasus, to work as their cut-out. According to SGC records, Elkins had stayed in Atlantis.
"Physical dead drop. Start chewing gum. Stick a USB drive under the table at the designated coffee place. There's a list, with dates and times, on the tablet. Memorize it. Memorize everything. The tablet has instructions on how to destroy it. If you don't, it'll do it itself in three days."

"I could transcribe a lot from it in three days," Kim said.

"You could. You could run to Farrow-Marshall and sell it to Ba'al and maybe buy your life, at the cost of every human being on this planet," Jack agreed. "It's a gamble. I've bet on worse odds."

He pulled the key to her manacles out of his pocket. "Here," he said and gestured for her to extend her hands. "Look, you don't have to believe me, just do the job. Or walk away. I won't come after you. Either you won't matter or things will go to shit and the worst punishment will be knowing you could have helped stop it."

He turned the key in the lock and then sat back, letting Kim do the rest.
"Everyone?" Janet repeated what Carson Beckett had just said. Good God, they'd thought this man was fit to head the medical portion of the Atlantis expedition? He wasn't fit to run a doc-in-a-box clinic out of a strip mall. How had he passed his ethics classes? Brilliant he might be, a gifted researcher, but you did not experiment on humans, never mind an entire population.

"It was their choice," Beckett defended himself.

"It was your choice to support this – this stupidity?" She closed her hands into fists. The difference between trying an experimental treatment to possibly save someone already dying and administering an untested genetic modification on perfectly healthy people was deeper than the Marianas Trench. She forced herself to take a deep breath, to appreciate the high ceilings and wide windows of her office above the central Atlantis infirmary.

With the full and the partially charged potentias powering Atlantis, the expedition had been able to take advantage of the already existing medical facilities, rather than set up hospital in some empty, repurposed rooms. Before he returned to the Stella Via, Daniel had teased a great deal of useful, if random, information from Atlantis' data banks, including what was where and how to utilize it. Each of the city's piers had its own hospital and many of the largest buildings boasted their own infirmaries.

Janet's office was composed of a slice of a pillar at the center of the floor that made up the hospital. She could look down on the surgical and emergency medicine sectors. On the far side were the treatment sectors and the patient rooms. She could activate a view of every room in the infirmary with a word now that Atlantis had accepted her as its Medical First.

Now and then, a reflection of sunlight from the ocean surrounding Atlantis rippled white over the aquamarine walls. It was so different from the infirmary under Cheyenne Mountain or the low ceilings and airlocks of the Revenge that Janet sometimes had to simply stand and breathe and smile. This wasn't just her medical domain. It was her place.

"I didn't support it," Beckett protested. "Everything was forced through so fast – I tried to tell them we needed to do more testing. But no one wanted to wait and, God help me, at first it seemed to be fine."

"Did you do any kind of testing?" Janet asked snidely.

"Once we believed we had succeeded in creating an inoculation that would render humans immune from feeding, a volunteer received it," Beckett said.
Devastation marked his face, but Janet doubted it was over his lapse of ethics. He should have been grieving, but he shouldn't have been shocked. Researchers could be terribly short-sighted, so intent on solving a problem that they never considered the consequences of their solution. Like wiping out predators and then watching the prey species over-populate and starve off.

Which was entirely too apt a metaphor in Pegasus.

And that metaphor wasn't true, anyway, Janet told herself. Humans, sentient beings, could moderate their populations. The Wraith obviously did or they would have wiped out their human food sources over the last ten thousand years. She'd keep that reflection to herself, though. Anything approaching approval of the Wraith would be met with hostility among Pegasans.

"And the result?" she asked instead.

"The volunteer," Beckett said before swallowing hard, "suffered no obvious deleterious effects from the attempted feeding. We monitored him for a week."

"A week," Janet repeated flatly. Beckett had the grace to look ashamed.

"I administered every test I could think of to be sure the lad was healthy. The Hoffans were moving forward no matter what I said."

"A week."

Beckett closed his eyes and bowed his head. "Yes. The Chancellor… well, I take responsibility, for all of it."

Janet sighed and leaned over her desk to catch his gaze. "You didn't rush out and jab everyone on the planet. This disaster took more than one person's mistakes to make."

He gulped and sighed and said in a small voice, "Thank you." He straightened in his seat. "The Hoffans had a captured Wraith – God knows how many of them died to catch it and keep it imprisoned. It hadn't… fed in months. There was some worry it would die before the inoculation could be tested. Perna told me about the pressure on the Chancellor and the Department of Science."

Perna was the pastel blonde Beckett had married. She was working with Atlantis people to get the Hoffan refugees settled. Janet had even spoken with her about meds for people with chronic conditions. Hoff had been advanced enough that people didn't normally just get sick and die; they had regular meds for many problems. Janet wasn't familiar with all of them. Perna could help expand their lexicon of Pegasus treatments and drugs. If she did that, Janet might reconsider her initial estimation of the woman.

She'd struck Janet as fragile and delicate, but maybe she had a spine of steel.

Maybe she was what Beckett needed in a partner.

Politics and an entire planet driven half-mad by thousands of years of being preyed on wouldn't make for good decisions anywhere. The Hoffans were so focused on achieving their dream they had taken shortcuts that turned it into a nightmare. But they weren't the only people to have ever done that. Janet felt a pulse of pity for Beckett. Alone and with no way home, terrified, offered a place of honor and a seeming chance to help his saviors, he had succumbed their obsession too.

She still wouldn't trust him to do any research without oversight, though.
"The volunteer, his name was Merell, went into the cell with the Wraith and it attacked immediately." Beckett shuddered. "Have you seen one feed? There's something sadistic about it, as if they're glorying in the fear and agony – " He shook his head at the fancy. "That's what ts was, until the Wraith jerked its hand away from that man's chest. It stared at him. He was undamaged except for a little blood where its feeding apparatus bit through the skin: unaged, unhurt. My God, he looked more shocked than the Wraith. And everyone was staring, then shouting and celebrating."

Janet tried to imagine it, but couldn't.

"It worked," Beckett insisted. Even now, he looked thrilled as he remembered. The happiness drained from his face. "Then the Wraith hissed something, some word none of us understood and it collapsed. It died, fast. Feeding poisoned it."

"I bet everyone thought that was a great side-effect," Janet muttered.

"You can't even imagine, lass."

Janet gave Beckett a hard look. She was no one's lass. She'd had enough of that crap back on Earth, being patted on the head every time she outshone the men, like it was cute, but they were still going to hire someone with a dick, even if he was only half as competent as her. But they'd hire her to work for him and prop him up and smile when he took the credit for her work and called it 'a team effort', like he'd done jack-shit.

There were reasons aside from Atlantis that she hadn’t gone back to Earth.

"The Hoffans immediately declared the inoculation a success and began plans to manufacture enough for all of their people. Perna and I, we both counselled for further testing, for monitoring for long term effects." Beckett shrugged. "They wouldn't listen. Even when people died, they wouldn't stop the vaccination operation. Even when they told the people of the risks."

"They were that obsessed with not being fed upon," Janet murmured.

"And that if the Wraith tried, they would die."

She could almost understand it. Almost. But. "They administered it to the children too."

Beckett rubbed his hands over his face before he nodded. "They did."

"What was the over-all casualty rate?"

"Fifty percent."

"And for the children?"

"Forty-eight percent if they were past puberty," Beckett answered promptly. "Perna persuaded the Chancellor to turn over the numbers. She hoped the data could be used to somehow improve the inoculation, so it wasn't as dangerous."

"Did she take it herself? What about you?"

Becket covered his face with his hands. "I did not. The inoculation was designed for Hoffans, not Tau'ri, there are some genetic markers we don't share -- I would have needed more time to tailor it to my genetics. And, Perna, I – I begged her to wait until I could make it safer. She was pregnant. I told her it might make her miscarry. She did, anyway, but by then we had the numbers… She
agreed to wait."

Janet wondered about fertility and whether the Hoffans' poisoned well might end up killing the rest of them too, even without the Wraith destruction of their planet. Anything that rendered them that toxic... She'd need to start studying if any of them had become pregnant since the inoculation and monitoring those pregnancies more closely than usual. If Perna hadn't taken the vaccine, then at least she'd have one baseline Hoffan as a control.

"The children," Beckett whispered, and his voice broke, "the little ones... the fatality rate was higher. Much higher..."

"How high, Beckett?" Janet demanded.

He began to weep. "Sixty-nine percent."

Vala's crew had brought back a report on what happened to the rest of Hoff, the destruction of the Stargate, an entire world blown into so much debris. It was disaster enough, but half of the Hoffans had already been dead at their own hands, in their blind drive to thwart the Wraith.

And now there were just over nine thousand left, packed into Atlantis' temporary housing, traumatized and displaced forever. Most of them seemed eager to assimilate into Atlantis' society, but Janet knew some would move on, and there would be a percentage that would have to be moved on because they thought they could take over.

All of them might be medical ticking time bombs. For now, they'd survived the treatment, but there could still be severe long-term side effects. She'd have set up a program to monitor and treat all of them.

One more stress added onto Atlantis' operations. It looked more and more like they were going to have to bargain with Earth, at least temporarily.

Ronon

Most of the Hoffan refugees wanted to stay on Atlantis rather than join the ship crews. That was fine with Ronon; he'd never wanted to fight beside someone who didn't believe whole-heartedly in that fight. He didn't see how anyone could expect someone compelled against their will to fight hard. More like, expect them to sabotage the fight.

Even when it came to fighting the Wraith, some people weren't meant for violence. It only made them different, not wrong. Melena couldn't use a gun, but her work as a doctor was a strike against the Wraith too. The Scholars who recorded history so that fighters could learn what worked and what failed, fought the Wraith. Everyone one who determinedly lived, fought the Wraith.

That was what Kell and so many like him had forgotten. Sateda had been more than soldiers, but they'd all been warriors.

Ronon knew Atlantis needed everyone they could recruit, everyone from seamstresses to farmers to cooks to cobbblers. They needed people who understood or at least weren't intimidated by high tech. The Hoffans were a good fit, like the Tarani and the Olesian rebels.

What Ronon knew of human nature left him surprised by one thing: the Hoffans didn't blame the Tau'ri, not even Beckett, for what happened. Of course, many of the refugees didn't have a clue who Beckett was and another portion of them just couldn't grasp why the 'cure' had enraged the Wraith into destroying their homeworld. They'd thrown themselves into making new lives in the City of the Ancestors.
Ronon folded his arms over his chest and looked over the group of volunteers — mostly Hoffans — with a scattering of boys and girls from other worlds. Mostly the non-Hoffans were older teens and young adults who had chosen to go with the Expedition when it visited their world. They were excellent fighters, trackers and hunters, but not interested in learning about advanced technology. Refugee children too young to take up arms, along with anyone else interested, were being taught Tau'ri, Satedan and Alteran science.

This group, though, wanted to fight the Wraith. Vala had told Ronon to gather up enough people to fill out crew and fight for *Revenge* if they needed to board another ship or do something on a planet. "Pick people who don't want Beckett's crazy gene therapies, since *Revenge* doesn't need the Ancestors' blood to operate," she told him.

Most of the Tarani were fixated on crewing the Alteran ships, particularly Hip, since it had been on Taranis so long, though *Revenge* had picked up a few who weren't willing to wait for the ATA therapy. Satedan refugees who hadn't been part of Kell's militia were also filtering in to the recruitment depots Atlantis had set up on several trade worlds. Word was spreading, just like the tale of what the Genii had done on Dagan.

The Wraith might be awake, but so were the people of Pegasus, and many still had the heart to fight.

"All right," he addressed the group. "Form three lines along the walls."

He'd spar with them one on one to get a feel. Then the ones he thought had promise would go up against Teyla. After that, he might ask for names.

Then they'd begin turning these fighters into soldiers.

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Vala

Vala waited until Janet was busy elsewhere before slipping into the genetics lab. Dr. Beckett was sitting at his desk, working with one of the Tau'ri computers, though one wall of the office displayed six different holograms, all labeled in Alteran. She made a face. Learning new languages wasn't her favorite activity, even if she could do it lying in bed, but since she was going to hang around Atlantis she'd learned to read and write and speak the Builders' tongue. It was necessary. So was the gene therapy Sam had mentioned Beckett meant to produce.

Janet was keeping a close eye on Beckett, but Sam had authorized continuing the genetic research. Newly activated ATA positives would have to learn to use it, but they would. Jehan might not like teaching, but he'd do it just to have a break. The few ATA positives they had were so overworked that Vala suspected they were starting to hate the tech. They needed people with the ATA desperately, for the city and the ships. The sooner Beckett succeeded, the better, despite Janet's doubts.

Just like they needed people who could read Alteran.

It would probably be a useful skill back in the Stella Via too. There were Gate Builder artifacts there as well, though no one knew how to make them work, since no one knew what they were supposed to do. Aside from the chappa'ai themselves and who knew if they weren't all using a sword to hammer nails in their case too?

"Hello, Doctor," she purred once the door slid closed behind her.
Beckett jolted in his seat and looked up, wide-eyed. Vala considered the seduction route, but remembered he had a Hoffan wife. Not that a wife or husband or partner guaranteed fidelity in her experience, but the marriage was still newish and Beckett seemed like the type to take it all so very seriously. Also, she didn't know how Hoffans felt about cheating and didn't want to find out poaching was considered grounds for murder. So she smiled without any sexual component.

"Miss Mal Doran," he greeted her.

"Captain."

"Oh, aye, that's right. It's a wee bit off-putting –."

Vala reconsidered her mission. Off-putting? Hathor's tits, no wonder every Tau'ri woman she met was filled with rage. Did she really want this person having anything to do with her genetic sequences? Something of her disgust must have shown. Beckett sputtered into silence.

"I've put me foot in it again, haven't I?"

Vala tipped her head. "Yes."

"What can I do for you, Captain?" Beckett asked quickly.

She drew out the Goa'uld healing device and held it up. "Are you familiar with this?" It was heavy in her hand, the technology hidden beneath a layer of etched and twisted gold. The red stone at the center covered most of her palm. When she had been Qetesh, she'd worn gold and platinum nail guards, rings and armlets, smithed by the finest slave artists to match it. Today her own nails were painted dark green and there was a chip on her thumbnail because the polish wasn't Mer's formula.

Beckett looked interested and excited. "Aye, I was shown one at the SGC before I was reassigned to the Antarctica base." He glanced up at her from looking at the device. He held out his hand but didn't touch. "May I?"

Vala dropped it into his hand. There was nothing he could do with it. Nothing anyone here other than Meredith could do with any of the technology the Goa'uld keyed to themselves. No one else here had ever been a host. Beckett almost fumbled it, startled by the weight. Underneath the decoration, it was powered with a dense, rice-sized pellet of naquadah.

Beckett turned the jewel-encrusted device over in his hands. "You can operate it?" he asked. Vala could see how much more interested he was in her now that she was research subject. It was rather off-putting, as Beckett would have said.

"Yes," Vala replied. "I was a host. Meredith was one as well and can also operate Goa'uld tech."

"So it doesn't in fact require a Goa'uld at all, but some effect they have on the host body that lingers? Is it permanent?"

Vala gave him a hard look. "There aren't a lot of ex-hosts wandering around the Stella Via, doctor, but as far as I know, it is permanent."

"Do you know the mechanism?" he asked.

"I'm neither a doctor a chemist or a geneticist," Vala replied with a shrug. "Goa'uld can sense each other in hosts. I can also sense them and ex-hosts and the primita a Jaffa carries." She plucked the healing device back from Beckett. "And I can sense Goa'uld tech. It's a sort of itching buzz in my blood."
"It's unlikely it's actually in your blood – "

"The naquadah is," Vala interrupted him. "All the other toxins and chemicals the Goa'uld produces can be filtered out, but naquadah, once introduced to the body, remains."

"It's a heavy metal. Do you have any symptoms of heavy metal poisoning?" Beckett asked instantly. "Would you be willing to undergo a complete examination? There are some treatments for it."

"It doesn't poison a host, because the Goa'uld make subtle changes in our metabolisms and body chemistry to compensate for the side effects."

"The Goa'uld can affect the host body on a genetic level?"

Vala twitched, imagined Qetesh's purr in her head. *Oh, is that what the Tau'ri call it? Genetics. Nirrti experimented with such. She wished to breed a superior host body. It wasn't really Qetesh, she knew, just an echo which her own mind had built from the memories Qetesh had cursed her with before her extraction and death. It still made her skin crawl. She'd almost rather it was really Qetesh rather than acknowledge how like Qetesh she'd become. She was centuries and a galaxy away from the rebellious girl that had been given up to be a Goa'uld host though and she couldn't turn back; no one could.*

She shook it off, the way she always did, and smiled wider and leaned a little deeper, so Beckett's gaze darted to her décolletage first and then up nervously. She watched his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed hard. She took a sadistic pleasure in discomfiting Beckett. He seemed like such a pathetic, harmless man, this healer who'd had a hand in the destruction of an entire planet. It was people like him who had agreed to hand her over to the Jaffa – best for the rest of the village, they'd said.

"Yes," she answered after gathering her thoughts again. "They can. The laziest use the sarcophagus, but there are others who manipulate the host's own cells to maintain health and youth. It's constant work for them though, though some of the changes become self-sustaining. Like the naquadah."

Qetesh hadn't been any less lazy than the other Goa'uld. She simply had lost her sarcophagus in a minor conflict with Kigal. Qetesh had concealed her losses, taken a new and youthful host, and maintained Vala's youth. Even now, Vala was faster, stronger, and healed quicker than the average human of the Stella Via. She hadn't visibly aged since the Tok'ra removed Qetesh, either, though decades had passed.

She knew that Jolinar had repaired Meredith's allergies and several other congenital problems that would and should have popped up in his body by now.

None of them knew how many times Ba'al had put Jehan in the sarcophagus, but Vala saw the beginning of crows' feet around his eyes. The Alterans had been long-lived, but for all he had the full complement of the ATA gene, Jehan aged like any healthy human.

It wasn't good enough. She needed him to live at least so long as she and Meredith would.

She needed to safeguard him in every way possible, too, if they were going to go back to the Stella Via.

Which had brought her to the good doctor, the mad doctor, the mad scientist, Beckett.

"What do you want from me?" Beckett asked.
Well, she had come to him because he was brilliant. Vala slid the healing device onto her hand and pushed her intention at it, at the naquadah in it, to activate it. The red stone glowed and the strange heat of it soaked into her bones. Not her skin, not her muscles, there was no heat to touch, but she felt it in the naquadah that laced through her. She held it so Beckett could see it but not aimed at him.

"I and Meredith will let you study us and contribute all we both know of Goa'uld science. In exchange, you will find a way to give the ability to use this to others who have not been made into hosts." Compared to activating latent ATA genes, it should be simple.

She closed her fingers over her palm. For a second, the glow burned through them, outlining her bones with pinkish-red, before the device shut off. "We're proof it is possible for a human to use this technology. The only question is the mechanism."

"What can those things actually heal?" Beckett asked.

"Everything but death," Vala answered honestly. Healing so much would likely put her or Meredith in a coma, since the energy came from them, but it wasn't a lie.

But it wouldn't slow the aging process. For that they would need a sarcophagus, a Goa'uld or Tok'ra or something new.

She hadn't discussed it with Mer. She was afraid he would side with Jehan. And she knew Jehan would vehemently object.

Beckett was a long shot and the healing device merely a lagniappe.

The part of her that Qetesh had shaped wouldn't waste time trying for something more acceptable to Jehan. But she wasn't Qetesh.

She wasn't.

"My God," Beckett whispered, his gaze on the healing device, lips parted, and then smiled at Vala like she'd offered him something wonderful. Like she was wonderful and desirable. Like he'd never wanted anyone the way he wanted her.

If he had even a hint of the screaming horrors in her head, he'd look at her with pity instead of want. Who, after all, wanted to sleep with a Goa'uld? No. Vala didn't want anyone's pity, either. When she finished here, she was going to find Stackhouse or someone and fuck him blind. It was her body and she'd do as she pleased with it. But she would get what she wanted from Beckett too.

Once she had this from Beckett, they could do business. There had to be a way to lobotomize a symbiote.

She wasn't Qetesh. She wouldn't put a Goa'uld in her friend's head to keep him alive.

Unless she had to.
Infiltration

Teyla

Teyla sipped her tea and smiled to herself as the latest negotiations closed on a good note. She'd dropped a word here and there since they took Atlantis back from the Genii, but it was Kolya himself who had done the Genii's reputation the most damage. His unit of armed men had been active on more worlds than Keras' former home and Dagan. Whenever someone didn't cooperate, Kolya resorted to force. The story of Dagan, and its endless refugees who had spent the next weeks dying of radiation sickness on different worlds across the galaxy, had melded with the rumors Athosians had gleefully fed and transformed into something greater.

Perhaps she meant worse, for the Genii.

The Wraith had begun culling hundreds of years early. The Genii had poisoned Dagan and destroyed its cities. The two events had combined as the stories were told.

The Genii had tortured the Tau'ri, the children of the Ancestors, and woken the Wraith early by taking one of them captive. They had tried to steal the City of the Ancestors and brought destruction down on everyone by bringing a Wraith into its sacred halls.

If Acastus Kolya had survived the mad Wraith who had tackled him into the Ancestors' Ring, it hardly mattered. There was no more hated name in the galaxy.

Word spread through the Rings faster than sniffles through a pack of children. The Ancestors had sent the children of their children, the Tau'ri, to raise Atlantis once more and fight the Wraith. Everyone must give aid as they could. For many worlds, it was no more than a bushel of tuttleroot or some of the now despised and unwanted Genii tava. Other worlds offered the mysteries of their own Ancestor shrines and artifacts. Stronger worlds sent their best and brightest scientists and soldiers to join the Tau'ri.

All of Pegasus was in upheaval. The Tau'ri, the Genii, the Wraith, the rise of a great Ancestor ship from Taranis, Hives destroyed, changed everything. Olesia's government had fallen; the new government had sought alliance with Atlantis, and offered their factories and technicians, after mass mobbing the Wraith who had made their world its personal feeding ground.

Teyla has earned her own share of fame. She was the Runner Who Won. She seldom bothered to assert the truth, that she had barely survived, and that by theft and ruthlessness, and was half-starved and mostly mad when Vala and Jehan and Mer found her. She always made clear, though, that her loyalty was to Vala and Revenge above all else.

Even, especially, Revenge itself was assuming legendary status already. In Pegasus, Vala's ship had become known as The Ancestors' Revenge.

Sometimes, it was almost annoying.

It filled her with hope and the will to force destiny, though. All of Pegasus was rising into the light, the way Atlantis itself had, uniting for the first time since the Ancestors left it behind. She would cheerfully spit on an Alteran if she ever met one, but she kept that to herself. Atlantis was filling with people from so many worlds and more were coming; they were building not just something to fight the Wraith, but a new unity, a new society, one that would be centered upon but not ruled by Atlantis.
Today she had persuaded yet another leader to send a legate to the Great Gathering, to lend another voice.

The Wraith were still strong, but the humans of Pegasus united were many.

**Sam**

Still nothing on the ZPMs. *Potentia*. Sam mostly remembered to call them that when she was in talks with other Pegasans. When she went into science and research mode, though, she tended to think of them with the old SGC term. Either worked.

She'd call them fluffy turtle tutus if she could just get her hands on some that weren't empty.

Atlantis was running nicely with the full Dagan *potentia* and the partial one Kolya had stolen from Ares' people. They'd have sent it back but after the massacre by the Genii and the loss of their shield (the Genii hadn't just stolen their *potentia*, they'd dismantled and removed the entire shield installation), but Ares' people had chosen to bring themselves, especially the smaller children, to Atlantis. Bates and Ford hadn't been wildly enthusiastic about offering them a place in the city, but admitted they were the least likely to be spies or saboteurs. Since then, Atlantis had taken in the Tarani and now the Hoffans, along with Satedans, Olesians, and random recruits.

They all knew the IOA and the SGC wouldn't have offered Pegasans a permanent place in the city. They had wanted a military and research goldmine, not a colony, not even a base – a camp. Something that could be abandoned, that wouldn't compete for loyalty to the homeworld.

Bringing in children turned a place into a home. It was a commitment to staying. Not scavenging, looting, lying, and protecting Earth at the expense of other good people. SG-1 came and went on the planets they visited and never experienced the aftermath of their upheavals once they were back in the cozy confines of Cheyenne Mountain. A year on the run, in Pegasus, with no way back to Earth and nowhere to hide, had taught Sam some hard lessons about the Tau'ri.

When Jack showed up with the Asgard, she hadn't been surprised by how few wanted to go back with him. Beckett wasn't the only Expedition member with a Pegasan partner and she knew of two who had already had babies.

She hadn't considered, even for a second, returning to Earth herself. No one there would ever understand how alone the Expedition had been. Not even the Pegasans did, only Jehan and Meredith, maybe Vala and some of the Satedans. No home to return to, only themselves to rely on. She belonged to the Expedition and the Expedition belonged to her, and that was home. Now Atlantis was theirs as well, a place to stand and fight.

She looked at the report on the Z – *potentia* again and groaned. They had the three empty ones that had powered Atlantis through its ten thousand years sleeping under the sea. If they could recharge them, Atlantis could run at full capacity, with its shield, even power up the stardrive and move from this world if necessary.

Or they could share the *potentia* out; one each for *Revenge*, for *Aurora* and *Hip*. Send *Aurora* to protect Olesia's precious manufacturing capabilities. Back up the rebels' new government on the second continent instead of just taking first continent refugees in if they made it to the Stargate.

They needed more. They needed to figure how to make and recharge them or something equally powerful, because Atlantis was in it for the long haul. They needed power for the future, they needed more ships, and they needed more people qualified to work and fix Atlantis, the defense satellite and the ships.
Ugh.

Sam closed her eyes and tipped her head back, hoping it would ease the tension in her back and shoulders and behind her eyes.

Naquadah generators could make a huge difference in the meantime, while she and Meredith and Radek and whatever other people had something to contribute worked on the potentia problem. Naquadah generators could handle most of the city except the shield and save the potentia they had for that.

Vala was interested in returning to Milky Way, doing some hunting and trading. Nothing would get them naquadah generators unless they went to Earth though. So far, Sam had been able to distract her with other possibilities, but with Hip and Aurora available, it was harder and harder to argue that Atlantis needed Revenge for defense.

Sam sighed and closed the file on her computer. She pulled up a different one. Despite the deliberately fragmented and scrambled database, Atlantis had already disgorged years' worth of technological breakthroughs -- manufacturing specs included. Enough to trade with the IOA for what they wanted -- if the IOA would only agree.

Obtaining technology and materials – damn it, they need ammunition -- from Earth would just bet a stopgap, to hold until they had manufacturing facilities set up on other, abandoned worlds or ones that didn't even have a stargate to draw the Wraith. Some Satedans were rebuilding on their world, so the option of salvaging from Sateda had become a political hot point. Sam knew that a strong Sateda as an ally would be better long term. But that would be very long term and Atlantis needed ammo now.

They needed a plan for if the SGC and IOA tried to choke them off. No, Sam thought, sitting back, they needed a Vala plan, so that the IOA and SGC never even knew what to deny them.

They could trade carefully chosen tech specs for naquadah generators. Or trade basic naquadah, tease with the possibility of the tech. Just give them a taste. A lagniappe. Pegasus had a dearth of naquadah, but if Vala couldn't 'obtain' them some in the Milky Way, they could dismantle a couple of Stargates on empty worlds or from orbit and pull the naquadah from them, if nothing else.

Trading naquadah casually would misdirect any intelligence estimates of how much Atlantis and Pegasus had, too. Potlatch politics. The lack of it as a resource was a secret Sam suspected they should keep to themselves.

She wouldn't mind dissecting one of the Pegasus stargates to compare it with the ones in the Milky Way. They could keep the parts for spares in case the city gate was damaged. She made a note, but breaking down stargates for materials had to be a last-ditch option.

This last year hadn't just made her harder, the way Jack thought, it had made her wiser and more cautious. More circuitous. She'd learned to go around when it took too much effort to go through, to hoard her resources, to value every life higher, even when they weren't her responsibility, and to spend those lives ruthlessly when she had no choice.

The SGC and the IOA would be determined to return Atlantis to Tau'ri control, likely throwing out most of its people, and even leaving Pegasus. Not acceptable. The Expedition… No, they weren't an expedition now, nor a colony, not of Earth's.

Sam groaned. They were going to have to form a government for Atlantis sometime very soon, something more formal than the cobbled together mixture of the Expedition's mostly military
structure, its scientists, and the strongest leaders of the various refugee and emigre groups. She estimated they had no more than a year before the IOA made a move, unless something blew up in the Milky Way.

She'd add it to the list. The need for more power, more tech and ammo and manufactured goods and trained personnel, still topped it. Which for the moment still meant dealing with Earth.

Jennifer Kim/Kim Yujin

Kim Yujin hadn't seen her mother in ten years, not since she was dispatched to infiltrate the US. She was fifteen at the time and already had three years active training. Her schooling started before that. Yujin had been born to be a spy. Born because her mother and her father were spies, her father the target of her mother's honeypot mission.

North Korean Intelligence service had miscalculated with Owen Granger. Even as a younger man, he hadn't been vulnerable to blackmail. He was the sort to quote Wellington's 'publish and be damned'. Besides, he'd been onto Yujin's mother from the beginning. Whatever emotion might have been involved had taken a backseat to mission priorities. Owen Granger had been playing Yujin's mother while she thought she was extracting USN secrets. He'd given her truths they could verify and misinformation that had called into question the take from other sources. Attempts to ascertain with data sets were genuine had blown at least two networks, one in Hawaii and one Okinawa. Others had been damaged, losses cut.

By them Yujin's mother had been pregnant.

Abortion had been dismissed. Despite the failure of Yujin's mother's mission, Owen Granger remained a target because of his success. Clearly, Owen Granger would move up the ladder. He would become a higher value target. A child, wanted or unwanted, could become a useful lever.

That hadn't endeared Yujin to her mother, forced to return to North Korea and raise her in comparative poverty to the life she'd had as operative.

Yujin had enjoyed both living in the US and succeeding at her assignments. A great deal of spying was utterly boring. The less you did, the less anyone had to notice. A good spy was a good citizen and kept their head down. Being too gung-ho, patriotic or helpful was suspicious to any smart spy hunter.

Other parts were just distasteful. Ferreting out or setting up nastiness on the parts of people who were in positions to turn over information or take actions dictated by the enemy tended toward the very ugly in the twenty-first century. There weren't a lot of acts that, even proven, couldn't be rationalized, covered up, accepted or ignored. Especially among those with money and power.

Living in the US gave her a different perspective on North Korea. It was not an impressive one. Yujin didn't want to return there. But she had an outsider's perspective on the West, the US, too, and her briefs and handlers were right: it was bloated and corrupt.

By the time she was caught by NCIS the first time – as a result of someone else's screw-up, not that it would matter to her masters – she knew she didn't belong in North Korea any more than she did in the US. She had become both and neither, slipped into the fog of lost loyalties and conflicting allegiances that deep cover operatives often found themselves in. She'd been scrambling to keep herself free and alive.

Owen Granger hadn't offered her any options. Yujin respected him for that, a little. She didn't feel anything else toward him. Her handlers had never tasked her with making contact with him,
assigning her to a different operation – the one that NCIS took apart – and she felt a little grateful they hadn't. She had very conflicted feelings about her mother. At least, Granger hadn't conceived her as a tool.

The second time they met, she had reluctantly aided him and he had attempted to improve her situation afterward. This chance, from O'Neill, wouldn't have come without him, she suspected.

She wasn't going to see Owen Granger again though, unless things went badly wrong.

There was a good chance she would end up never seeing anyone again, dissolved into the nothingness by a zat fired three times.

She'd intended to take the cash O'Neill had given her and disappear. She could have done it. She had the training. O'Neill had even said he wouldn't come after her if she did. She knew how to go to ground. She'd been trained to go under. Under cover, underground. How to bury herself. Funny how all the metaphors sounded like digging her own grave.

She couldn't resist the siren lure of reading what was on that tablet, though. Maybe there would be enough on it to take back to North Korea and – but Yujin wasn't naïve enough to believe that would result in anything better than them taking the information and executing her. She would die for her country, but she couldn't see how her death would benefit it at this point.

While she read the briefing, which included a quick and dirty outline of how the Stargate Program began and what they'd discovered on the far side of the wormholes it opened, Yujin still told herself she could still disappear. O'Neill couldn't hunt her down without blowing his off-the-books op. No one else knew she hadn't gone to the Utah black site. It was probably all a trick or an experiment, crazy misinformation they meant for her to feed back to her superiors.

It couldn't be real.

Aliens?

Yujin gave up on not believing once she saw the pictures of the Goa'uld. Video of an autopsy of an American marine who had been taken over by one of the eel-like aliens. A normal autopsy which proceeded with the corpse positioned on the autopsy table, no cuts or edits, no voice-over. In this case, the corpse was prone, allowing the pathologist to make an incision from the coccyx to the base of the skull. Yujin had to stop it twice as the man's skin and muscles were dissected and butterflied outward so the camera could clearly record the creature that twined along the spine. The thing was nearly black, shockingly dark in contrast to the vertebrae, and thick as a fist, shining wet. She wondered if it had expanded, maybe from gaseous decay, after death, or if when alive it could compress itself. It seemed impossible something so large could be invisible beneath the skin.

The marine's body had had its backbone – and the Goa'uld – methodically removed and cut apart. The head of the Goau'd had still been locked onto the spine, its mouth latched onto the spinal nerves.

It stopped looking like an eel to Yujin when the pathologist began removing the Goa'uld's head. Thousands of filaments stretched from inside its mouth into the dead man's spinal column, hacking into his nervous system, hijacking control of his entire body.

Yujin watched the video twice, looking for cuts, for off proportions, for shadows where they shouldn't be, for places where they should be shadows, for any sign it was faked. The camera never moved, there were no edits, fluids drained into the runnels carved into the autopsy table and the stains on the pathologist's apron were continuous. The analog clock over the doors at the far
end of the room, barely noticeable, ticked, ticked, ticked, the minute hand sweeping through one hour into the next. The thing that convinced her beyond doubt, though, was an odd moment when the pathologist had finally lifted the Goa'uld's body free and set it on a second autopsy table. The woman commented, in an aside from her steady dictation of the marine's autopsy, "This was a big one, so it's probably old. We'll autopsy it next, then it goes in the freezer." It was so prosaic, as if the alien was a catfish. She noted next that without the Goa'uld, the marine's body had lost fourteen point three pounds. One of the guards in the autopsy room, US Air Force SFs, stifled a yawn.

If it had been a fake, everyone involved would have been too intent on making it look real to get sleepy or bored.

It was real.

Yujin read the rest of the background. She read the mission brief. She memorized the dead drops and the codes. Food orders for take-out Chinese, specific amounts of change left in the pocket of a piece of clothing taken in for dry cleaning at a certain business, dental appointment for a tooth ache for an emergency extraction (someone had a sense of humor). Nothing to be written down, no audio, just numbers. O'Neill could monitor her credit card transactions. On specific days of the week she could send a coded message by how many gallons of gas she purchased. Someone would know how much the price per gallon was on that day at that gas station and calculate the number, then the code. Clever, but she was at the end of a very long string. It might take days for a tug to transmit back to O'Neill. She had no idea if he could offer her any kind of back-up if she did send a distress code. Or whether he would. She would sink or swim, live or die, and had only herself to rely on.

Not so different than before.

She headed for Seattle in the morning. She had an interview with Farrow-Marshall HR.
Snakes and Ladders

Chapter Notes

I'm sure many fans of Atlantis have been bored with the Earth shenanigans. This will wind them up - for the nonce.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Deeks

Marty watched Sam Hanna throw what was a fit for him: scowling and looming over Hetty at her desk. It didn't work. It never worked and Marty wondered why Sam thought it ever would. Hetty had always been tiny; if she let size intimidate her, she'd never have made it as far as she had. Sam was like a bear trying to scare a black mamba.

Marty would put his money on the mamba.

"You should have let us know!" Sam growled at Hetty.

Hetty just squinted at him, her lips pursed, and her pause before answering made it clear she was only answering him because she felt like it. "It was irrelevant to our operations, Mr. Hanna."

"What if she comes back at us?"

"Ms. Kim is a professional and unless there is something missing from your reports of her arrest and interrogation that would cause her to desire revenge on you or Mr. Callan, I think we can be sure she is far from here and us," Hetty dismissed.

Oooh, point to Hetty. Sam looked like he'd swallowed a frog.

"Now, I believe you owe me an expense account report for the Mercedes you took into the dealership in the Elkins case."

Two points.

"We should be going after her."

"Fugitive pursuit is a matter for the US Marshals and the FBI, Mr. Hanna, not NCIS or the Navy."

Sam growled and retreated to sulk at his desk. He wouldn't call it sulking, but Marty would. But only in his own head.

"It's weird, though," Kensi said from her desk, voice low. "Considering she must have escaped during the prisoner transfer. She would have have to had inside help."

Marty wanted to look back at Hetty, but kept his head down, looking at his own paperwork. Considering the mole hunt active within NCIS, he would have thought Hetty would be more interested than she was. Which could only mean that she knew more than she was saying; knew enough to not be interested.
"Deeks?" Kensi prompted him.

He settled for saying, "Hetty knows what she's doing."

He believed that.

**Kim Yujin**

She'd killed someone.

She'd done it for Balim – for O'Neill and the operation – on Balim's orders. She had to prove herself. Getting the job with Farrow-Marshall had been easy, but getting close to Balim required catching his attention. She couldn't do that as a temporary legal assistant, they were too low in the organization and with not enough access. So she slipped just enough for him to discover Jennifer Kim, ex-North Korean spy, who was more than willing to do whatever it took to move up the corporate ladder and into the inner circle, and vulnerable to even just a phone call to the FBI.

Balim had the connections to discover her real identity. He'd had it within a day. She realized anyone O'Neill had sent from within his own organization or any US intelligence agency would have been made even faster. She still waffled over actually believing in the aliens on some days, but anyone with those sorts of connections was immensely dangerous.

Doubt yielded to leaden cold certainty though when Balim flashed his eyes and spoke with the voice. The reverberation shook her bones. Small wonder people in a more innocent time had believed those things were gods. Yujin wasn't religious herself, but she knew there were devils now.

O'Neill had told the truth.

And wasn't Balim pleased to have her skills – her real skills – at his beck and call. She had to think of him as Balim, because she could not afford to think of the thing curling around his spine. She couldn't think of Ba'al or her revulsion and hate would give her away. Something as old as the Goa'uld, that had occupied so many human bodies, would be master of reading micro-expressions and body language. Or maybe she was assigning it human motivations and it didn't give a fuck. Humans were mayflies compared to the lifetimes a Goa'uld expected to exist.

She still followed her instinct and thought of him as Balim.

Balim had wanted a man dead. He'd wanted proof Jennifer Kim really was willing to do anything to buy herself the good life and security with Farrow-Marshall. That she never wanted to go back to cold, authoritarian, arbitrary North Korea, even if she had thought of it as home.

Yujin hadn't thought of it as home for fifteen years. *Not home*, but still, *hers*. Someplace she wanted to keep safe. This op, it was keeping everywhere, everyone, safe. That should make her the good guy, but she knew she wasn't.

She considered the man she'd murdered for Balim. He'd been a turncoat; she had no sympathy for a man who was willing not just to betray his country for money, but then to try to cheat Balim too, all while knowing what Balim was. He'd been a fool. She couldn't think of a single reason he should have lived. He had no wife, no children. She knew he used escorts, because she'd showed up pretending to be one, told him she was a 'little extra' sent by Balim to entertain him over night. He'd been eager enough to take advantage. She had no sympathy for him, no regret.

She'd left him calling down to the front desk for fresh towels, unaware of the poison he'd ingested along with his Scotch and rocks. It wasn't impossible to discover the toxin, but Western
pathologists didn't run screens for cerberin. Even a toxicologist might miss it unless they were looking for it. It would disrupt his heartbeat, leading to a heart attack.

He already had a history of cardiac disease, conveniently. It hadn't even been difficult to obtain the seeds, you could order them off eBay, though not in the States. Yujin had had hers sent to a post office box under another name in Victoria BC and enjoyed several hours at Butchart Gardens while she was there to pick it up. The police would check the hotel's CCTV and notice the signs of someone else in the hotel room, but the maid will clearly see her target still alive, the cameras showing the escort leaving well before his death. His briefcase full of cash and his laptop (wiped of anything that would make them look twice at Farrow-Marshall) would still be in the room, along with his keys and his wallet. No assault, no theft, just a business man who got laid, then lay down and had a heart attack.

She slipped her disguise in an alley with no camera coverage, becoming just another twenty-something heading home from seeing the game, losing the bits and pieces of the escort's look (wig, heels, fuck-me dress) along the way.

The nausea afterward was unexpected. Despite everything, she had never killed anyone before. She hadn't expected it to bother her, not when her target was so deserving.

The next day, after lunch, Balim stopped by the desk where she worked and smiled. "Everyone is impressed with your work, Ms. Kim. We'd like you to join Farrow-Marshall permanently." He had on a bespoke suit in gray wool. Everything about him was crisp and sharp, even his goatee. Even his smile. "You know our benefits package already, but we are prepared to offer a very generous signing bonus and a luxury apartment right here in the building."

"You just want me to work over time," Yujin replied with a smile of her own.

"It does do away with the whole traffic bother." He tapped one finger on her desk. "But I like you because you get things done." Pause. "Without stirring up a fuss."

So he'd had the target's death confirmed and it had gone unremarked.

"If HR sends me a package, I promise I will go over it. I think I'm ready to appreciate a more secure employment. Travelling is getting tiresome."

"You don't like travel?" Balim's eyebrows went up.

Yujin shook her head slightly. "I don't like moving, I'm loyal that way once I'm comfortable; travelling is fine." Pay me well, keep me sweet, and I'll be a loyal asset. I only left North Korea behind because they left me... They were in the public offices; everything they said had a second layer.

"Then I think we can offer you the best of both worlds." Balim smiled a little cat smile meant for himself as he rolled worlds off his tongue.

Jack

Jack had a postcard in his mailbox. He glanced at it as he flipped through the rest of the mail after letting himself through his front door. Kim must have found out something important, something she couldn't convey through the limits of the preset code groups.

The coded transactions had been steady for the last three months. She'd had zero contact with anyone associated with the SGC or Homeworld, unless it was someone Ba'al already had under his thumb.
Jack had hoped that meant she was busy gathering information.

The post card in his mailbox should have been full of data he could use to destroy Ba'al and root out every one of his traitors from the government and business world.

He'd taken the post card – an innocuous picture of Butchart Gardens – inside his Georgetown house along with his water bill, the latest issue of *Field & Stream*, another god damn AARP flyer, and two fat envelopes filled with contest crap that went straight to file thirteen. The rest he dropped casually on the kitchen table along with his keys, while he got himself a bottle of water from the fridge. He left it there while he prowled through the townhouse checking for bugs and surveillance. He did that every evening. When he was as sure as possible no one could see him, he turned the radio onto a hockey game, stuffed a casserole in the oven to cook for his dinner and finally sat down with the post card, a notepad and a pen. The words on the post card were empty, *It's even prettier than the pictures! Wish you were here.* No signature. Postmark Victoria, BC. He wondered why Kim had been there.

Along the short side of the postcard were a series of nicks, mostly invisible to the eye. Jack ran his fingertip along them. Narrow, wider, narrow, narrow, wider. Morse code braille. He translated the nicks into dots and dashes, the dots and dashes into numbers. The numbers were book code. Only Jack and Kim knew which book; *The Handmaid's Tale*, something she might believably have read and stuck on a book shelf, that he himself would claim he bought to drive Danny crazy. In fact, he'd bought two identical copies and given one to Kim along with the code to memorize. Only Jack and Kim knew how many pages to displace from the numbers she sent, or how many words down the page would be the one that mattered. Provided Kim had maintained operational security. If not, anyone from Ba'al to Bozo the Clown could be sending him messages. It was old school tradecraft that Jack had learned from Hetty; that Hetty had learned in the iciest days of the Cold War. Everything that mattered was carried in memory. Perhaps not as secure as a one-time pad, but a book was less damning than a set of cyphers if someone searched your belongings.

It all always came down to memory, to people, the personal was the politic and the political was personal. No matter how much electronic intelligence you had, it came down to humans, because cameras and bugs and satellites and codecrackers could accumulate all the information in the world, but computers didn't decide what to do with it; people did. Someone wrote the algorithms, someone designed the protocols, someone, somewhere, decided. Someone human. Find the right lever and the right person in the right position and like Archimedes, you could shift the world.

Personally, Jack just wanted to shift Ba'al. Offworld. With his boot, preferably.

"Oh for crying out loud," he muttered when he had the postcard's message. It was a goddamn internet address and a password.

Well, he wasn't accessing the internet from his connection here. There were just too damn many ways it could – assuredly was – monitored. He memorized both the site address and the password then methodically destroyed the pad he used to decode it and nicked the edge of the postcard until it was ragged. He took it and the water bill into his office and dropped them in his to-do box carelessly. If someone searched the house while he was out, they would just find the postcard, not the telltale negative space of something he destroyed because it was important. Another Hetty lesson, you can often figure out the shape of the thing that's gone by the shapes the things around it took to accommodate it.

The oven timer dinged in the kitchen. Jack fixed himself a simple salad and a portion of the casserole and ate it while listening to the third period of the hockey game. Crosby was a goddamn machine. No overtime. Jack was a little disappointed.
Kim had uploaded an entire, detailed report onto a private cloud server with cryptographic protections that probably even gave NSA weeping fits. Of course, it could be cracked, anything encoded could be decoded, but someone would have to find it first. She avoided keywords too, using euphemisms and slang and periphrases instead, making it an odd document. Sort of like Cockney rhyming slang. And no wonder.

The intel was hot enough to glow in daylight, never mind the dark. If anyone saw it besides Jack, Kim would be dead in hours.

No wonder that Ba'al was here, there, and everywhere: the fucker had cloned itself. Snake and host. That seemed dumb to Jack when it could clone its snake self and put on other faces no one, including anyone at the SGC, would look twice at. Not like Ba'al's intergalactic Most Wanted mugshot. Whoever heard of a sentimental snake? Guess maybe Lam and the xenobiologists that blathered on about the snakes using the host's intrinsic intelligence and talents to augment itself were right. An extraordinary host could make for an extraordinary Goa'uld.

It made Jack want to puke.

So did Kim's proposal: she could make contact with one specific Ba'al clone and strike a deal to take out all the rest. The only thing that had been slowing Ba'al down was infighting between the clones. They were all jockeying to be the pre-eminent Ba'al, the one that would survive and rule. It rang true enough, hadn't that always been the Goa'uld's biggest problem? They couldn't work together because they were all megalomaniacs. A bunch of clones weren't going to be any better.

Kim needed something to prove herself to Ba'al enough to pull all the clones together, something singular, to prove her worth to him.

A deal with a Goa'uld. With Ba'al.

Jack curled his hand into a fist then slowly uncurled it one finger at a time. He beat back the rage that rose like a red tidal wave and made his vision waver and his heart hammer too hard for a man his age. Jennifer Kim had no way to know how much he hated Ba'al. She didn't know about the torture, the gravity cell, the sarcophagus, the ascended phantom of Danny that had either been his only comfort or when his mind broke. She was doing her best.

Better than he'd had any right to expect from a conscripted enemy agent. He didn't think he'd be thanking Hetty any time soon, though.

Damn if Kim wasn't right: get them all in one place and then she could use the symbiote poison. Otherwise it would be like spraying the dog for fleas and letting them go on hatching in the carpet. Next thing you knew, they'd hopped onto you.

She'd have to turn someone in the SGC and they would have to have access to something Ba'al, every and all Ba'als, desperately wanted. Jack grimaced. He had several people on a list, people he'd suspected of being in Ba'al's pay who Homeworld had cleared, but who had specific weaknesses. He'd left them in place and arranged for each of them to be fed a slightly different data set while watching for the flags to show, like a doctor doing a coronary angioplasty and watching the ink flow through the veins, seeing where they were blocked, or in the case of Jack's potential turncoats, where specific information went that it shouldn't.

Landry would have gotten rid of all of them if Jack had let him know about their vulnerabilities. Jack preferred to leave them as easy bait. It kept the opposition from finding people that Jack didn't
He'd set one of them up to get the information he wanted Ba'al to have, along with what the hell ever he figured out that Ba'al would want so badly, and then sic Kim on the poor goat.

It was a dirty, dirty way to do things. It was why he'd gotten out of the Game after Poland. But he remembered the rules and everything Hetty taught him. Even when to break the rules.

You couldn't wash your soul clean, but his hadn't been much to speak of since Charlie died anyway.

He just needed to figure out the best bait.

He was in his office, talking with Elizabeth about potential trade with Atlantis if the IOA ever got over themselves, when it hit him.

Not what Ba'al wanted, but what Ba'al wanted to find.

Ba'al wanted his god damn lo'tar back, but no matter how high the bounty no one in the Milky Way could find him or the pirate crew he ran with because they were off in fucking Pegasus.

Atlantis' coordinates might be enough to interest Ba'al, but the chance to get Jehan abd-Ba'al back, that would bring all the clones running.

And if things went wrong, if Ba'al made it to Pegasus?

Well, Vala Mal Doran had threatened Earth with the Wraith, so Jack had no compunctions about siccing a System Lord on her.

He grimaced, glad Elizabeth was on the phone and not in the room to lift her eyebrows at him, and amended his first reaction. He couldn't take the chance of Ba'al making it to Atlantis, even if Vala was a bitch. Sam would have his head for endangering everyone else.

And, God knew, Jehan didn't deserve to have to face that bastard again, any more than Jack wanted to be in the same room with him.

He could fake up something close enough to fool Ba'al though.

After all, the idea was to get the clones together and kill them, not send them to Pegasus.

Jack snorted to himself. Ba'al wasn't his only problem. There was the intergalactic wasp's nest Mitchell and his team had stirred up, too. Damn the Ancients and their inability to clean up after themselves.

Maybe he'd have Kim slip Ba'al the address for the Ori galaxy. Jack had a feeling the Ori would eat the snake alive.

**Kim Yujin**

"My asset at the SGC provided take you're going to want to see yourself," Yujin told Balim. She glanced at Mayfield and the other Farrow-Marshall top echelon. They looked confused. Yujin smiled sweetly at them.

Balim rocked back in his expensive, made-to-measure executive's chair, and raised his eyebrows. He recognized the intelligence world slang for valuable information. His mouth curled into a smile. "Really, my dear?"
Yujin met his gaze steadily. Dark brown eyes. No Goa'uld glow. It meant nothing, no more than Balim using a regular voice. She was still talking to the snake.

"Just you," she clarified, putting an emphasis on the second word. The Balims, as she thought of them. The clones looked identical, but they really weren't: Yujin could always tell when she was dealing with the ones who stayed on Earth. Or rather she could tell when she was dealing with one of the Ba'als who ruled over the System Lord's worlds. They were always so much more arrogant, almost clumsy compared to Balim. They were treated as gods on other planets and it shaped how they thought of themselves. The Earth-bound Balims, the ones who interacted with humans while pretending to be one, were so much subtler.

So much more dangerous, Yujin thought.

"Well." Balim waved at the others. "Go."

Mayfield started to object and the monster in the man flashed his eyes. "Out."

Mayfield wore Louboutins. They were silent on the plush wool carpet of the office. To Yujin, they always looked like the red soles should leave blood prints behind. Mayfield made it to the door ahead of them, despite the heels and the hobbling pencil skirt. Mayfield was the smartest of the bunch; that's why she was afraid of Balim.

Yujin brought out the flash drive as soon as the door clicked shut. "Atlantis. It's in another galaxy. The Asgard have been there and back – they brought back a Dr. Jackson. They sent an expedition through a Stargate two years ago, but it takes more energy than the SGC or anything on Earth has right now."

Yujin thought the Asgard were creepy, though that was likely just the result of pop culture and urban legends. O'Neill's briefing marked them as among the better allies. Certainly, not as sketchy as the Tok'ra, who were just snakes that didn't like the System Lords, in Yujin's opinion.

Balim took the drive from her and walked it through his fingers like a quarter. "Interesting but not remarkable. Though Dr. Jackson's return is valuable information. Your agent has done well."

"They never realize that the 'one little favor' is the beginning and not the end," Yujin commented. Espionage would be a harder trade if more people weren't fools.

"No, they don't," Balim agreed and smiled at her. Yujin hid a shudder. If she hadn't had her own reasons for being here, for doing this, she would have been shaking with fear. No. Horror. Balim's smile said he thought he had her as pinned to the board as the SGC officer she had so deftly blackmailed.

And she had blackmailed and turned the man, quite genuinely, though O'Neill had made sure the major had access to exactly what they wanted to feed to Balim. Whether Yujin survived this and Balim was stopped or not, the poor major's career was over. Unless O'Neill decided to continue using him to channel misinformation. Otherwise, the man was destined for Leavenworth.

Yujin felt no sympathy.

"There's more," Yujin said. "I recognized a name in the report when I scanned them. Jackson didn't go with the expedition through the Stargate. He was aboard an SGC ship, sent to recover them, but it disappeared. They thought it was lost, that it had been pirated."

Balim rocked forward in his chair, abandoning his façade of indolence for intent interest. "Pirated." O'Neill had been right. Balim would bite this bait, hook, poison and all.
"The ship is with Atlantis now, captained by a former host," Yujin said, as though she was completely unbothered by the idea of symbiotes and humans taken over by aliens like Balim.

"Qetesh," Balim said in a low, vicious voice, that shivered on the edge of the Goa'uld 'god' voice. "The little bitch that survived her."

"Mal Doran, according to the report. You have a bounty on her head."

Balim rocked back. "I do, indeed."

"I thought you'd want to know where she is."

"Rather out of my reach… for the moment."

"There's another name in the reports that struck me," Yujin mentioned carefully.

"Oh yes?"

"Jehan abd-Ba'al."

Balim's eyes flared gold.

Kim Yujin

Yujin arranged for everything for the gathering in the penthouse conference room, from the flowers to the feast. Instead of live musicians there was a sound system and a pre-programmed set of playlists she could start, stop, and switch via remote. The private elevator was locked down. Jaffa guards were stationed at the stairwells. She watched the caterers and florists and event coordinators ushered out by the stone-faced security. None of them had a clue that prim'ta were squirming within those security guards' guts.

Of course, Goa'uld couldn't be expected to serve themselves at a buffet, so the first arrivals were slaves ringed down from the cloaked ha'tak in orbit.

Balim and Balim and Balim were all there first, in their Savile Row, bespoke suits, sipping whiskey and a margarita and an imported Thai beer. Next came the rings delivered the offworld Ba'als, each bedecked in the Goa'uld version of high fashion. Yujin thought the English tailoring scored higher on the taste meter. She'd never seen that much leather, velvet and gold embroidery all in one place. According to O'Neill's briefing, Ba'al was among the more restrained Goa'uld, too.

She didn't give a damn about the servants – slaves – but they could be a problem if they panicked when their 'gods' started dropping like flies. She hung back, considering, trying to get a head count on the clones. If she showed her hand too soon, all of this would be for nothing, and she would be dead. Both possible failures bothered her. If Yujin hadn't wanted to live, she would have taken herself out while she was in NCIS custody. And she had her pride, she wanted to beat Balim. It didn't matter if the Goa'uld knew who had defeated him before it died; she'd know.

That competitive streak, along with the ability to operate without emotional support, had been the biggest reason she had been fast tracked to operate in the field.

One of the offworld Ba'als gestured to her to approach. Yujin obeyed without even gritting her teeth. One of the skills of a spy was to control not just what she said, but how she said it, and her body language. Gritted teeth might be over frustration that the prawns the caterers had promised were more like a size smaller shrimp. Or it might be that she resented the bastard treating her like another slave. Ba'al might not notice it consciously, but those cues still influenced whether she
triggered suspicion and distrust or not. Seduction was much, much more than just words or sex.

"You have done well for us," the Ba'al told her.

Yujin let herself smile in response, let it reflect her pleasure in fooling him, so he thought his praise elicited it. "Thank you, my lord," she replied. "It's difficult to find anything that you would want that you do not already have."

"Very well," he continued and stroked a tendril of hair away from her temple. Yujin leaned infinitesimally into his touch. Selling it with a shiver and a swallow that left her lips faintly parted – all the hallmarks of submission and arousal.

"You will be well rewarded."

"Success is a reward in itself," she replied. He knew she wasn't some slave that considered him an all-powerful god. She couldn't be too subservient, too impressed. She was still proving herself. But everything O'Neill had found and her own observations confirmed, Ba'al liked the smart ones. Ba'al, any of him, was still Goa'uld, though, and liked nothing better than to brag. So she smiled and listened to this one go on about what he/it/they had planned for Jehan abd-Ba'al, their renegade lo'tar.

It made her skin constrict, goosebumps at the back of her arms and shoulders. Most of all because at the same time Ba'al listed the tortures in the man's future, there was a kind of want for him woven in, admiration and desire fueled by the man's defiance. His escape had only made Ba'al want this Jehan person more. Yujin couldn't be sure if Ba'al wanted him as a host or a fuck, though, or both. And she really did not want to think about what the clones might be doing with each other.

One of the Balims, eyes flaring, announced from the center of the room, "Our base on Praxis has been lost to raiders," in that reverbing Goa'uld voice, eyes flaring, from the center of the room. All the others turned toward him, their eyes glowing incandescent in their identical faces. Yujin couldn't control the shudder this time, but none of them had any attention to spare for her. The slaves rushed to the ring designation and a Jaffa accompanied them away. Yujin headed for the door, anticipating dismissal before the Prime could reach her. She was counting Goa'uld as she passed through the room to the elevators and was sure they were all there.

Time to make the donuts.

She stepped into the elevator. As the doors closed, she slipped her phone from her clutch and opened it to the app that let her tap into the building's HVAC system. One tap and the canister of symbiote poison opened, venting directly into the penthouse via the circulation ducts. Yujin waited twenty minutes in the unmoving elevator carriage. The interior doors were a gleaming, brushed finish bronze color, to match the rest of the building's public décor. It reflected her face as a pale blur surrounded by darkness that smeared and slid sideways.

The Jaffa prime lay on the floor, blocking the elevator exit. She stepped over him. The poison had no scent, but she imagined she could see it floating, sparkling, virulent blue. The Jaffa was only the first body, others had fallen, all around the room. Jaffa and the Goa'uld.

Yujin paused, her high heels sinking into the luxurious carpet. The Ba'als and the Balims were all dead, but she still circled the bodies cautiously, animal instinct insisting she couldn't trust there was no danger yet. She raised her hand to her mouth and jittered back when she saw that one Goa'uld had tried to escape its host. The eel-like body had exited through the mouth, surrounded by bloody foam, almost a foot long. Yujin gagged looking at it. The body was thick as a man's fist. How could it hide in a body so easily?
It was dead though. They were all dead, Goa’uld and hosts, Jaffa and prim’ta, and the first smells of death were already present: piss and shit. Decay and its reek only came later.

Yujin forced herself to do the next thing. She retrieved a zatniktel from one of the Jaffa and began fire on the bodies. One, two, three. Nothing left to clean up except a few disgusting stains on the carpet. *Zap,* nothing, *zap,* nothing, *zap,* gone. She meant to keep the weapon.

She'd almost finished the grim task and begun going over the plan for her exit and disappearance when her company cell trilled Balim's tone. Yujin flinched but finished the last one, firing a third time. No bodies, nothing to see here, move along. Her brain was buzzing with stupid American slang. The phone trilled again, somehow insistent, despite the nearly inaudible volume.

She went to elevator and started it down. She stuffed the last zat in her purse and reluctantly pulled out the phone. Two missed calls. *Kevin Balim.*

Her breath came in quick inhalations. She schooled herself to slow them, to slow the trapped bird beat of her pulse. When the phone trilled again in her hand, she accepted the call.

"*Well done, my dear Jennifer,*" Balim purred from the tiny speaker. Yujin stopped breathing. She counted them. She counted them all. Her head felt like it might float off her body, the fear curling through her nerves bright as the poison she used on the Goa’uld.

Balim laugheds from the phone. "*I wasn't sure of you until you offered up the location of Atlantis. But it was so perfect, thank you, Jennifer. You served me well.*" More laughter. "*Please thank Jack O'Neill for me when you see him. Consider that your termination bonus.*"

"It's been a blast," she replied, despite her dry mouth. "Don't call me, I'll call you." The elevator doors opened on the lobby, ground floor, and she started walking. She ended the call and keyed in a number she'd only memorized, never written down, even in code, anywhere.

A sleepy, irritated voice takes the call. "*Report.*"

"It's fucked," Yujin told O'Neill. "One of them made me somehow. Got out. I'm trying to exfiltrate now."

"*Where are you?*" O'Neill demanded.

"Lobby of the Farrow-Marshall building." She kept moving. It was early enough, she could be a woman heading out to a late date or going home early from a gathering. If she could just get two buildings down, there was a maintenance closet on the ground floor, she had the keypad code to get in and a change of clothes, ID, and cash stashed in a false ceiling above the shelves of cleaners. She would change her look, exit through the underground garage, steal a car, switch it as soon as she was outside the scope of the city's surveillance camera grid. Change her look again. Get the fuck out of Seattle – She scanned the lobby for anyone paying too much attention to her. She still had the zat in her purse. O'Neill would be peeved if she used it in public.

"*You going to make it?*" O'Neill asked, because there was fuck all he could do for her now, but he wasn't without sympathy, even though Yujin had failed so badly the entire planet could be endangered.

"I don't know."

She had one more card to play. She opened another app. She hadn't wanted to resort to this, but maybe, maybe Balim was still in the building, even though he'd escaped the penthouse kill jar. She didn't hesitate as she reached the doors to the street. Her thumbed pressed to the warm glass of the
phone face where the blue circle turned red as it read her print and triggered the series of bombs through the two top floor of the building she'd placed during the constant back and forth fuss of the catering and event set-up. Yujin slowed her strides as she reached for the doors' handles, knowing what was coming.

The top two floors of the building above her blew upward, fire and blackened debris blooming into the sky. A storm shattered glass rained to the sidewalk just outside the door, crystal spears heavy and sharp enough to behead anyone unlucky enough to be beneath them. The buildings screamed and groaned in the aftermath, torqued steel girders struggling to compensate for abrupt force that had impacted them. The floor of the lobby rocked like a ship's deck under Yujin's heels. She clung to the gilt door handle to keep her feet. The roiling, ear-splitting roar of the time explosions made her wince and O'Neill, still on the phone, shout, "What the hell was that?"

A fine haze of dust hung on the air. Glass was still pattering down outside, and the doors where shivered with cracks, pieces tumbling down to the lobby's floor, the sound of the shards hitting polished marble bright and sharp and the screams of someone outside on the street.

"Just hope he didn't ring up to one their ships," Yujin said.

"You're on your own until you can report in again, Kim," O'Neill replied. "Fuck." He sounded awake and exhausted at the same time. "Fuck. Get out of there."

Yujin ended the call. She pushed the door in front of her open. It took more force than normal; the frame was warped out of true. She pried open the back of her phone. She tossed the battery, then got the SIM card out and did her best to render it useless before dropping it into a storm drain. She was about to do the same with the phone when a tall figure loomed up next to her.

"Jennifer Kim, you are under arrest."

She glanced to the side and almost laughed in hysteria. It was the shaggy blond agent from NCIS. She'd barely seen him during her time in their custody, but she'd made a note of him. Martin Deeks. Yujin began to shake.

Could he be one of them? Goa'uld? Was this Ba'al?

His hand locked on her elbow. Somehow, she'd kept walking and he was walking with her. She saw the other agents who had been part of her arrest in Los Angeles. Callen, the one she'd fought with and the biggest man, Agent Hanna, along with a tall, dark-haired woman. "Don't try anything," Deeks advised her.

He couldn't be one of them. Not while working with a team. Balim was good at faking being human, but he wasn't good at faking being a good human being. A Goa'uld could access all of a host's memories, but it would fuck up sooner or later trying mimic human emotions accurately. They were just too arrogant.

Balim must have tipped them off about her. One of them had. The one that hadn't been in the penthouse? Yujin couldn't know. Balim had double-crossed her and she had been a double in his – its – organization. For NCIS to be here now, the tip had to have been made well before she killed them all. It had probably been the one that hadn't been in the penthouse, covering its tracks, using her as a scapegoat in case any of its others managed to escape.

Yujin didn't try to shake his hand off, didn't tense to run away. Instead, she lifted her face to glimpse the ruined top floors of the Farrow-Marshall building, flames and city lights reflecting off
the low cloud cover, black smoke belched against them. Much, much more than the two top flours were gone. Much more than her bombs should have destroyed. She must have triggered something of the Goa'uld's.

Dazed, she swayed into Deek's hard grip.

Maybe she'd got the final one. Maybe. She hoped so.

"C'mon," Deeks prompted her.

Yujin nodded, feeling too blank to reply. She wondered if O'Neill would pull her out or leave her to rot. Whether she'd succeeded or failed. If she would ever know.

The ululated wail of sirens, accompanied by flashing lights, heralded the arrival of the first responders.

Hanna strode up and took Yujin's other arm, passing the purse over to the dark-haired woman. "We need to evacuate the area now." He shook Yujin's arm hard. "How many people were in the blast zone?"

Yujin swallowed a sob that turned into a choking sort of laugh. "Just one, I hope."

Hanna dragged her to a dark sedan and she was pushed into the backseat. "Better fucking hope so," he growled at her.

Yujin turned her gaze back to the burning building. "You should hope so too," she told him.

Deeks

Marty watched his teammates. He always watched them, working to fit himself into the space they'd never wanted to make for him. Sometimes, sometimes, he wasn't that impressed with them. Callan and Sam were arrogant. Kensi was amazing, but viewed too much in black and white.

The Jennifer Kim thing was an example of how they didn't look beyond the obvious.

Sam had been peeved that Kim got away and then he was incensed by the Farrow-Marshall bombing. But once they had Kim back, that was all Sam cared about. File the paperwork and move on. Kensi followed Sam's example and Callan had already gone out for the evening – cover maintenance. Eric didn't have the background (or the balls) to try to read Hetty and Nell…

Well, well, Nell, Marty thought, considering OSP's other diminutive yet intimidating female. Miss Jones might very well be dialed in enough that she didn't need to read Hetty.

Wasn't that a kick?

Nell might indeed know what Hetty was up to or at least have seen her fine hand in Jennifer Kim's slip from custody or even the tip that took them to Seattle in time to see her walk out of Farrow-Marshall as it blew up. Which had been entirely too convenient for Marty's comfort. Especially with the way Kim had been almost eager to be taken in.

Most people thought Hetty was grooming Callan to take over for her. Callan was one of her favorites, one of the agents she'd hand-picked, trained, defended, and she gave him that extra iota of trust. Not complete trust; Hetty didn't trust anyone with everything. Not that Marty blamed her as absolute trust was just stupid, but he knew she had her favorites, the people she trusted to come through on an op. He counted himself lucky to be among them. That didn't mean she intended for
any of the field team to take over OSP (or NCIS, for that matter). Field agents were generally not
good at the bureaucratic and political side of the game. Too impatient, too much history, hang-ups,
and favors owed; too inclined to weigh loyalty over expediency.

For a while, Marty had thought Hetty might be looking at Kensi, but it didn't track. Kensi was too
blunt, too straightforward, too much her Marine Corps father's daughter. Smart enough and tough
enough, beautiful enough to charm and fool the idiots too blind to see the first two, but not
interested.

No, it was little Nell who would take over some day, if Henrietta had her way. It was why she was
gently encouraging Nell's interest in field work. Hetty wanted Nell to have that experience and that
edge.

He wondered if it would be worthwhile to try wriggle out of Nell if she knew more than the rest of
them. They had a good working relationship, but she was still more trusting than not.

But he wasn't sure he wanted to know what Hetty was up to now. He might have to make his own
call and if it didn't fall on Hetty's side, he knew he'd lose the precarious position he occupied with
the OSP. He'd prefer to leave that outcome for later.

He looked away from Nell and realized that everyone else except for Hetty had gone for the
evening and Hetty was watching him with that sharp gaze that said she knew everything going on
in his head. No doubt she did.

Marty grinned at her helplessly. He shrugged and she inclined her head. "Surely Monty needs a
long walk, Mr. Deeks," she called to him. "It's time you went home."

"By a different route," he promised.

"Indeed, Mr. Deeks," she agreed, "it never pays to be predictable."

Hetty

Hetty inspected the authorizations and credentials of the four men who had arrived at the OSP
headquarters shortly after she came in that morning. Everything was in order, unfortunately, so she
had no bureaucratic leverage. They weren't smart enough or high up enough in their organization to
negotiate for information or favors.

She kept herself from making a face. The NID agents were neither courteous nor respectful, though
they hadn't quite resorted to looming or threats. She hadn't argued with them yet.

The situation was grim and growing grimmer, she understood. This wasn't the hill to die on, not
when there were more important battles waiting in the future. The not-too-distant, she feared.

She straightened the paperwork into a single sheaf and slid it into its file folder, then centered it on
her desk blotter. The lead NID agent reached for it. (He had a name on his identification. Hetty
didn't believe it was his anymore than she was the Grand Duchess Anastasia Nikolaevna
Romanova, though she'd once possessed papers that claimed just that.) It was peevish of her, but
she refused to think of any of them by their obviously false names. Phillip Peters, Peter Phillips,
John Benson and Ben Johnson. Good God. It was insulting. She thought of the one in charge as
Bad Suit.

Hetty set her hand down on the folder. "Oh, no, gentleman, this is my copy."

The second one, who Hetty had dubbed Brush Cut, opened his mouth to object. Hetty suspected
they wanted to sweep in, sweep out, and leave no paper trail.

Not happening in her shop.

She smiled at them. "I would be derelict if I didn't file this with the proper release papers turning over Jennifer Kim to your custody. Surely you understand? Without my authority, you might find it difficult and time-consuming to remove her. Questions might be raised. We don't want that, do we?" Hetty would have used Kim's proper Korean name, but she suspected that would have confused the men before her.

Not that she objected to confusing them, only they likely would respond stereotypically. She wasn't interested in provoking verbal or physical violence in the middle of the office. Not without a better risk/reward ratio.

The two other agents, Too Thick and Broken Knuckles, shifted on their feet. Their hands almost unconsciously drifted toward their weapons.

Hetty narrowed her eyes at the lead agent and said, "Don't be foolish," in a sharp tone.

Bad Suit glared but made a cut-off gesture with one hand. "Keep the paperwork. Give us the spy."

"Of course, gentleman," she replied. A gesture had Mr. Hanna, who had been lurking and scowling just out of earshot, joining them. Hetty explained that the NID would be taking over the prisoner transport and incarceration of Jennifer Kim. Mr. Hanna's scowl became even darker and he alternated darting unhappy looks at Hetty with threatening ones at the NID agents.

"Mr. Hanna will accompany you to our holding facility and turn Ms. Kim over to you. Ms. Jones will arrange all the proper paperwork on our part and it will be printed out and waiting for your signatures there," Hetty said.

Bad Suit squinted at Mr. Hanna and shrugged. "Let's go."

"Indeed," Hetty agreed, "soonest started, soonest finished."

Bad Suit didn't offer any farewells. Mr. Hanna lingered as the minions marched after him. "You sure about this, Hetty?"

"They have all the proper authorizations, Mr. Hanna."

She watched him stomp off and then called for Nell. "Take the time to make sure everything is in order in our paperwork too," Hetty instructed her. Nell, darling girl, immediately understood the subtext. She was to delay, but not obstruct.

"Haste makes waste," Nell said with a bright smile before bustling upstairs to her own cybernetic fiefdom. No doubt she would recruit Mr. Beale to aid her. She was coming along. Another five years and Hetty would feel better about retiring if she was forced into it. Ten would be better of course, so she could leave Nell in a role with more seniority, but best case scenarios seldom played out. When Hetty went, she would leave Nell her still vast arsenal of favors owed, contacts, and blackmail material. Nell would have to choose how she used that inheritance.

Until then, she would shield her from the uglier aspects of the Great Game, and continue with her own efforts.

Mr. Deeks was watching. Keeping his own counsel, as he was more and more inclined to do, even while he traded silly gibes with Miss Blye. Hetty gave him a tiny nod, barely enough to shift the
gold chain that dangled from her glasses, and he blinked back at her, raising his voice and
distracting both Miss Blye and Callan.

Hetty stirred her fingers through the small bowl of fidget stones, all pretty and polished and
without any value, picking out the black one that always felt cold. She rolled it in her fingers for a
moment, before leaving her desk. She took the folder with the NID's paperwork with her and the
fidget stone in her pocket and climbed the stairs, passing the open door to Ops, where Nell and Mr.
Beale were debating how to remotely convince a networked printer it was out of ink.

The secure communications room was locked, as always. Hetty tapped in her seventeen-digit
passcode and pressed her left ring finger to the print reader. There was really no reason to always
use a thumb, beyond ease and habit, those twin traitors to real security. If someone were ever to cut
off her thumb to use it in an effort to fool her security, they would be disappointed. Hetty's
thumbprints would set off a complete lockdown, as well as setting off alarms and alerting security.

Once inside the room, the door closed and locked silently behind her.

Little effort had been put into decorations. The walls were painted white over a network of metal
and otherwise unadorned. A single glass-topped table and a white plastic chair sat in the center of
the room. Lights ran along the top of all four walls and along the floor. There were no shadowed
corners or crevices to hide even the smallest listening devices.

The secure telephone sat on the table. Nothing else.

Hetty sniffed. For all the effort put toward making sure no one could tap into communications in
this room, she knew there were ways. There were always ways. According to Jack O'Neill, even a
secret only you knew could be unearthed by some of the aliens his program had encountered.

Aliens.

She took out the black stone and gave it a pinch. There was a shift in the air in the confines of the
room, only noticeable because Hetty was waiting for it. This wasn't a conversation she wanted
even logged.

No one – outside the aliens who had created the anti-listening device – would be able to hear or
record anything in the room now. Hetty picked up the phone and called a number she'd memorized
but never written down anywhere. She had an official and a home number for Jack – after all they
had a history that dated back to the Cold War. This one was for a burner, though.

God, how that made Hetty feel old. She'd been a tiny wisp of a girl when she was recruited into the
Game, when Berlin was divided and the world held its breath wondering where the tanks would
roll in next. There had been a strange honor in the vicious shadow war the intelligence agencies
had fought so that the bombs wouldn't drop. And now there were children who had never passed
through a checkpoint in a cold sweat with a microdot glued to a postcard and a piano wire garrote
woven into collar of a coat. Children who didn't remember that the present was just the same tune
played on different instruments, while new dancers set their feet to old steps.

When Jack accepted the call, he said nothing. Hetty suppressed a small smile and said, "Secure on
my end, хуй." If she hadn't called him a dick, he would have known something was wrong.

"Aw, you still love me, герцогиня," Jack replied with proper parole, but he sounded tired. "Secure
here too."

Just as wearily, Hetty told him, "My people were tipped to Kim's location. They picked her up last
night."

"Передай, ёб твою мать, водку!" Jack still had a default Muscovite accent to his Russian. It reminded Hetty of when he'd been one of her ducklings, but there was no nostalgia to the memory. Those had been the bad old days.

"You might want to wait on the vodka until I tell you the rest."

Someday, if they were very lucky, they might get to look back at this and call it the bad old days too.

"It gets better?" Jack asked sardonically.

"I just received a visit, complete with transfer paperwork, from several gentlemen with the NID, requesting OSP turn Ms. Kim over to them."

"And by gentlemen you mean jerks and by request you mean demand."

"They're currently on their way to our holding facility to pick her up. My Ms. Jones is slowing the paperwork on our side, but even LA traffic won't hold them up too long."

Jack cursed steadily. "You don't know where they'll take her?"

"No." She wouldn't have believed anything they told her if they had offered.

"I can't do fuck for her, Hetty," he said finally.

"Nor can I," Hetty admitted. If she could have, she would have made sure Callan's team reached Seattle too late, but anything else would give away that Kim had some value to her or Jack.

Sacrificing someone, even an enemy, had never set well with Hetty. She knew Jack held the same credo.

Sometimes you had to, though.

"Did she succeed?" Hetty asked. The Farrow-Marshall bombing had been more obvious than she would have expected from Kim. Jack had always liked making things go boom, though.

"Close, but no cigar," Jack answered after a long silence. "She gave it her best shot. Bought us some time, at least."

"I'm sorry," Hetty told him.

"Keep your ear to the ground, would you?" Jack asked. "Maybe I'll be able to pull her out later."

It was a futile hope, but Hetty knew better than to say so.

Chapter End Notes

Friday will mark a return Pegasus and pirate action and because I'm very nice, it won't even be a cliff-hanger.
No Hostage to Fortune

Jehan

Atlantis and their tentative, growing Pegasus Coalition needed power. It was a constant.

Sam and Mer and Miko and Lindsay and Radek and Peter Grodin were either brainstorming new methods or desperately cobbling fixes together to keep what they had going. The Olesian refugees, the Tarani and even the Hoffans were studying and working at the same time to get up to speed with the Tau'ri scientists.

At the same time, Sam, Vala, Chuck, and Teyla were working with the anthropologists, sociologists, and the Expeditions one diplomatically-trained lawyer along with a Taranian lawmaker to craft a new government. Unsurprisingly, the Pegasans were far more pragmatic than the Tau'ri who weren't military. Sam had been elected by city-wide referendum to a five-year term as both civil and military commander.

Jehan could have helped more than he did. He knew it. He had the math skills and he could wheedle Atlantis' senile AI better than anyone else. Only he hated it with a passion that sent him back to Revenge every chance he could find. Sam was convinced if Atlantis had full power that its self-repair systems could restore the AI. Radek and Mer held the opinion that the Alterans had performed the equivalent of a lobotomy on the AI before they abandoned Atlantis.

Jehan just knew that dealing with it too long left him feeling as wrong as coming out of Ba'al's sarcophagus had.

So instead he led the teams that went out through the chappa'ai searching for useful Ancestor tech and maybe a potentia. Or clues to where the Alterans had built and charged the damned things, since that was among the information they'd purged from Atlantis' records.

Jehan had spent a week in the control chair, trying to ferret out the information from the scrambled systems before he pulled up a Council memo detailing the plan. The Alterans evacuating back to the Via Stella had worried about the Wraith obtaining their technology.

They hadn't spared any care for the humans they were leaving behind. They wanted the surety that the Wraith wouldn't be able to follow them.

One meeting's holographic transcript had nearly turned Jehan's stomach. Moros had mentioned trying to bring the human population with them. He'd been shut down. Removing their food source would motivate the Wraith to explore beyond Pegasus. The humans would be left behind to pacify the hungry Wraith. It wasn't like there weren't plenty of them seeded through the Via Stella anyway.

Jehan had replayed that one for the command staff.

After a week of merging with Atlantis' systems, he'd spent the next two days in medical, exhausted, feeling like his body didn't fit, speaking a scrambled mixture of Alteran and Goa'uld. Frasier had decreed that because of the side effects to his brain chemistry Jehan could only use the chair every other day and the other gene carriers had to leave three days between their efforts.

Jehan had almost kissed her for that.

But he hated feeling useless, so after a week, he'd volunteered to go out with the trade teams, where
he could use his ATA gene to tell if the Ancestor tech they found was functional or not. They didn't want to waste trade goods on junk.

Thus, he was spending his third day wandering the great markets on Plefa.

Teyla was with him along with two Olesians, named Alber and Nelgon. They'd hit most of the stalls in the first two days, but were returning to the Kirtans. The trader there had promised to return with more after they bought nearly everything he had. The Ancestor items he'd offered had all been powered down or off, but lit up for Jehan effortlessly.

The trader's mouth had fallen open when Jehan touched what seemed like a solid rectangle of bronze-colored metal to reveal a toolbox. (He'd also immediately tried to negotiate for a better price, since tools were more useful. Jehan had closed the toolbox and invited him to sell to anyone else. The tools would be so useful locked inside, Teyla had pointed out, all sweet sarcasm. Jehan suspected most of them wouldn't work for anyone without the ATA too, but didn't bother explaining that.)

The Kirtan trader clapped his hands when he saw Jehan's group ambling toward his large tent. The open front tables held the same goods they had on the first day. Jehan sighed in disappointment.

"Good traders!" the Kirtan greeted them.

"Alcid," Teyla replied. Right. That was his name. Jehan was almost as bad at remembering names as Mer. Jehan smiled at him awkwardly. He waved his hand instead of speaking.

"My friends, I am most pleased to see you again," Alcid declared effusively.

Used car salesman, Jehan decided. That was who Alcid reminded him of. There was just an edge of desperation to his friendliness. It was a hot day and Alcid was sweating even in the shade of his tent.

"Were you able to obtain more Ancestor goods?" Teyla inquired. "We would not have wanted you to go to an effort and then not return ourselves."

"Oh yes," Alcid replied with the circular head movement Jehan had seen used the way a nod was among the Tau'ri. "I brought several larger items for you." He gestured to the heavy tapestry curtain closing off the back of the large tent. "They're back here."

Jehan had a fraction of second, while his eyes were trying to adjust to the darkness, to recognize the cycling whine of a stunner before the every nerve in his body fired white-bright.

Jehan woke in a locked compartment. The tiny space reeked of sweat and grease and the thousand smells that were unique to ships, particularly spaceships with overstressed life support systems. He could feel the hum of engines and circulation fans through the deck and the bulkheads. Not a good sign. Excessive vibration pointed to loose seals, a short step from death in vacuum.

He broke the neck of the first guard that came in for him and fought his way through two more and into the corridor before someone stunned him again.

He woke the second time in the same compartment – the bulkheads were scratched and dented – this time stripped of bedding and obvious weapons.

This time he pretended to cooperate and brushed a Goa'uld contact poison onto the guards taking
him out. He'd developed immunity to it himself after dying and being revived in Ba'al's sarcophagus enough times. Lo'tars sometimes acted as assassins for their masters. Jehan had been well-versed by the time Vala stole him away. He could have killed her if he'd wanted to. He used a blade hidden in his jacket seam to cut himself loose after the guards went down.

He didn't know the ship, though, and there were people – even kids – at every turn. He might have escaped even so, but the shuttles and escape pods it had once been equipped with had all been scavenged and repurposed.

All their energy weapons were palm-locked, which left him with his blades.

It wasn't enough. He rigged a hatch to blow out and slipped into a cargo compartment, staying ahead of the search for him for another day, but without food, he couldn't hide forever.

They stunned him again, kicked the crap out of him, and stripped him naked this time, only giving him clothes when they came for him the next time.

That took a week.

Jehan pieced together what had happened. It wasn't hard. Larrin, the ship's captain, reminded him perilously of the ghost of Qetesh that sometimes looked out of Vala's eyes. She explained that her people were the Travelers. They lived on their ships and had since the Wraith War ten thousand years before. They were nomads of the space ways, trading technology and skills for water, food, and other materials to keep their ships functional, running whenever the Wraith found them.

Ten thousand years meant most of those ships were failing, patched and cobbled together, and disastrously overpopulated.

They were closer to pirates than Revenge's crew were these days and saw exactly nothing wrong with shanghai-ing Jehan. He had the Ancestors’ blood and they had a great, hulking bitch of an Ancestor warship that would provide a new home for crew. The Traveler fleet could quit leaving off excess crew to work on friendly planets. Travelers didn't have much respect for anyone but themselves and hated settling in any one place.

Larrin was arrogant. Jehan could understand why. She'd clawed her way to the position of captain. She'd found the old warship. Adding it to their fleet would be nothing but a stopgap solution, but people in Pegasus lived in the moment. Getting the ship working would make Larrin a hero to the Travelers, her power in their society cemented beyond captaining one ship.

She was lovely, too, Larrin, but so arrogant her careless attitude left Jehan cold as space. He'd developed an aversion to that sort of entitlement. Ba'al had left a mark that would never fade.

Larrin was supposed to be the carrot, though. Jehan didn't even get hard when she started in on him – being tied up wasn't one of his turn-ons, being a captive of anyone was an absolute turn off – and there were a few snickers from the guards when she gave up and stalked out.

There was the handsome young Traveler who brought Jehan a sad meal – everything about the ship they were on screamed it was at its limits, including life support and rations – but the kid made a terrible Mata Hari. Too flinchy when he should have been flirty. Larrin was trying to cover all the bases, which just made Jehan feel sick, wondering if she'd send in kids next, to see if that was his fetish. (His father said everyone had a predilection, a thing they wanted more than anything else, that they would do anything to get and keep.)

After the carrot came the stick.
Larrin had some limits, at least. Instead of kids, she sent in thugs. The preliminary tune up left Jehan bruised and spitting blood, but none of the damage was permanent and he still had all his teeth when she came in afterwards. The thugs had been kind enough to pick him up and put him in a chair and tie him to it.

"You could be a hero to every Traveler," she said.

Jehan tongued a split in his lip, before curling it. Fresh blood oozed down his chin. "Sure. A hero who is a prisoner."

Her gaze strayed to the blood. Jehan wondered if she got off on it. If she was that much like a Goa'uld. She stepped close enough to cup his chin in her hand. Jehan couldn't do anything about it, though he considered biting.

He hadn't shaved since being taken; her thumb rasped over his scruff.

"One of our scientists is sure that all we need is the Ancestors' blood," Larrin said. Her thumb dug into the soft flesh under Jehan's jaw. "If he's right, he'll stick a needle through the orbit of your eye and stir."

Human physiology being pretty much the same in the Via Stella and Pegasus, someone had been bound to discover lobotomies outside of Earth. Jehan breathed steadily, suppressing the shudder that would have wracked him before he learned to control his reactions. He'd never thought he'd thank Ba'al for anything. He could have done without the irony.

"Won't work," he told her. It would work a little. They could get things to initiate with just his presence or touch; Atlantis had proved that, but Jehan could also will everything off. Almost everything on an Alteran ship required knowledge and intent along with the gene. *Aurora and Hip* were proof; Sam and the other scientists theorized the ATA had been the Alterans' ultimate security system. It kept the Wraith and Goa'uld – or uppity humans – from activating and using their technology. But the Alterans hadn't been arrogant enough to believe they couldn't be captured or that passwords and security codes couldn't be cracked. The mental component of operating the jumpers, command chair, and command deck on their warships required active involvement from the operator. Otherwise an enterprising pirate could incapacitate someone with the gene and use their body like a lightswitch. Vala had pointed that out, when people from the Expedition started looking at Jehan like a resource instead of a person.

Not that anyone on Atlantis had been talking about 'requisitioning' Jehan or anything. Not where *Revenge* crew could hear anyway. Jehan knew Vala and Mer would go to any lengths to make sure nothing like that happened to him.

That knowledge kept him from going out of his mind. They would be coming for him. People from Atlantis too, he imagined, even if it was only to reacquire their primary Alteran genetic resource.

"I don't think we'll need to do that," Larrin taunted. "I tried to be nice about this, but if you don't want to cooperate for a nice reward, I'm sure we can make you cooperate anyway."

"Whatever you make me do?" Jehan said, "I'll make you regret."

Larrin slapped him. Just a warm up. He saw the blow coming and moved with it. She kept at it though, rocking him from one side and then the other, taking a stance behind him and slapping both hands against his ears, then yanking his head up by the hair, until Jehan's sight flickered and his mind slipped back to the torch-lit torture chamber in Ba'al's palace.
She didn't have even a fraction of Ba'al's finesse and none of the tools Ba'al's Jaffa had used to break him. Jehan still flinched eventually. He hoped Mer and Vala were close. He already knew how this ended if they didn't find him.

Larrin could break him.

Ba'al had shattered John Sheppard. Ba'al had had a sarcophagus. Ba'al had had the advantage of John's ignorance of the Goa'uld and anything outside Earth, of John's isolation and despair and helplessness. Larrin didn't have any of those things. She couldn't turn Jehan, could never convince him he needed or wanted to serve her, because he knew he had Mer and Vala coming for him. He knew where he stood in this universe.

She could break him, but she couldn't break him far enough he wouldn't choose death over captivity.

When he could muster the breath for words, Jehan leaned back and called Larrin a disease-raddled, brain-dead, honor-less offense to the gods in Goa'uld. Jaffa had a plethora of blasphemous curses all related to not being good worshippers. Or bad hosts for immature Goa'uld, so he wound up with telling Larrin she had a pouch full of poison and smelled like dead prim'ta. Larrin didn't have to get the translation to get the insult.

Jehan got another blow to the face, but Larrin had been stupid about it and probably broke a knuckle on his cheekbone. She clutched her hand to her body and snarled before leaving him. Two guards immediately came.

Jehan let his head hang and considered how best to get loose and wreak havoc on the ship.

He really missed his Kull armor.

Vala

Vala called down floods, waves of locusts, and infestations of boils in a low mutter as Revenge orbited Genea. Aurora quartered the rest of the star system, tracking Wraith energy signatures to make sure a hive wasn't lurking in the shadow of a gas giant to ambush them.

If Jehan had been taken by the Genii, they had to hope he hadn't been brought back to Genea.

Because Genea had been culled and subjected to a kinetic bombardment that had cracked the planet's mantle. Their chappa'ai had been blown off the planet. Sensors found it tumbling through vacuum, destined to ultimately fall into the local sun along with chunks of the planet. No one was left to use the chappa'ai to escape anyway. There was still some atmosphere, but life on Genea was extinct.

Beside her, Mer tapped on a tablet, ignoring the sensor display. He'd gone white when they received the first sensor readings on arrival and hadn't spoken since. Teyla stood beyond him, her expression set in a mask and her hands curled into fists. No one blamed her or the others for Jehan's kidnapping. Teyla blamed herself for taking him to Plefa and it translated into a fury that gave even Vala pause.

But only pause. She really didn't have any problems with whatever Teyla wanted to do to find who had taken Jehan.

"We go back to Plefa," Mer declared. He looked up from the tablet.
Vala swung her attention to Signe. Jehan would have already plotted their course. Signe was still working on it. She wanted to snap – Qetesh would have snapped – but Signe was working fast. Faster than most. She was spoiled by Jehan.

Teyla uncurled her fists and shook them. "Yes. The Kirtan who called himself Alcid. He was gone too when I woke. Someone will know where he came from, though. Stalls and tents of that size cost goodly sum from the market grounds."

"And then we will find out who Alcid sold us out to," Mer finished.

Vala nodded. They'd wasted time jumping straight to Genea, assuming the Genii were behind taking Jehan. They had to get smart if they were going to find him.

If he hadn't been on Genea when the Wraith came.

Jehan

Larrin had Jehan brought aboard the Ancestor ship with a bag over his head. No doubt she knew it was a warship, mothballed in place and waiting for crew who would never return, but she didn't want Jehan to know.

*Tempestas* recognized someone with the gene immediately, though. The ship greeted Jehan eagerly, pushing into his head with a dozen status reports, most of which detailed exactly how badly it had deteriorated while it drifted between stars. The thin, cold atmosphere it grudgingly provided immediately began warming.

"Feel that?" the Traveler on Jehan's right side asked. Born on a ship, any change in atmosphere registered quickly with them. Their ears were tuned to the omnipresent sounds, the way a man in the jungle listened to the birds and the steady insect buzz of life. Silence signaled something dangerous in both places.

The larger man on his left tightened the hand locked around Jehan's elbow. Besides the bag, they had him in arm and leg manacles, so he had to shuffle along. Larrin might have thought that would safeguard them from an escape attempt. "Yeah."

Under the bag, Jehan let himself smile a little.

*Tempestas* might have been mothballed in place, left to drift with empty weapon racks and powered down engines, but the ship's security abilities were still operational and Alterans had been as afraid of humans rebelling against them in Pegasus as they were of the Wrath.

Even with the bag on his head, even without *Tempestas* talking to him, Jehan would have figured out where they were going. Alteran ships were trans-atmospheric; designed to be operable while under planetary gravity; so they had a fore and aft, an up and down. Command chair and power buried deep in the center, with the most protection, then weapons and life support. Binocular vision shaped design aesthetic though: they placed the command deck top and forward.

*Tempestas* had locked the Travelers out of the command deck. They were taking Jehan in and down.

Command chair.

Even smart people did incredibly stupid things.
Larrin knew there were people who could use the technology of the Ancestors. She'd even managed to kidnap one.

She'd had the bad luck to kidnap one who could do a lot more than just turn the lights on. One who had been a slave to a System Lord, and who had gritted his teeth and forced Atlantis to remain dead in the water as a monster hurricane bore down on them and Kolya had the skin flayed from his lover's arm.

The guards marched him forward then forced Jehan into the chair. He could feel *Tempestas* shivering to life all around him. The chains between his arms and his feet were separated and used to bind him in place.

Larrin jerked the bag off his head.

"Activate the ship and open the command deck," she ordered.

Jehan splayed his hands over the gel pads on the arm rests and dropped his head back. The command chair reclined and a holographic wireframe of the ship formed over his head.

White dots indicated life-signs, humanoid-sized, no ATA present. A single blue pinpoint at the center of the ship was Jehan, five other life-signs in the room with him, four more in the corridor outside. More parties were waiting outside the command deck and the entrance to engine rooms.

*Tempestas* highlighted what was operational, what was powered down, and what was damaged or unpowered. No drones, no missiles, and the powered weaponry required a charged *potentia*. The ship felt almost apologetic. Only light armament remained, even its armory had been emptied. Calculations indicated it didn't have enough power to destroy the ships in formation around it.

Internal security protocols were functional however and that was all Jehan needed.


He smiled at Larrin as a shimmering forcefield surrounded him.

Larrin shouted, lunged and was thrown back from the force field with a sizzling white flash. She clawed her blaster – similar to Ronon's and Jehan's own and he wanted that back damn it – and fired. The forcefield absorbed the energy, increasing its strength.

Jehan's smile turned into a wolf's grin.

The white lights on the hologram began winking out.

Larrin's gaze caught on the display. Her mouth fell open for a moment, then she shouted something – noise didn't transfer through the forcefield, since it was air proof as a defense against poison gases – and ran for the door, followed by the other Travelers.

Jehan monitored as they bolted for the airlock and the umbilical attaching it to a Traveler ship.

When they were gone, Jehan relaxed back in the chair and asked *Tempestas* if she still had long range communications ability.

If the ship didn't, he was looking at either surrendering to Larrin's Travelers or a long, unpleasant death: *Tempestas* didn't have any way of freeing Jehan from the manacles holding him in her command chair.
He sighed when the ship admitted its communication systems had been wiped when it was left behind.

It did have a distress beacon meant to transmit to Atlantis.

If he used it, someone would come.

The only question was would it be someone from Atlantis or the Wraith. But he didn't really care.

*Activate Distress Beacon,* Jehan told the ship. He had to believe Vala and Mer were already out looking for him. They'd find him before the Wraith did.

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**Ronon**

Ronon grinned at the potato-nosed merchant they'd found and spun his energy pistol around his finger. It was harder than it looked; the pistol was not balanced at the trigger guard. In fact, it was unbalanced thanks to the energy pack in the butt, but it had no recoil, so the muzzle didn't drift unless his arms got tired. The Tau'ri's propellant-based armaments required far more skill to fire accurately. Not that Ronon was going to admit that.

A Satedan, even an ex-Satedan, had his pride.

He knew his grin wasn't nice. The Kirtan merchant certainly didn't think so, but when he glanced at Haemi, he physically recoiled further into the over-stuffed vegetable stall. She'd brought out a knife – a large knife, one Ronon hadn't seen before – and a whetstone. She was putting that extra bit of edge on the blade. Doing it blind, while she stared unblinkingly at the merchant.

Knives were viscerally more frightening than an energy weapon. Most people had cut themselves at some point. They'd seen themselves bleed. They had that point of experience to let their imagination build on. Plus, Satedans had a reputation for knifework.

Haemi wasn't the scariest person there, even though she stood as tall as Ronon and regularly tossed him around when they sparred. That title went to tiny, perfect Teyla. Teyla, who had gone toe to toe with Wraith as a Runner. Just the thought of surviving that life made Ronon shudder. He didn't think he would hold onto himself half as well as Teyla had.

"Tell us where to find the man calling himself Alcid," Teyla asked politely. She spoke softly. She didn't need to threaten. She hadn't even stepped into the shade of the stall's awning and the sun glinted copper fire off her hair. "We have unfinished business with him."

"What business, maybe I know someone else who could – "

"Tell us who were the people who paid him to set us up, left three of our people for dead and took our crewmate?" Nelgon and Teyla had woken from the stun they'd taken. Alber had taken two blasts, judging from the burns on his clothes, trying to reach Jehan. The kidnappers had left his body in the emptied tent along with Teyla and Nelgon. Now Olesians paired paired with Tau'ri marines were interrogating anyone they could find who had been at the Plefa market.

"On Garesh," the merchant blurted, the words tumbling over each other as fast as his tongue could move. Sweat gleamed at his hair line and on his upper lip. "Garesh Mindal, the river town. Alcid does most of his business there, his father was a Traveler so they go to him to trade for food and anything else their ships need. They don't use the ring."
"Ships?" Teyla prompted with a lifted eyebrow. The simmering fury didn't show in her expression at all, but Ronon could sense it.

"Yes, ships – the Travelers live on their ships, travel between the worlds, never settle where the Waith can find them."

Ronon huffed out a breath. He'd thought the Travelers were a children's tale.

Haemi let out a curse. Like Ronon, she'd just realized finding Jehan was going to be even harder than they'd realized. Getting him back would be harder too; ships fast enough to flee the Wraith would be fast enough to run from their ships.

Jehan's kidnapping was looking more deliberate than they'd thought too: people with ships would want a pilot, not just a random Tau'ri with the Ancestors' gift.

Haemi tucked away her whetstone. She twirled the knife the way Ronon had his gun, moving it intricately through her fingers, flipping it back and forth, first grasping the hilt then the blade. One slip and she'd lose a finger.

"Speak of this to anyone, let word we are searching for him reach this Alcid, and we will find you and all your kin and send you through a space gate," Haemi told the merchant.

"Let's go," Teyla said.

Ronon picked out a couple of ripe gammi melons and dropped them into his coat pocket. Melena loved them. He flipped a coin onto the ground at the merchant's feet. He wasn't a thief.

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Sam

"I don't know if it will work the way Carson thinks it will," Janet cautioned Sam. The command staff of Atlantis, Revenge, and the proposed crews for Hippaforalkus and Aurora were gathered in the large conference room. The doors to the balcony that gave a view over the whole city were open. The breeze from outside smelled of sea and salt, clean and alive. They'd already gone over everything critical to maintaining the city and the on-going search for Jehan and moved on to the gene therapy Beckett swore would give people an artificial version of the ATA.

Janet wanted them to do more testing before using it. Sam got that; she did, because she didn't trust Carson after Hoff, but they needed people who could operate the ATA to crew their ships. It would take more time and tech than they had to retrofit them. She'd run the numbers herself after Peter submitted his report.

No ATA meant they were more vulnerable to hijack too. Having Revenge in orbit tended to keep pirates at the front of her mind.

"Don't care," Mer said. His chair skidded back. He was already on his feet, rolling the sleeves up on his shirt. "Just do it." He had changed so much from the hypochondriac Sam had been married to. Calling him by a different name came as a relief and a reminder.

"It could have long lasting side effects," Janet protested. They had more people than chairs in the room, but as First Medical she was senior command staff so she got a seat at the table. "Just because you're frustrated by the –"

Mer rounded on her. He was a big, solid man and could loom surprisingly well. The rage he'd been
bottling up leaked out in his raised voice.

"Dead," he snapped. "That's long lasting. That's what could happen to Jehan if we don't find him and get him back." He slapped his hands down on the table and laptops and tablets jumped along with several of people. "Miko and Beckett and you can't do everything this city needs, never mind the ships and the satellite."

Janet flinched.

"What side effects?" Vala asked. "Will it make a difference that Meredith has naquadah in his blood?"

Sam grimaced at the reminder. She never forgot that Vala had been a Goa'uld host, but she'd never known Rodney – Meredith while Jolinar was in him. He made it easy to forget; he didn't talk about his time with the rogue Tok'ra.

Meredith didn't talk about it. Not with Sam. Maybe he talked with Vala and Jehan.

Janet pressed her lips together in a line, then blew out her breath audibly. "Fine. Your choice. Only volunteers. Five. If everything looks good and it works for you, then we will discuss more volunteers. The naquadah shouldn't make a difference, but I don't believe Teyla or any of the Athosians with the Wraith marker should try it."

Halling nodded at this. He was a conservative guy. He wouldn't be volunteering for the therapy.

"I'm done here," Meredith said. "I'm going to find Beckett." No one said anything as he walked to the conference rooms doors and opened them with an annoyed jab of his finger. The same doors would have opened on their own for Jehan or Miko or Beckett.

"So are we keeping it just to the Tau'ri?" Peter asked in the quiet that followed.

Sam glared at him. Just what they needed to bring up.

"We're keeping it to people who carry the ATA as a recessive from one parent," Janet said and saved Sam from that political shitstorm. "Not everyone has that." She nodded at Sam. "Sam doesn't, for instance. Meredith does."

"You are strengthening their ties to the Ancestors, not giving their gift to those who are not of their blood?" Halling asked.

"Um. Basically."

He nodded again, looking far more pleased than before. "That is acceptable."

Sam dug her fingers into her thigh. Halling was a decent man, but God, save her from religious bull – she smothered a laugh into a cough. It looked like the segregation she'd worried would peeve the native Pegasans was going to defuse a religious problem she hadn't even seen coming.

That was probably all the good luck she could hope to enjoy for the day.

"Janet, I know you don't like pushing this through so fast – "

"Fast?" Janet made a dying cow noise. "Sam, we shouldn't even be past clinical development, never mind a trial therapy. If we were on Earth there would be years of clinical trials before we ever approached being ready to give it to more than small test groups. Even then, even after
approval, there would more years of ongoing formal studies to monitor for long term side effects and efficacy."

"You're our head of medicine, I think you can monitor everyone who gets the therapy," Peter suggested.

"Yes, and I will, but I can't pretend this isn't reckless and illegal," Janet replied.

"It's not illegal here," Sam said. She added, "Even on Earth, not every country has the same laws as the US."

"Not actually making me feel better," Janet mumbled. "I care about not hurting people with something that hasn't been tested, not about being sued or going to jail."

"You aren't going to jail. You're too important."

"No, ugh, no," Janet said. "Never say that, that's awful. No one is too important to be responsible for what they do."

The alarm from the gateroom sounded, jerking Sam away from whatever she might have replied.

"Unscheduled gate activation," Campbell sang out as Sam and half the command staff scrambled out of the conference room. "Receiving Teyla's IDC."

"Drop the shield and transmit authorization to come through," Sam directed.

She turned toward Vala, who had been very quiet through the entire meeting.

"We won't stop looking."

"They're early." Vala kept her gaze on the shimmer of the wormhole as Teyla, Ronon and Haemi walked through. Her eyes narrowed. "They have something for us."

Teyla raised her head to look at them. She didn't have to raise her voice. The gateroom had fallen silent.

"We know who took Jehan."

**Meredith**

He began working on the bombs as soon as Vala asked for them. They still didn't know where the Traveler fleet was – Alcid had no real grasp of astronavigation. But they knew why the Travelers had taken Jehan. They wanted a pilot with the ATA – the Ancestors' Blood.

It was all too reminiscent of the Genii.

Zelenka hadn't been able to take the ATA therapy, so he'd returned to *Revenge*. He was working beside Meredith and nearly as committed to using the bombs they were building as him. Radek had admitted being vindictively happy the Wraith had wiped out Genea.

"I know there were innocents there too," he'd confided to Mer over a bottle of Ruus wine. "I want to be sorry for them. But šoustat the Genii."

Mer had raised his glass to that. Fuck the Genii.
"You wouldn't have destroyed the entire planet."

"No," Radek had said. "But I am not sorry the Wraith did. Am I a bad person?"

"No," Mer had told him. "Fuck 'em. And fuck the Travelers when we find them."

He'd be ready when they did. They couldn't let the Travelers get away with stealing Jehan. It wouldn't end with him, even if Meredith had been willing to write him off. An example had to be made for the entire Pegasus galaxy.

All of that, though, all of that was mere distraction from the sick terror that had filled Meredith since Teyla had come back from Plefa without Jehan. Someone had him and Meredith could barely deal with that. It was more than the pain of missing him. It wasn't about Meredith's feelings; it was knowing that being taken captive and used, as a body, no choice, was Jehan's worst nightmare. It wasn't Ba'al or a Goa'uld, but it was bad enough. Meredith hated that, hated the damage it would be doing to Jehan, as much as he'd ever hated the SGC for abandoning him.

He wouldn't. He would never give up looking for Jehan. If everyone else, even Vala, stopped, he would go on. He would find Jehan and then he would burn everyone who had hurt him to ash.

Vala would be with him though; he knew that. Teyla would never give up, either. Radek understood, too well. Miko and Lindsay, Til, Ronon, Haemi, all of *Revenge's* crew.

He'd rewritten the search protocols himself; Meredith knew they were as finely tuned and powerful as was possible.

It was killing him, though, waiting while Atlantis' scans swept through the galaxy, hunting the power signatures a fleet of hyperspace capable ships would emit. The Travelers were too good at hiding; they'd spent ten thousand years outrunning and outwitting the Wraith.

Meredith told himself they'd slip. Sooner or later, the Travelers would make a mistake and reveal themselves. They just had to be ready.

His stomach growled for the fourth time. He set down the tools he'd been using and double checked all the safety and containment elements were in place and enabled. He was tired enough to make stupid mistakes. That meant taking extra care. But he had to eat and rest for a few hours or he'd start forgetting to be careful.

A shrieking alarm began sounding through *Revenge*. It was the one Meredith had rigged to the Atlantis scan sync.

They'd found *something*.

The alarm shut off, but Meredith didn't care. He was already running for the bridge.

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**Vala**

The distress beacon led them to a ship orbiting far, far out from a dimming red giant sun. It was a cold, dark system to human eyes. The only planets were icy, lifeless rocks endlessly circling far out from the habitable zone. No chappa'ai and nothing of interest to draw the Wraith close enough to find an abandoned Alteran warship.

Maybe that was what had drawn the Travelers there. Maybe they'd tracked down some legend.
Their 'fleet' hovered in a sphere around the warship.

*Revenge* blinked out of hyperspace in the deep black, well beyond the reach of passive sensors. Vala piloted. Lindsay had the reactors, while Mer and Zelenka babied the hybrid Goa'uld/Alteran cloak that hid *Revenge* from even an active sensor sweep.

Goa'uld tech could hide an entire mothership, but not if you were looking for it. The Alteran tech on their gateships was far superior, impervious to the most active search. But when ramped up for something larger, like *Revenge*, it was – like all Alteran tech, according to Mer – a power-sucking, inefficient bitch. The cobbled together tech the geniuses and engineers of Atlantis had created outperformed Goa'uld cloaks without draining *Revenge* too badly.

In six months, they would install a debugged version on all their ships, along with Atlantis itself, but at present, it was fussy and not completely reliable. Vala had wanted it anyway and Mer had made it happen.

It would let them approach the Traveler ships close enough to use the rings to board them.

*Aurora* dropped from hyperspace even farther out, beyond the Close Sphere that Mer and the Tau'ri called the Inner Oort Cloud, and passively drifted, waiting since it didn't have a cloak, watching for Wraith or anything else, ready to back up *Revenge* if necessary.

Ronon and Til and Teyla had multiple boarding parties trained and ready for each Traveler ship, along with back-ups. They'd been prepared for a larger 'fleet' than the six they'd found. Seven, if you counted the Alteran warship. They'd found *Tempestas* in the Atlantis archives. It would need someone with the ATA in its command chair to respond, but no one believed Jehan would fire on *Revenge*.

They would have Jehan back or they would destroy the command cadre of the Travelers.

Vala wasn't Qetesh; she wouldn't visit vengeance on the children or crew with no power or choice in the course. She'd discussed it with Meredith and the rest of the crew, considering the opinions of the fighters on the boarding parties: if it came down to hand-to-hand in the Traveler ships, they would be the ones taking casualties.

Til had surprised her by speaking strongly in favor of confining their attack to the command crews. Even Mer had grumbled but agreed. They'd take revenge if necessary, but they'd do it the hard way, and take the ships back to Atlantis and the children to new homes there too. If they had to. If they didn't get Jehan back.

She hoped it would be a moot point.

Mer's bombs would be enough if they got Jehan back. They were ringing them into the life support compartments of the ships. The rings were loud and flashy and the opposite of covert, but they were using life-sign detectors to know when no one was there to see or hear. The bombs themselves were the size of an apple, the naquadah in the core like so many pips. They would roll to the nearest wall and adhere, defying any attempt to disarm them. If anyone even found them.

Vala waited until the last naquadah bomb was on board its ship and ready for remote detonation before handing the helm over to Signe and opening communications. The cloak stayed up and *Revenge* was moving arbitrarily around the Traveler ships while maintaining maximum offensive attitude. Lindsay had the engines up to full military power, ready to redline if they needed guns and shields at nanosecond's notice. Signe had dozens of a pre-coded course maneuvers set up, calculated and ready to initiate with the press of a button.
Signe wasn't the pilot Jehan was, but compared to the Travelers… it wouldn't be a contest.

Vala opened the communications channel herself, hijacking the frequency and code they'd heard the Travelers using between their ships.

"Traveler ships, this is Vala Mal Doran, captain of the Atlantis ship Revenge. Respond on this frequency."

Vala smiled at the blurt of static and panic that propagated between the Traveler ships. They switched frequencies trying to communicate securely. Filan, their new Olesian comm tech, followed the change effortlessly, piping the Traveler captains' voices into the command deck in real time.

"Where is the ship?" one of them demanded. "Find it, it must be close!"

"Arm weapons," a woman directed.

"You've brought this trouble to our hatches, Larrin," another woman shouted.

"It's one ship," the first one replied.

"How do you know, we can't even find it! There could be dozens!"

Vala was getting impatient and that was a perfect prompt. She gestured to Filan, who grinned. The Olesians were surprisingly bloodthirsty. Vala liked them. Filan gave a thumbs-up – the Tau'ri gesture had been picked up by everyone on Atlantis – to transmit.

"I don't need dozens of ships to wipe you out," Vala interrupted. "I suggest you listen closely. Particularly you, Captain Larrin."

"Prove you're really here," Larrin demanded in response.

"Do you want me to fire on you?" Vala replied. "I don't do warning shots."

On her secondary display, Filan relayed a highlighted graphic with Larrin's ship identified, bright solid red among the red outlines of the other Travelers. Predictably, it swung closest around the Alteran warship. Filan was a keeper, in addition to freeing Signe up to pilot.

Filan was nice to look at too: dark, short hair, gray eyes, rangy body. But off limits, the comm tech had been introduced as Filan-ban – the Olesian suffix for an asexual uninterested in attachments. Vala had almost pouted. At least, she still had Stacks.

The Second Continent, rebel Olesians had a whole slew of introductory suffixes. Vala liked them; it got the whole thing out of the way up front, like giving her rank as captain. Signe had started using Signe-ghin: physically female male who liked women. Vala was Vala-ghil, female that liked both. Meredith and Jehan were -ni, in a committed relationship, uninterested in conveying their biology or psychology. Olesians didn't have to ask. How they introduced themselves conveyed everything they wished to share. At least the Second Continent Olesians did. The First Continent Olesians were repressed fanatics who preferred to sacrifice all 'deviants' to the Wraith in exchange for security for themselves.

With flick of her fingers, she targeted Larrin's ship, letting Revenge light it up, and went weapons hot. "Mer, drop the cloak."

"Sure, sure, just don't ask us to get it back up as fast," Meredith replied. Power diverted from the
cloak to shields immediately. A read-out on the weapons console provided her same information as he added, "Shields at ninety-eight percent." Meredith liked to hold back a trickle to shore the shields back up if — when — they began taking fire.

Vala heard the other Traveler captains gasp and mutter softly as Revenge seemed to just pop into existence, terrifyingly close. Revenge didn't have the size of a ha'tak or a hive or even the massive yet graceful Alteran warships. But it was bigger than the Traveler ships, newer, and looked practically vicious in comparison. Revenge was a predator and pretended to be nothing less.

"Shields!" Larrin shouted to her own crew. Her ship brought its meager shields up faster than the rest of the Travelers did, but Vala could read the power consumption patterns, the slow asynchrony translated into visuals by Revenge's sensors, and they were weak. She could punch through them with two salvos from the main guns.

Aurora registered the change and signaled its fast attack approach, shedding stealth for brutal speed. In another moment, the Traveler long range scans would find it. And then anyone that hadn't already shit their pants would fill them.

Aurora also transmitted to Tempestas, command codes courtesy of Atlantis' archives, asking for its status and directing it that only Revenge and Aurora were friendly ships, the Travelers were to be treated as neutrals unless they initiated an attack. Tempestas responded after a breath, accepting the new codes. They had the ship without even stepping foot inside.

Now that everything was all out in the open, there was no need to be circumspect about their comm tap. "Give me visuals," Vala told Filan.

A picture of Larrin — attractive, young, angry and over-confident — coalesced on the main screen. She didn't wear leather as well as Vala did.

Vala smiled for the camera.

"I want my first officer back, Larrin."

"You're insane."

"No, you were insane to think you could just take someone and we wouldn't come after you." Vala let the memories of Qetesh rise up. Had Jehan been her lo'tar, Qetesh would have razed planets to get him back, simply because she let no one take anything from her. No System Lord could afford to ever show weakness.

Were they not gods, after all?

Weakness led to doubt and doubt bred betrayal, insurrection, and revolution.

Lessons had to be taught.

The irony of following the same credo as the Goa'uld made Vala queasy. Which made her even angrier than she already was. That incandescent fury leaked into her voice, if not her face, if Larrin's expression could be trusted.

"We will have him back or we will destroy you. All of you, to the last child in the last escape pod — not that there's anywhere to escape in this frozen pit of a star system."

Let Larrin think they would do the worst.
"We need that ship for our people. It's just one man – "

"You won't need anything when you're debris drifting in vacuum," Vala cut her off.

Larrin glared back. "If he's so special, you wouldn't want us to damage him. He'll be taken care of, well treated, so long as he helps us control that ship."

"That ship is Alteran. It belongs to Atlantis," Vala said. "Jehan is crew. He belongs to our ship. Touch either and I will fuck your shit up." Stacks had taught her that phrase. She liked it. She liked most of the Tau'ri who had survived Pegasus so far.

"We found it, it's ours!"

"And we found you. You might be able to outrun or outsmart the Wraith, Traveler, but not us." So Vala was exaggerating more than a little. If Tempestas hadn't activated its distress beacon, they'd still be hunting the Travelers. That was the point though: she and Mer and the crew of Revenge would never stop hunting the people who took Jehan, any more than he would give up on any of them.

There were nights she was almost grateful for the mutiny that left her with only Jehan to stand by her and rescue Meredith. If not for that, they wouldn't have Revenge. They wouldn't have gathered the faithful crew they had now.

Before Jehan, Vala had never had anyone she could rely on.

"And if any harm comes to Jehan," Vala added, "I will exact it measure for measure a thousand times over." She stood up and approached the camera. She couldn't flash her eyes without Qetesh or speak with the Goa'uld voice. It didn't matter. "I will have what is mine or I will destroy you."

Larrin paled, but pride kept her upright, and rage lit her gaze. Filan filtered through comms from the other Traveler ships.

"Give it up, Larrin. If you put him back on that ship, it'll just kill everyone next time."

"That ship's a curse – "

"They can blow us all up. We haven't got warships! I'm not risking my kin and crew for your fantasies of leading us all."

"Kempi and Dules were right to stay out of this. We could have traded with them for tech – "

"Traded what!?" Larrin yelled. She gestured to a display on her own bridge. "They won't give us their help for nothing; we have to take what we need!" Then she glowered at the camera, as furious with her own people as with Vala.

Vala felt a stab of sympathy. The Travelers were desperate; they existed on the ragged edge, endlessly pursued, with no support to be found anywhere in Pegasus. But their need didn't translate into a right to enslave other humans and if they succeeded with Jehan, it would be only the beginning. They would need more crew with the ATA; they lived on their ships generation after generation. They would force Jehan and any others they took to have children and those children would soon be a slave class, for how else would they keep them from taking over?

Qetesh's memories included more than just Goa'uld atrocities. Vala sometimes suspected the parasites had learned all their evil from their hosts before building upon it. But maybe that was because she preferred to believe the well of darkness within her was hers and not an indelible taint
left by Qetesh.

Vala bared her teeth at the Traveler woman on the view screen. "My engineer ringed command detonated naquadah bombs into the life support sections of all six of your ships. Talk among yourselves. Briefly. See who wants to be the first to be blown up."

"You wouldn't —"

"You mistake me for — " Vala interrupted. She watched as a read-out told her the Traveler ship was powering up weapons. It lashed out, but the plasma beam splashed off Revenge's shields without effect. The read-out blipped down by .002% for less than a picosecond. She finished, " — a fool," without a hitch. She'd expected the attack and Mer might not be much of a pilot, but with Linds and Zee watching engineering, he could play their shields like music. The Travelers were cowards, always running from the Wraith, never standing to fight, so they didn't know enough about offensive action to be much of a threat.

Larrin lifted her chin, but Vala could read the fear beginning to bloom behind the mask of defiance.

Vala leaned toward the screen. "Maybe I should mention, we've taken out Hives."

"Everyone fights the Wraith if they can."

Vala smirked. You don't, she thought, you run. The Travelers would have jumped out already if they could. Some of them were already running up the power to their hyperspace engines. At least one was leaking so much radiation everyone on was losing years of their lives. She reminded herself desperate people did stupid and insane things and to be wary of just that.

"It doesn't mean anything," Larrin declared.

It meant something when you won. It meant you were still alive. Which the fucking Travelers, especially this bitch, weren't going to be for long if Mer had his way. Vala was beginning to think he was right. Giving them a chance was a fool's game. She hated to waste ships, though, so Vala decided to try once more.

"Send my man back."

"How about you get those bombs off my ships and I don't fuck him up instead," Larrin counter-suggested, coming back to trying to use Jehan as a hostage.

Larrin just didn't get it. Maybe she thought she was dealing with a bunch of soft-hearted Athosians or the Asgard. Vala didn't shift her gaze, just gave the command. "Mer. Trigger. Execute."

The bridge dimmed to green-tinted battle station lighting that saved energy and made reading the sensor displays easier.

"Executed," Mer reported. A second screen showed them the Traveler fleet, the distance between Revenge and them rendering the ships into tiny toys. One ship jerked off course with a gout of atmosphere jetting out of an abrupt hull breach. Mer must have chosen randomly. It wasn't Larrin's ship. Or he'd excluded hers in the likelihood Jehan was aboard it.

A graph estimated the power of the explosion in one of the smaller windows framing her main data display. It had exceeded Samantha's estimations, but not Mer's. Vala still had the best scientist.
Now she just needed the best pilot back.

Alarms wailed on Larrin's ship, and echoed through the comms from the other Travelers. Larrin's head whipped to the side as someone on her bridge shouted, their volume attenuated by distance. Vala waited until the Travelers knew exactly what had happened to their ship.

"You bitch!" Larrin screamed. "We'll never get that ship repaired enough to live on again."

Not a word about any casualties. Vala stopped feeling bad – not that she had anyway.

"That was for threatening one of mine," Vala said, vacuum-cold. The comms transmission was unencrypted so every Traveler ship was hearing and seeing her, not just Larrin. That would have the other captains screaming bloody murder, scrambling to make sure they weren't next on the list. "Don't do it again."

They'd had a fast, angry debate over where to set the bombs off. Mer was angry enough to want to blow the hyperdrives, but Vala knew that would likely blow the entire ship, and render it not fit for salvage. She didn't relish the thought of people dying who hadn't been party to the command crew's decisions either. Or children. Destroying life support would force the crew to either jump for the nearest habitable planet or evacuate onto one of the other already over-crowded Traveler ships, but it wouldn't kill anyone immediately.

Before Jehan and Mer taught her to be human again, Vala wouldn't have cared about any of that. She refused to lose them now. She was better than Qetesh and the Tok'ra had left her.

If Jehan were badly hurt or dead, though, all bets were off. That would make it war and not crime. Vala had been a criminal most of her life; there were acts that exceeded criminality. As Qetesh, she had ordered those acts, but Vala was capable of committing them herself. She knew Sam Carter would quail at such actions, but if Jehan was dead, Vala would feed everyone on those ships to the Wraith, leaving Larrin for last so she had to watch what she'd wrought.

She'd always been vindictive and ruthless. Not that it mattered at all, because what was, was. Right now, she had to get Jehan back.

Mer crowded in next to Vala to glare at Larrin.

"Six bombs left. They'll go off one by one. Each ship has five chances they won't be the one that goes off next. But next time it's four to one, then three. The odds only get worse until none of you have life support." Mer crossed his arms over his chest. Mer usually showed every emotion on his face and his voice lilited high when he was upset. He'd moved far beyond upset. The flat tone of his words didn't sound eager, though. That made him more frightening. "After that I start killing ships."

"He's one man." Larrin held onto her composure.

"Not to us," Vala stated. "Oh, and it's not just one man – it's what happens if you touch anyone from Atlantis, our ships or our allies. Leave Jehan on the Alteran ship and get out of this system."

They could use the ship. Taking it would remove any temptation to attempt another, more covert kidnapping of any of their people, too.

*Tempestas* might be out of date by Alteran standards, but it would be an excellent addition to Atlantis' growing fleet. It would take time to restore it enough to jump to hyperspace, but they had
engineers and technicians. In a few weeks many of them would be able to use the ATA too.

Vala waited for Larrin's answer, hiding her own apprehension behind a smug smile.

Larrin

Larrin gestured for Garem to cut the comm feed. The instant he did, she whirled and kicked a rusting bulkhead then sucked in a hard breath as the toe of her boot caved in and pain bloomed through her foot.

"Larrin –"

"Shut it," she snarled. Breach it, she'd broken her damn toe! She hugged herself against the pain and concentrated on her anger. "Go get him."

Breach and blow-out, she was grateful they'd suited up and gone back to pull the grubbing waste of atmo out of the Ancestor ship. If he hadn't been desperate for food and water, she knew they'd never have got past that rotting Ancestor forcefield. She wanted to put a gun to his head and burn out his brains for costing so much for breaching nothing, but Garem had reminded her that the other captains wouldn't like it much.

Garem pointed out the Ancestor bastard needed the same things they all did: atmo, water, food. Larrin had just tried to push it too fast. They had to break him slowly, but they could do it.

But now they had this rotting, fucking, radiation-damned ship from the City of the Ancestors threatening them.

"Major energy signature approaching from outside the stellar system," Raga reported. "It's big, Larrin, bigger than the Ancestor ship."

"Breach it," Larrin hissed. The bitch did have other ships. She'd walked the corridors and decks of that Ancestor warship even if she couldn't bring it out of hibernation. She knew what it had the potential to do; she'd dreamed of commanding that power, keeping the other ships in line, turning it on the Wraith, showing the breaching dirtgrubbers they couldn't extort people and tech or anything else from the Travelers in exchange for their materials and food.

They could have moved so many of their people onto it. The families and children could have been safe enough to breathe easy for once.

"Go!" she shouted at Garem.

She'd see how that bitch on the Tau'ri ship liked it when she put the muzzle of a blaster against that breaching bastard's head. Ancestors knew she wanted to blow it off, even if it would make a mess of her bridge.

"Larrin," Garem persisted. "Katanya's calling for a confidence vote. Disali and Herden have already agreed."

Those shits, they'd been angling for Fleet Captain for years and probably thought this was their chance to oust her. Damn them, they'd been as eager as she had been when they'd realized that the Ancestor ship could be more than a dead hulk if they snatched one of the Tau'ri Ancestor bastards
to activate it. She'd suck Wraith cock before she let Herdan or Disali take over the Fleet.

She'd even let that bitch in the boxy, bastard warship over there take the Ancestor bastard.

She glared at the image of the Tau'ri ship. It shrugged off *Maga's* best weapons and her *Maga* was the strongest ship the Travelers still had. *Revenge*, the bitch called her ship. Larrin wondered if it would be as immune to the golden drones on the Ancestor ship.

Not that she'd have a chance to find out. She hissed under breath. Larrin didn't want to, but she believed the Tau'ri captain's threats. The bitch was probably an Ancestor, one of the rogues there were legends about. She hated them, she hated them all like oxygen burning in an engine room.

"Go get him," she told Garem again and this time he went.

She wanted to shoot someone. Preferably the Tau'ri who had cost her so much when taking him should have been a triumph. The Tarani had been full of talk of the Tau'ri pilot who could make Ancestor ships fly when the fleet stopped to trade for water and oxy, leaving off workers in exchange for food supplies, because their crews were too big for the ships to self-support any longer. It should have been simple after they grabbed the bastard out of the market.

He'd killed three of her men with poison before they managed to stun him and managed to gut two more since with a knife they'd missed in their first search for weapons. He'd blown open an airlock hatch near engineering while they were in hyperspace. Larrin had finally ordered him stripped and dressed in a crew jumpsuit and spaced all his clothes, starting with his boots.

Even then, he'd used the Ancestor ship to kill more of her people, nearly including her. She didn't want to use Garem's slow methods to turn the Ancestor bastard and make him loyal. She wanted to break and wreck him, put him on his knees and make him piss himself and beg.

They should have moved the fleet, only they were stuck, because the casualties the man had inflicted on *Maga*'s security didn't count everyone lost. Her best engineer and half her techs, along with critical crew from Katanya and Herdan's ships, were aboard the Ancestor ship when Larrin put their captive in the command chair. The Ancestor ship had come alive for him, the chair glowing blue-white, and his gaze had gone from slit-eyed rage to distant and blind, while security protocols turned against everyone aboard. Some of them were still working on repairs from the damage inflicted. Larrin could still replay the alarm's pulsing shriek in her head, along with the calm Ancestor voice warning that atmosphere in any compartments occupied by intruders would be evacuated and anyone left in denied compartments would be eliminated.

The purge only stopped when everyone still alive exited into the umbilical attached to the ship from *Maga*. She'd waited days to re-enter wearing vacuum skins and drag the bastard out.

He'd glared at her, manacled hand and foot, and said, "Go ahead. Shoot me. The ship will purge anyone aboard without me here and if you put me in that chair again, I'll do it myself."

Wraith blast it, she'd wanted to shoot him.

Larrin shivered at the memory. She was a hard woman; she'd used everything, including her looks, to make Fleet Captain. She wasn't insane, but what she'd seen in the Tau'ri man's expression had been. She'd brought the him back to *Maga* and left him stunned again, tied up and naked, in a bare cargo container, rather than risk he'd find a way to escape or suicide and take her crew and her with
him.

She wondered if the other Tau'ri were as crazy as the one they'd taken. The bitch on the ship and the broad-shouldered engineer backing her seemed willing to inflict any kind of damage necessary to get just one man back.

Breach and board, she should have paid closer attention to the rumors of what the Tau'ri had done to the Genii. She leaned her hip against the arm of the captain's chair and stared at the blank comm screen until Garem returned with a security team half-dragging the still still-manacled prisoner. Larrin winced to herself. That woman wasn't going to be happy when she saw he was bruised and bloodied.

Even battered and with blood running from his temple, the bastard was attractive. He had a truly beautiful mouth for a man. Too bad he hadn't been interested in her when she tried to seduce him into staying with the Travelers. He hadn't wanted her, nor any other women, nor men, and not been interested in little boys or girls when she'd gagged and asked. She didn't think she could have gone through with that, even if there were dozens of worlds where they could have bought children and no Travelers would have been sacrificed.

No. She couldn't have done it. Not even for an Ancestor warship and a way to kill all the Wraith. She'd deserved the hate and loathing in his eyes when she'd even considered it. It didn't make her sympathize any more with him, though.

"You have cost me so much," she told him.

He hawked a gob of bloody spittle at her. Larrin wiped it away deliberately, then slapped him hard, so his head rocked to the side. "I'd love to do more, but there's no more time." She turned away and ordered Garem to re-initiate comms with the Tau'ri ship.

The screen flared into life, showing the bitch and the engineer. Larrin noted how their gazes zeroed in on her prisoner.

"We'll leave him on the Ancestor ship. After that, he and it are your problem," she said. "It will take us twenty taid to disengage the umbilicus."

"You have thirty. Anything more and I'll start setting off bombs again."

The engineer shifted restlessly and blurted, "Jehan?"

Jehan – Larrin thought she might have done better to find out his name before – straightened and smiled wolfishly. "I knew you'd come."

A brilliant smile lit the engineer's broad face.

"Should we believe her?"

Jehan angled a considering glance Larrin's way before shrugging. "If you have enough leverage."

The bitch nodded and declared, "Your thirty taid start now. – See you soon."

Larrin gestured to the security officers. "Get him through the umbilical, detach and seal the ship
and get back. Garem, comms to the rest of the fleet, everyone goes to hyperspace in twenty taid. All emergency power if necessary."

She'd deal with Katanya and Herden once they were out from under the Tau'ri's guns.

**Meredith**

Meredith took Miko along with him, behind Ronon and Teyla's boarding parties. He was still seething over the manacles and bruises they'd glimpsed on the comm screen. Novak and Zelenka could handle anything in *Revenge*'s engine rooms. He didn't have to say it; the fact he left them behind was proof of his esteem. Miko could too, but he'd need her ATA to supplement Jehan's getting *Tempestas* back into operating condition.

They were all wearing the thin vacuum suits Vala had bought for the ship on Ushbos. Melena wanted to come too, but Mer and Vala persuaded her to wait until they had the ship and the situation under control. He appreciated her outrage over how Jehan had been treated though. Once Kell and his idiots had been eliminated, Satedans had proved themselves reliable additions to the crew and Atlantis.

When they went out into Pegasus they were all starting to call themselves Tau'ri, wherever they'd come from, an indication of the refugees' commitment to the city and their new world. Meredith hadn't considered himself belonging anywhere except *Revenge* before.

Beckett's ATA gene therapy had worked for him, but Meredith wasn't ready to completely rely on it. Atlantis and the other ships were already attuned to their crew. *Tempestas* had been invaded by the Travelers. Its security might be over-sensitive. He was glad for the EVA thin suits.

"Be on the look-out for booby traps and any other little presents the Travelers may have left for us," Ronon reminded everyone as they waited for the airlock to cycle open. Mer nodded. Wraith drones didn't mess with that sort of thing, but the Travelers were a different enemy. It paid to be cautious.

He wouldn't put it past that Larrin witch to have left Jehan with a bomb strapped to him or some other nasty surprise meant to blow up in the faces after the Travelers jumped to hyperspace.

At least Jehan had still been standing. The Travelers hadn't broken him. His words had warmed Mer as well; this time Jehan had believed in them. They'd found him.

He wouldn't be completely reassured until he'd seen Jehan in the flesh, held onto him, and used the healing device on him once Melena had done her checks, but the terrible fear had finally eased. It left him nauseous because he hadn't been eating enough, but he figured he'd be sharing a meal with Jehan soon.

Jehan was waiting on the other side of the airlock door, propped against a bulkhead and *still* manacled. Those fuckers. Mer wondered if he couldn't comm Vala to blow up the Traveler Fleet Captain's ship after all. He stayed in the airlock instead. Ronon held up a hand to stop anyone from stepping through. Jehan lifted his head wearily and nodded, gesturing confirmation as he croaked out, "It's clear. No ambush. They didn't have time to set anything up before they took off."

Mer slumped in relief.
Ronon led his team inside. Mer surged forward before Teyla could bring through her team. He crossed the desk in a breathless rush that ended with him wrapped around Jehan. Ronon enfolded them both in one of his rib-cracking hugs and then Teyla was beside them too, her small, gloved hands on Jehan's shoulders.

Jehan winced though so Mer had to elbow Ronon. He moved to the side enough that Jehan could dip his head and greet Teyla Athosian fashion, forehead to thin suit helmet. The two of them shared a silent smile before Teyla stepped back and Mer pressed close again, taking some of Jehan's weight just because he could.

The time for more than looking at Jehan searchingly and tracing his brows and cheekbones would come later. Mer unlatched his helmet and tossed it aside. He brushed a careful kiss to the unhurt corner of Jehan's mouth, then demanded, "How hurt are you?"

"Bangs and bruises, thirsty and hungry," Jehan assured him. His manacled hands couldn't reach around Rodney and instead his hooked his fingers into the front of Rodney's thin suit. "Uncomfortable."

"We brought a torch and heat shields," Haemi offered from just behind Ronon. She hefted the tool case and grinned. Mer shuddered a little thinking of what she could do with a torch if they ended up fighting hand to hand. Fire and space ships were a bad mix.

The soft sound of relief Jehan let escape cut through all of Mer's defenses, though. The manacles were a symbol of captivity that had to bother Jehan far more than their actual weight and restriction.

"Look, we'll need you to get this old cow moving, but just to the nearest system with a Stargate," he explained, because he wanted to sweep Jehan back to the safety of Revenge's compartments, behind its shields, and jump for Atlantis as fast as possible. Since he couldn't, he'd be sticking with Jehan working double shifts until Sam could send a volunteer crew from the Atlantis stargate.

Jehan made an unhappy face.

"Hey, don't call the old girl a cow. She's a good ship."

Mer's comm whispered static before Vala's voice sounded.

"Traveler ships are entering hyperspace now. One, three, the Maga, six. That's it. Even the one with the blown life support made it. Everything clear over there?"

"So far so good," Mer replied.

He fished out a comm-set and hooked it onto Jehan's ear so he could hear and talk with Vala, along with monitoring the channel they'd set up for the skeleton boarding party.

Haemi knelt and began setting up the torch. "Let's get this done."

"We'll head for the engine rooms -- " Mer started.

"Not without --" Jehan spotted Miko among their people. "Stay with Miko. They put me in the command chair, so I activated the security breach protocols. Anyone wandering around without an ATA gene is going to either end up breathing vacuum or, if you have a suit, trapped and isolated."
"I bet Fleet Captain Larrin loved you for that," Mer said. "Okay, Miko, out of the suit, we know these systems are sampling shed cells to check for the ATA. When you're sealed up, it won't know you from Adam." He switched his attention back to Jehan, who was flagging despite his best efforts. "Beckett finished his therapy. I'm the proud owner of a knock-off ATA. So's pretty much everyone we're bringing aboard, except Teyla."

"Shit, you went through with it?"

Miko began shedding her suit helmet immediately, followed by her gloves. She hooked both onto snaps on the suit though, before stroking her hands along an obvious sensor pad. Mer pretended he didn't hear her murmur to the ship in Japanese, since it wouldn't help the tension to flay her for anthropomorphizing when Jehan had just called the ship 'old girl'.

He directed his attention to Jehan's question. "Just about everyone given the chance did. Sam's peeved. She took it even though she didn't have the recessive gene. It made her blow up like puffer fish for three days. She can operate stuff, but the mental component doesn't work for her. Oh, and Frasier pitched an epic fit about some voodoo shortcut Beckett used. Everyone has to give her blood every week so she can monitor us."

Jehan leaned back. "Crazy."

A hiss accompanied the blue-white flame as Haemi lit the torch. Mer finally stepped away from Jehan so he could shuffle over.

"Feet first," Jehan said. Mer knew he wanted to be able to run.

Haemi fit the flexible heat shielding under the manacle, grinned, and said, "Don't move," before applying the flame. The metallic odor of the hot metal immediately filled the chamber and the old ship's ventilation system huffed and creaked before shifting into higher gear to evacuate any poisonous fumes and deal with the heat build-up.

Once they had the manacles off, they headed for the control chair, so that Jehan could shut down the security system and get them access to the bridge and engineering. Mer pretended he didn't see Jehan pat a bulkhead and whisper, "We're taking you home."

From that point, it was three long days and nights of nearly non-stop work to bring the ship into shape to make a hyperspace jump. Everyone worked, but syncing comms and security with Aurora and Revenge proved much harder than they'd expected. The Alterans had changed their programming language sometime after Tempestas was abandoned and the bastardized mix of Tau'ri, Goa'uld and Asgard running Revenge wasn't compatible.

Mer would deny it to his dying day, but the three ships each had their own personalities. Tempestas was eager to please, Revenge was suspicious, and Aurora was a snob. But they got them working with each other successfully with a new program that would work with anything else using Alteran base math. Including Atlantis and Hippaforalkus. Atlantis was always a gracious lady and Hip, well, Hip was that cousin who'd hit his head one too many times, but it wouldn't balk.

He grinned to himself. Less than a year and they had three Alteran battleships, along with Revenge. They just needed to figure out how to build drones and potentia.

Way to depress himself.

The bombs he and Radek had built hadn't taken much naquadah, and they could salvage the Genii
Stargate to replace it, but they desperately needed more power sources for Atlantis. He almost wished Daniel had stayed to help dig through the city's archives looking for answers.
Send Men to Canaan

Chapter Notes

Short one this time.

Sam

A month later they'd put together crews for all the ships, three shifts, ten and ten and ten, to match the thirty-hour day the Alterans had favored for their ships. It let each shift rest and have some awake time off-duty, so everyone stayed sharp. If there was an emergency, back-up was already awake instead of groggy from being yanked out of REM sleep.

That was the only good news though.

The Wraith were awake early.

They were culling.

The Atlantis Council took stock of the looming problems after Peter presented Science's findings on the city's current state and the ships. At least Sam was a scientist; she could understand their problems and concurred with the findings.

"We can't exactly pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps," Mer declared. Technically, he wasn't in charge of anything, Peter Grodin was First of Science, but Mer was the Engineer. In Atlantis, it had become a title and job with more status than nearly anyone else except Sam's First of the City and Vala's First of Ships. When the Engineer spoke, everyone had to listen. "And there's no one in this galaxy with anything but bits and pieces of broken Ancient tech."

Sam shot an apologetic look at Halling. "The Wraith have destroyed any infrastructure here."

Mer waved a hand. "Exactly. It's not that people here are dumber than in the Stella Via, I mean at least you never bought that the Wraith were gods or any other claptrap like the Goa'uld, you're just... trapped in this same rut."

"So, what are you proposing?" Sam asked, though she had as good an idea of what they needed and where they could get it as Mer did. It wasn't like they hadn't discussed it before. More than once.


"I don't believe the Ancestors would approve of such practices," Halling commented.

Vala waved her hand. "Well, obviously, that would matter more if they were here. Since they aren't, they don't get a say."

Sam bit her tongue. Halling tended to get his back up when anyone questioned the saintliness of the Ancestors. It was one reason Mer and everyone else had begun referring to them as Alterans. She wanted to agree with him though. Going Viking on the Milky Way didn't strike her as a sound bit of nation-building.
"I believe we should table this until Tempestas is fully crewed," Teyla suggested from her seat farther down the table. "Then we will have enough ships to perhaps spare Revenge to go hunting for a few seasons."

Vala shrugged one shoulder. "It's no skin off my nose." Stackhouse kept teaching her ridiculous Tau'ri colloquialisms. She got them right, but they still sounded odd coming from someone who had never set foot on Earth. She brightened and added, "Besides, Beckett is working on another therapy that will let others use Goa'uld tech. The crew should have that before we return there."

Sam hadn't heard about that. It would be useful back in the Stella Via. And much better than hosting a Tok'ra or a Goa'uld and then finding a way to get rid of it. The naquadah in the blood meant always knowing when another snake was nearby.

"Who authorized this?"

"No one, Samantha," Vala drawled. "I asked him, as a favor, to see if it was possible."

"There's been no human experimentation?" Janet was going to have a cow, no, an entire herd of cows. Sam swallowed a groan. She'd send Beckett back to Earth hog-tied with a Christmas ribbon if she didn't know the IOA would use him. Not to mention his Hoffan wife. She would not separate family or break up relationships.

Down at the far end of the table, where he'd been pretending to nap through everything, Jehan perked up. "How long until it's ready?"

"Don't know, darling," Vala said, "but soon? He's been busy with the ATA therapy until now."

To think Sam had been frustrated that Janet had skipped out on this meeting.

"We could put together an inventory of exactly what we need, what we'd like to have but can do without, and various luxuries that are available either on Earth or elsewhere in the Milky Way," Sam suggested. "That could be on-going until the crew members for Tempestas are all through training and a shakedown cruise."

She looked around the conference room. "All agreed?"

Everyone agreed.

Meredith

"Earth is still the best trade option for what we need," Sam insisted at the next meeting. "I know some – " she sighed and amended that, " – many of you don't trust the SGC."

"With good reason," Mer said.

"But they have a manufacturing base," she went on. "Medicines. Computers. Surplus food."

"Yet people still starve," Jehan commented.

He'd come back from Tempestas' shakedown cruise satisfied but worn. It had something closer to an AI than anything the Alterans built afterward; they hadn't liked dealing with cranky ships that insisted on evaluating and confirming or denying their own captains. Tempestas wanted Jehan and Meredith and was a little sulky until Haemi came aboard with Novak.

Which left Teyla sulking on Revenge or as close to it as she allowed herself.
Meredith felt a little sulky himself over losing *Revenge*'s best engineer. No one would ever know *Revenge* better than Novak did, not even him. She'd been part of the design team, been there as *Prometheus* was built and present through all the changes that had shaped it into *Revenge*. He was losing Miko to the Alteran ship as well, since she had the natural ATA.

At least he got to keep Radek.

Sam made a face, half exasperation, half acknowledgement of Jehan's jab, and went on, "Guns and ammunition."

"Which they'd be happy to use on us, probably," Vala said.

"I don't think they'd start with that," Sam replied with a tired smile. "Look, I know there are other places in the Milky Way to get the things we need, but none that have everything. Not to mention Ba'al is still out there and, according to Jack, the Lucian Alliance is taking over everywhere they can get a foothold. Earth isn't beholden to either."

"But we don't want to be beholden to the Tau'ri," Zelenka said. "If we come to them, they will think we belong to them."

"Jehan, what do you think?" Frasier asked.

He'd gained back most of the weight he'd lost while a prisoner and didn't look as brittle and furious. He rocked his chair back on two legs and frowned. "I don't want to go there, but Earth would have everything we need – if we could do business with the people there and not go through the governments."

"Good point," Mer agreed.

It was true. The SGC didn't make that kind of decision. They were dancing to the IOA's tune.

"Then there's no real problem at all," Vala said. She smirked at Sam. "We have people who speak the languages and understand the culture. We have trade material – "

"Gold, silver, platinum, diamonds, refined lithium," Zelenka ticked off. He had a gleam in his eye that scared Sam. A pirate's gleam.

Vala grinned back at him. "We can obtain all of those."

"I don't want to know," Sam muttered. "I still don't see how – "

Zelenka waved her off. "Leave it to us. Black market money laundry will take a steep cut to convert any of that to funds, but we can afford it, and then we can purchase from legitimate sources."

"We can raid a couple Goa'uld shipyards," Vala added.

"Ba'al has an R&D lab on Praxia," Jehan added. "It's where he stashes anything Ancient he finds."

"But the defenses would be overwhelming," Sam objected weakly, "wouldn't they?"

Jehan shook his head. "No. It's secret; its main defense is that no one knows about Praxia. Only his most trusted Jaffa guard it and none of them are pilots."

"Huh," Mer muttered.
Sam watched Mer's fingers twitch, like he was imagining getting them on what Ba'al might have hidden there. Plus, there would be the absolute joy of fucking a System Lord over, especially Ba'al. Nothing compared to thwarting the Goa'uld, not even destroying Hives. She understood that, even if she didn't have the same history.

He pulled his tablet closer and squinted. The light from outside the conference reflected off his screen dazzlingly. "You memorized the coordinates?"

"Ba'al had no idea I was Tau'ri." Jehan looked grim.

Mer's mouth fell open a little. It was the first time Jehan had admitted out loud that he came from Earth. O'Neill had figured it out and blabbed to Teal'c, but Jehan had never confirmed it.

Sam's eyes widened fractionally, but she wasn't surprised any more than Frasier, and everyone had the tact to not comment on it. Jehan looked uncomfortable but added, "He's smart, but not as smart as he thinks he is."

"Goa'uld arrogance," Vala agreed and Mer had to nod. Jolinar might have been Tok'ra, but in the end, a snake was a snake was a snake and they all thought they were better than any human host.

"So... we're seriously considering going back to the Stella Via, conducting some raids on Goa'uld or Lucian Alliance holdings and then doing some quiet business on Earth?" Mer asked.

"We -- You -- will have to negotiate with the IOA through the SGC," Sam said, "but yes. No. First you come back here with whatever you get in the raids and we sort out what we need before trying a trade mission."

Zelenka snorted under his breath and Sam pretended she hadn't heard. What Revenge actually did after it left Atlantis would be beyond her control.

**Jack**

Jack showed up at George's ranch with a bucket of Supernova Hot wings and a bottle of decent bourbon in hand, and his Asgard bug-zapper in his back pocket. He turned it on and off randomly while the two of them watched a terrible hockey game and off while George told him how his grand-daughters were doing in school and Jack griped about one of his neighbors in Georgetown. Half an hour after the game they were both snoring, until Jack woke and turned zapper on. Time to get down to business.

"I swear the IOA wants to make enemies," he said when George raised his eyebrows in a silent prompt. George Hammond was too smart to think Jack had showed up just to complain and watch hockey. Not that it hadn't been about the best evening he'd had in months.

"There are many days I'm relieved I've retired."

"Well, you shouldn't be," Jack snapped. "You still live on the planet and those idiots are doing their best to get it blown up." He scrubbed at his face. His eyes were tired. Hell, he was tired. He was too old to go out in the field any more. He was too tired to deal with the constant rain of horseshit generated by the IOA either. Landry kept trying to strike deals behind Jack's back and if the alternatives weren't so much worse, Jack would have Hank's ass out in a hot minute.

"What has the IOA done that has you this riled?" George asked. They'd been making the bourbon last while sounding more affected than they were. He tipped a shot into Jack's tumbler and then his own.
Jack picked his up like he was going to down it in one shot, but then made a face and sipped instead. "I never used to worry about a hangover," he muttered.

"It's the stars," George told him. "They're a headache. You're a good general, Jack."

"Bullshit. I'm a crap general," Jack objected. "I was a good colonel, but I hate the goddamn politics."

"But you play them."

"It's like the god damn Cold War all over again in DC. Moscow rules." Jack swirled the liquor in his tumbler. "Never figured I'd be using what I learned in the good old USSR at the Pentagon. Thank God for Auntie's lessons." He'd floundered when he took over Homeworld until he started treating it like one of Hettie's deep cover ops in enemy territory.

The Ba'al op with Kim kept haunting him. It had been mostly a success, but if it ever came out, it would explode all over him like an ink-pack in a bank robbery. With about the same chance of him ending up shot or behind bars. Hetty used to quote Honoré de Balzac. A spy is always a spy, night and day, in bed, at table, as he walks abroad; his vileness pervades every moment of his life. Thus, Jack would be held accountable.

Well, he had worse to answer for than Jennifer Kim's fate, didn't he?

But George had asked him a question and Jack hoped he might have an answer or two if Jack explained.

"The SGC is sending Daedalus back to Atlantis loaded for bear. Hank's waltzing to the IOA's tune and they think they're going to take back Prometheus and the city. What's going to happen is we're going lose us our best line of defense, make a new enemy, and probably lose another goddamn ship to that pirate woman. If we just sent them some supplies and played nice, Sam and the rest of the expedition survivors would send us all kinds of Ancient goodies."

"They don't trust anything they don't control," George pointed out.

Jack grunted and finished the bourbon. "They're greedy and short-sighted. Plus, they're slipping Caldwell secret orders they think I don't know about."

"And you do because you are good at your job."

Not good enough, Jack thought. If Chekov hadn't tipped him off, if Caldwell was any less honorable, if he was even a step slower, the IOA would have slipped their shitty plans right past him. Spies and parents never sleep. If only he could give the IOA the spanking they deserved.

"Caldwell is by the book, but he takes care of his people, and Hank got one of his bridge crew discharged because she's a lesbian. He wouldn't cross the street to piss on Landry if Landry was on fire." Jack was at the point he wouldn't either. Caldwell had turned over the sealed orders Landry had slipped him on the sly and expressed his doubts over their legality. Legal or not, chain of command or not, refusing those orders would end Caldwell's career. Jack still hadn't located where the NID had buried – and he hoped that was a metaphor – Jennifer Kim so he could pull her out; now Caldwell was going to get shafted too. All Jack could do was tell him to do the right thing anyway. "It all sucks," he declared morosely.

George looked disgusted. He'd never tolerated officers who went on sexuality witch hunts. Weir didn't either, but there was nothing she could do about military code prosecution within the military. Jack had given Weir the name of Hank's latest power play though and, even with her
clearance fucked, Weir could probably pull enough strings to get the woman, Erin something, a consulting job somewhere.

"That isn't even my biggest problem anyway," Jack went on. "I just hate to see a decent officer sent into a no-win situation that's going to tank his career. I was hoping I could get him a star, kick Hank to the curb and slot Caldwell into the Mountain."

"General Landry is a fellow officer, Jack."

"Fuck it, that's why the zapper's on. Landry's a vindictive, self-serving ass. He was just the least-worst option and you know it."

Jack was afraid. He didn't try to hide it now, though he'd been snapping sarcasm at Landry and Daniel and the rest of SG-1 since the mess blew up in their faces, keeping up the mask. The head of Homeworld Security had to at least act like he could keep the planet safe.

"Last year, after Danny got back, he found another Ancient installation thanks to stuff he found out on Atlantis. And then he used some kind of communications doohickey to contact the Ancients in another galaxy." Jack ground his teeth for a second. "Except they're not Ancients, they're Originators, the assholes the Ancients left their galaxy to get away from, and now they know where the Ancients went. Which conveniently is also an entire galaxy full of potential converts to Origin, their religion. Did I mention they're Ascended and worship amps up their powers?"

The IOA wanted to dispatch negotiators, establish diplomatic connections, maybe snag some of the Originators' power for themselves. They couldn't conceive that to the Ori political power brokers were meaningless. The Ori trafficked in faith and rewarded it. No one was as frightening as the true believer. Except the believer betrayed, Hetty whispered in the back of his head. Jack had no clue how they could prove the Ori were false gods when they genuinely had god-like powers. Taking down the Goa'uld had been a cakewalk in comparison.

The thought of Origin taking hold on Earth made Jack shaky inside.

It could happen. Earth was ripe for a religion that delivered.

"They're in another galaxy," George offered gently. "Even with the ships the Ancients had, it's a long trip."

"Oh, no." Jack laughed harshly. "They just hold a prayer circle and they've got power to spare. They can open supergates. Jenn Haley managed to blow up the first one, but they're back."

"How long do we have?"

Jack shrugged. "Who knows?" Ori Priors were popping up on planets all over the gate network. Ori ships were operating according to the mission. Chulak was gone and the remaining Jaffa were converting in droves. No one knew what happened to Bra'tac and the Lucian Alliance had decided the whole disaster at P3Y-229 had been a Tau'ri trick to weaken Netan. It wasn't a two-front war now; it was a three hundred sixty degree one.

Jack raised his gaze from his hands and met George's kind eyes. "Christ, George, I think Daniel's finally pissed off someone we can't beat. The Ori opened another supergate.

"Odyssey only made it because the Ori couldn't be fucked to finish it off. We lost Korolev along with the Jaffa fleet, ha'taks from the Lucian Alliance and the Tok'ra and a goddamn Asgard ship at P3Y-229. I'm sending Daniel with Caldwell to Atlantis, in the hope they've got some answers in the city's archives and to get him out of reach of the IOA. My orders to Caldwell are if Daniel finds
something we can use, to trade anything and everything for it, including free coffee for life and a
dozen dancing virgins."

George closed his eyes, then poured himself another drink that he raised in silent toast to their
dead. Jack couldn't bring himself to join him.

"George, right now our best hope is a myopic archaeologist and a bunch of pirates in another
galaxy that the IOA is about to piss off," Jack said. "I'm worried that we're really screwed this
time."

**Meredith**

"Dropping out of hyperspace... now," Jehan announced. *Revenge* exited the hyperspace window
smoothly. The viewscreen showing the space outside the ship went black. Meredith only noted it
tangentially; the landscape hardly mattered when they had a possible drive problem. His gaze
flicked down the numbers on his station's read-out, looking for anything off.

"Good, good," he said. He rushed over to the main bridge sensor station and began a series of
scans. Vala and Jehan might as well have not existed for all the attention he paid them, once they
shuffled out of his way.

"Everything else is all right," Vala said.

"Mmmph," Meredith mumbled. Of course, everything else was all right. The alert had come from
the engine rooms. Though he supposed it was still important data. They were far out in the dark
between galaxies. If anything failed, they were in trouble.

"How's it look?" Jehan asked. He spun his chair so he could stretch out his legs, crossing them at
the ankle and linking his hands over his belt buckle. Meredith ignored him.

He frowned at the displays in front of him, then went back to the engineer's main console and
opened the comm to the Engineering. "Radek, are you getting the same readings on the sensors
there that I've got on the bridge?"

Zelenka's voice sounded clear as if he was on the bridge with them. "Yes. Everything's good. The
program is handling the translation between the Alteran systems we snagged from Aurora and the
hybrid human-Asgard systems. They're more sensitive than what the ship started out with, though,
so there are some hiccups."

"I'd call a hyperspace shutdown a little more than a hiccup," Meredith sniped.

"We didn't shut down. We dropped out, under control, to double check an iffy reading." Meredith's
ire didn't affect Radek. After the Genii, very little did. The Travelers had managed to piss him off,
but they hadn't frightened him. Mer wasn't sure the *Wraith* frightened Radek.

"Well, we can't afford to keep doing that. We'll never get anywhere."

"It will be worth it," Radek replied. "You're the one who insisted the Alteran systems would
increase our drive's efficiency by eleven percent."

It would, if the damned tech would just play nice with some of the Goa'uld and Asgard-derived
equipment. He'd thought they'd got the bugs out before they left Atlantis.

"Can you resolve the problem?" Vala asked. She rested her hand on Mers shoulder and leaned over,
studying the same numbers he had.
"An hour to write a patch for the mediation program," Radek said.

"You can do it faster than that."

"Ano, but I check my calculations and so nothing blows up," he gibed back.

"Fine.‖ Mer shut the comm down and sulked for a minute. Miko could have done it faster. But Miko was on Tempestas, guarding the Atlantis system along with Aurora. Even with Beckett's ATA therapy, they still didn't have nearly as many people to crew the Alteran ships as they should. Truthfully, if it came down to another battle, they'd need Mer on one ship and Jehan in the other to get the most out of them.

"Aw, don't take it so hard, Mer," Jehan drawled from his place at the pilot's console. "It wasn't your mistake."

"Sloppy coding. I should have spotted it."

"It's the kind of thing that wouldn't show up until we made a big jump, though, right?" Jehan asked. "The microjumps didn't last long enough to register any deviations."

"No, that's true."

"Take a minute, indulge in some pure science, and take some readings. We're out here between galaxies. Nobody ever stops and looks around out here – "

"Because there's nothing to look at," Signe said as he and Teyla entered the bridge. "Problem?"

"Not if we fix it," Meredith told him.

Jehan had a point though. This far out from the Stella Via or Pegasus, they could take readings free from gravitic pollution. Radek would handle the program fix. There was never any time to spend on pure science. They were always plotting something or fighting or running for their lives. Even in Atlantis, he'd been under the gun to figure things out so they could survive the Wraith. He hadn't really had a chance to do pure science since before he joined the SGC. But he could take a half hour or so now… No one was shooting at them.

He drifted over to the science officer's console. Another minute and he'd forgotten about everything else. What was that? Was that an artifact of Revenge's own signature or something else? It was so faint.

Meredith dropped into the chair and began refining the sensor sweeps. Anywhere else the data would have been lost in the static blur of stellar radiation. But they were deep dark, where secrets older than the stars were still whispered.

Vala

"So?‖ Vala asked.

"The patch and program are both ready," Radek said. "I have run tests. There will be no problems now."

"He says," Mer muttered, but didn't look up or question Zelenka's work. He'd been hunched over the main science station, working on something else for hours. Vala wasn't sure she wanted to know what.
They could jump back to hyperspace and finish the trip to the Stella Via whenever they wanted.

Signe had taken over at the engineer's console, though while they were in real space, there wasn't much to monitor. Filan had even less to do at comms and was playing a Tau'ri game on a secondary screen. Teyla was sitting watch at environmental and had either gone asleep with her eyes open or was meditating. Jehan wasn't even faking. He had nothing to do and was napping, head tipped down.

She held her hand out and examined the polish on her nails. The gleam satisfied her, but the color just wasn't right. A metallic would look better, but anything gold reminded her too much of the Goa'uld and anything silver looked too much like the false talons the Wraith favored. Neither was a good association for her or her crew. She would stick with the reds one of the expedition chemists had made up for her. Oh, perhaps she'd be able to pick up some different colors on Earth. According to everyone, the planet did have a cosmetics industry, even if it was backward in other ways.

Mer didn't look up from the notepad in his hand. "Hmm."

"Huh?" Jehan rocked the pilot's chair forward as he blinked awake. The nap hadn't done him any favors. He looked worn. There bags under his eyes and the glint of silver along his unshaven jaw. He'd been quieter than ever since they decided to trade with Earth. The Tau'ri lived longer than most humans in Pegasus and even the Stella Via, but noticing the touch of time on Jehan made Vala shiver inside. The changes the Goa'uld and the Tok'ra had made to her and to Meredith meant that they would live and stay young much longer than normal, even without a sarcophagus. Neither of them would do well without Jehan with them. It nagged at her every time she looked at him.

She supposed this terror of loss was what had driven the Alterans to the experiments that resulted in the Wraith.

Vala pushed the specter of mortality aside and prompted, "What?" They were halfway between galaxies. There shouldn't be anything out here, but Meredith's 'hmms' had often led them to worthwhile targets or saved them from enemies.

Distracted, Mer tapped another command into his tablet, and mumbled, "Oh, there's an odd echo on the proximity sensors. It isn't affecting anything, but, uh... Yeah, no problems."

Vala stalked over to him and read the screen over his shoulder. He flicked a glance up, but said nothing.

A second later, Jehan had joined them at Mer's other shoulder and scowled at the information displayed.

"So, that's weird," Jehan commented. "You sure the sensors are working properly?"

"No, no, no," Mer muttered. His hands played over the touchscreen. "They're better than ever. And with no interference they're able to discern data from much farther out than normal."

Jehan patted his shoulder and went back to the pilot's console, only this time he wasn't relaxed. Instead, he began pulling up sensor data himself.

"Doppler Effect?" Mer muttered to himself. "No... no, no."

Jehan whistled abruptly. "Is that an energy signature? It looks like sublights." he blurted. Vala headed for comms and dropped into the seat next to Filan, but refrained from switching the console controls to her. Filan began scanning for any transmissions. Teyla and Signe were both wide awake.
and alert now, too.

"Are we going to jump or not?" Radek inquired from the engine rooms.

"Not yet, Mer's spotted something interesting," Vala answered. She watched Mer.

Meredith scowled at his display and then slaved it to the tablet again. "It's old data."

Another sensor pinged and he switched screens. "What the — I've got an object travelling at .999 the speed of light, and it's coming this way," he blurted.

Vala nodded. They would never have caught the signature if they'd been in hyperspace. But despite the vastness of space, ships did encounter each other sometimes, because they all plotted for least-energy, high-efficiency courses between systems. Figuring out the courses ships would take, where they would come out of hyperspace and when, that was the bread and butter of pirate work. The best course to navigate between planets was the equivalent of a water hole; the plains were wide but animals must still come to drink, the universe was huge, but humans with equivalent science would travel the same paths between planets.

Or galaxies, she guessed. They'd gone into hyperspace at the edge of Pegasus closest to the nearest system in the Stella Via and an easy next jump to Praxis.

"Slow ship?" Jehan asked Meredith. "Time dilation has to have done a number on them."

"Could it be Wraith?" Signe asked. "Their hyperspace jumps are short and slower than ours."

Hyperspace ablated the organic hulls of the Wraith hives. They had to pause between longer jumps to let them regrow even if they had sufficient energy. Vala cringed at the thought of bioships; she didn't want to be inside something that was alive and could get sick.

"Whatever it is, it's following the same course I'd calculate to move between Pegasus and the Milky Way," Jehan said. He studied the navigation console. "If I was so screwed I couldn't make a hyperspace jump. But it would take a forever to get that far."

"Hmm, and that's where relativity kicks in," Meredith told them. "That close to the speed of light, the people — assuming they are people — would only experience maybe twelve years between galaxies. So, unlike on *Aurora*, if they have a few stasis chambers, they're laughing. Well, they're not laughing, they're unconscious, but you know, metaphorically."

"So, they get there alive, but everything and everyone they knew is dust and history." Signe shook his head.

His hair had been growing out and Vala wondered if he would get it cut soon. Signe worked hard at being male. None of them, except Dush, had known he'd been born with a female body until he took extra days off to recover after the Olesians had offered a gender conversion treatment that was superior to anything Signe had been able to find back in the Stella Via.

He flipped his hair out of his eyes and added, "A million years? Not even history."

The Goa'uld had never been interested in sex reassignment; if they cared about the sex of their host at all, they just took a different one. It turned out the Alterans hadn't been interest in gender either. Sex was a distraction from Ascension. The Olesians from their second continent though thought bodies were something to tailor to the person inside them. They couldn't re-write someone's gender at the DNA level yet, but cosmetically and functionally they were wizards.

Signe had cried when he told Vala about it; she'd cried a little too, aware of how it felt to be trapped
in her own flesh.

Signe didn't look any different than he had before, but he smiled more, and liked to rub his fingers along his jaw when he needed a shave. Seeing him happier made Vala smile, too.

"Assuming it is a ship," Teyla said, "and assuming the crew is alive, should we not help them?"

Jehan glanced at Vala. He was obviously thinking of the same problems she was. "Might not be that easy. Not like we can match speeds, honk the horn, roll down the window and yell at them to pull over."

"That makes no sense to me," Teyla told him crossly. A smile lurked at the corner of her mouth though. Jehan smirked at her.

"They're going so fast that if we broadcast any kind of message to them, they'll pass it so fast they won't notice it," Jehan explained.

"And if we match speeds with them, which Revenge isn't really made to do," Meredith picked up the explanation, "we'll be subject to the same time dilation effect." He frowned at the quandary.

Vala was tempted to just shrug her shoulders and tell them they'd have to let this fish go.

"Could we try a microjump and deliberately slow the drop-out protocols to launch a message buoy at close to their speed and course?" Signe suggested. "Something telling them to stop so we can match with them without losing time?"

Meredith practically twitched in horror. "No, no, no, no. It doesn't work like that, you – argh! You're either in hyperspace or not. There's no run up to light speed or dropping from it. Hyperspace goes around – no, through – all that. The only speed the ship has is calculated to set its course when it comes out of hyperspace. We could be sitting dead in space – as we are right now – and still shift into hyperspace. When we came out, we'd still be adrift until the gravitic effects of the destination system began to influence the ship." He pointed at Signe. "If we were stupid enough to try what you just suggested, the ship would be ripped apart at every bolt and bulkhead. You're horrifying. I blame the Goa'uld. They've made sure everyone in the Milky Way except on Earth is so ignorant I want to cry."

Signe glared back at Meredith.

"Hey, at least he's not calling you stupid," Jehan soothed.

"No, he's stupid too," Meredith said. He switched his attention back to the sensor consoles. Signe muttered something in his native language that didn't translate, but didn't need to, finishing with an obscene gesture at Meredith's crotch. Mer didn't even notice. "But there is still something – " He snapped his fingers. "Microjumps!"

Jehan raised his eyebrows and waited while Meredith typed and then sat up with a crow of triumph. "You – " he pointed at Signe, "— aren't nearly as useless as most people. This will rely on whoever is on that ship also not being completely stupid, so it's the opposite of a guarantee, but this will work."

"Maybe share with the rest of the class, Mer."

"Right, yes, it's simple enough. If our sensors can pick up a ship going into or out of hyperspace – which, obviously, we do, there's tremendous energy signature if the ship isn't cloaked – the ship in question should too. We can microjump into their direct course, then microjump a couple hundred
light years ahead along the same course. They'll notice and, if they aren't morons, realize they have
to cut their sublights and that we'll will then come to them."

"That's relying a lot on someone on the ship being awake, noticing, and figuring all that out," Jehan
said. He smiled with real fondness at Mer's enthusiasm. Life in Pegasus wasn't, perhaps, as
profitable as raiding and ambushing Goa'uld bases and ships had been in the Stella Via, but Jehan
and Mer were happier. They'd both been tense and haunted before. With Caias gone, the light crew
who had come with them had merged with expedition people like Zelenka and some Pegasans.
Atlantis had become homeport and homeworld. There was no one on Revenge they couldn't trust.

Meredith threw up his hands. "Well, we can't do everything! And I'm not about to waste years of
my objective life, leaving Atlantis hanging, while trying to play Good Samaritan. For all we know,
it's a ship full of Goa'uld. Or worse, politicians."

Vala agreed that while it was all well and good to come to the rescue of strangers, if there wasn't a
profit in it, there was no good reason to waste their resources on them. They'd leave the do-gooding
to fools like Daniel Jackson. Who was delightful but needed a minder, not to mention someone to
kick him into remembering not everyone thought the way he did. It seemed to be a problem many
Tau'ri men had.

"We'll put it to the crew. A couple of microjumps shouldn't cost us more than a day or two," Vala
decided. She didn't mention, but was perfectly cognizant of the fact that, if Meredith's plan worked
and they managed a rendezvous with the slow ship, it might take much more time to figure out
what to do for or with them.

**Jehan**

Jehan dropped them out of hyperspace a second after entering it, but lightyears from where they'd
started. Meredith was already scanning for updated data to plug into his projections.

Vala lounged in the captain's chair as insouciant as ever, boneless as a cat. Jehan thought that was a
good comparison. Vala had a lot of feline characteristics beyond beauty. It had been a while since
they'd fucked, but he hadn't forgotten how much she liked to scratch, for one thing.

Stackhouse didn't seem to mind. Or any of her other partners.

"Okay, yes, it looks like," Meredith was talking to himself, his big hands moving over the controls
with the same speed they did under battle conditions. Jehan smiled. Meredith's brain was always
moving faster than light, leaving everyone else in the dust. The fact that he could translate all that
theory into real world applications made him amazing. Mer was much more than a theoretical
genius and while he'd never be a sharpshooter, he could handle the gun he wore if things got hot.
Jehan loved all that, along with his prickly attitude that had no patience with anyone not willing to
stand up to him.

He leaned back and enjoyed just watching Meredith match the universe and beat it into
submission.

"Yes!"

"It worked?"

"What do you mean?" Meredith snapped. "Of course, it worked."

"Well," Jehan drawled for the fun of winding Mer up, "of course, your part worked. Guess
whoever's on that ship is as smart as you."
"What – what!? No! It took someone as smart as me to figure out how to do this when no one else has!"

"Sure, Mer."

"Jehan," Vala interrupted. "Jump us back to where that ship is waiting."

He snagged the coordinates from Mer's sensor readings and laid in a quick jump back to the decelerated ship. With the dilation effects, the crew would have been waiting for them for weeks, maybe months, depending on how fast the ship had dropped speed.

"Interesting," Meredith said as soon as they dropped out of hyperspace again.

"What?" Vala asked.

Jehan set a course that would bring them alongside the ship. It was still under minor acceleration – no longer boosting, but drifting along its course thanks to inertia. They were still too far out to see it visually, even with magnification and sensor translation. It was just numbers on a console for the moment.

"If these readings are correct, and, to be perfectly fair they may not be…"

"Mer…"

"It's an Alteran warship. Possibly *Aurora* class. And they slammed on the brakes to the tune of around twenty-seven Gs."

"Who's flying it?" Vala demanded immediately.

"I would imagine Alterans," Meredith replied impatiently.

Jehan watched her narrow her eyes at Mer before turning her gaze to the main display where the ship finally showed up as a dim dot, its energy signature translated into visible pixels for their eyes. So far out between galaxies, starlight was too attenuated to reflect much from the ship's hull.

"Alterans haven't been around for ten thousand years," Signe said.

Mer made a disgusted noise. "Do I need to explain relativity to you again? For this ship only a handful of years have passed."

"*Aurora*'s class has a hyperdrive," Jehan pointed out before Mer and Signe could go for each other's throats.

"Warship," Vala murmured, still looking thoughtful. "Must be damaged."

"Maybe, but look at why we were stopped out here," Meredith agreed. "It could have taken damage fighting Wraith or something just broke. If it conked out on the way, they may have been forced to continue at as close to light speed as possible. Which would explain why they're a million light years out from Pegasus."

"Could *Aurora* or *Hip*'s sublight drives push them so close to c?" Jehan asked. *Tempestas* couldn't. He didn't know the specs on the other two the way Mer and Radek and Miko and Linds did, but he'd studied everything pertinent to piloting them, which did include all the drive specifications.

"With a *potentia*, maybe," Mer replied. His eyes brightened.
So did Vala's, unsurprisingly. "That would be worth finding out. No one tells them we understand Alteran, just in case."

"Just in case what?" Mer asked.

"Just in case they have a potentia or they aren't the wondrous and wise Ancestors half of Pegasus worships," Vala straightened up. "We're going to help them, but there's no reason we shouldn't get something out of this. I think a potentia would be more than fair."

"Of course, but they might not," Signe agreed, all sharp grin and sharp edges.

"What shall we tell them and what language do we use if it's not going to be Alteran?" Meredith asked.

"Athosian maybe – " Vala started.

"We're getting a transmission," Filan interrupted. Filan paused then added, "Audio and visual and 3D. I can put it up on screen or as a hologram."

"Hologram," Meredith said before Vala could.

The hologram fritzed for a second, then resolved into the image of a woman, mid to late thirties physically, in Alteran beige and white and grays. If it was a uniform, it didn't show much similarity to military uniforms in the Stella Via or Pegasus.

"Unknown vessel, I am Captain Helia of the Lantian warship Tria. Our ship has suffered damage. Our scans registered your vessel's hyperspace transits along our course. Will you render assistance in the form of hyperspace transport?" She spoke in the lingua franca of Pegasus, the chappa'ai translation that had no written forms.

"Oh, of course we will," Vala purred.

The hologram flickered and Helia looked a little constipated. Vala waited another minute then told Filan, "Open the channel."

"Channel open," Filan reported with a single flourished gesture. It had been it set up already.

"This is Captain Vala Mal Doran of the free ship Revenge. It would be an absolute honor to render assistance in any way we possibly can," Vala declared.

The hologram Helia smiled and nodded with gratitude.

"We're already on a course to rendezvous with your ship."

"Half an hour," Jehan said.

Sam and Mer and Radek had collaborated and finally installed Asgard beaming tech on Revenge, which was useful. But even better, it allowed Mer to reverse engineer their shields to block them if necessary. They'd be in beaming distance soon and close enough to ring over not long after, but they wouldn't be using either. The Alterans hadn't had Asgard or Goa'uld transport technology. Helia and her crew didn't need to know exactly what Revenge could do. That ship was still a warship and they'd be very, very close to it soon enough.

It was just caution, but they'd be idiots to trust this Tria and her crew just because they said they were Alterans. Even more if they were Alterans.
Vala tapped her index finger over her lips. "We will contact you when we've finished our approach. Please maintain your heading and speed."

"We thank you," Helia replied graciously before the hologram winked out.

"Well," Meredith breathed out. He looked torn between excitement and frustration. Not a new look, really, but the element of caution that had kept him silent while Vala talked was something he'd learned from years as Jolinar's host. Mer made it easy to forget that he had most of the knowledge and experience and skills of a Tok'ra spy who had been several thousand years old.

Everyone on the crew had skills that they would just as soon not talk about where or how they had been acquired.

"Filan," Vala said. "Crew wide, please." She stood up and paced forward. "We are about to rendezvous with an Alteran warship in distress. Be nice, darlings, and keep your mouths shut. We don't know their intentions or why they left Pegasus. Don't speak of Atlantis, our other ships, Earth or the ATA. Those of you who revere the Ancestors, these are not the Ancestors. Let's keep a knife up our sleeve."

"Card," Jehan corrected her absently. Mention of the ATA had reminded him of his own uncomfortable ancestry. Beckett had nearly wept going over his genetic profile and now everyone who had taken the ATA therapy had the same twists and turns in their double helix that he did. He really had no idea how to feel about that or that all Ancient technology still seemed to respond better to him and Kusanagi or Beckett than anyone else. Atlantis still made him uneasy sometimes, but he'd grown very fond of *Tempestas*.

"Knife, darling," Vala said. "This isn't a game."
Don't Teach Your Grandmother to Suck Eggs

Chapter Notes

If you spot errors or typos in this chapter (or any other), please comment with them. I'm posting tired, distracted and in a hurry so this will be on schedule after all. But I will fix them if you point out the error of my ways!

Vala

Dushka suggested taking over some fresh fruit from Revenge's storage buffers. They'd picked up plenty for the trip from the trade market on Marisa – no one wanted to go back to Plefa – along with a lot of fish. Dush loved the buffers, one of the new pieces of technology the expedition scientists had reverse engineered from Wraith technology taken from downed darts. It took very little power to beam food stuffs and even live animals up and simply keep them in dedicated buffers until they were needed, then beam them out. Everyone else found them a little creepy, since the Wraith used them to catch people to eat, but the cooks and the quartermasters loved them.

"It's not the refrigerator's fault cannibals were using it," Dushka insisted.

They had an actual stasis pod from Atlantis in the medbay now, but Vala was still determined to obtain a sarcophagus while they were in the Stella Via. They had helped corrupt the Goa'uld, but she thought the scientists of Atlantis could find a way to re-engineer one so it was no longer addictive.

The fruit went into a stasis box on a small gravity float working off a remote. It trailed behind her like a pet as Vala strolled to the umbilical they'd connected to Tria. She was dressed in her good, but not best, leather outfit and forwent carrying a blaster. Instead she had non-ferrous knives in her boots, a garrote dressed in her hair, poisoned needles, and a kara'kesh on one hand. Her jewelry had been made to match it. Melena had injected an emergency transmitter behind her knee she could activate by squeezing it once. It felt like a tiny cyst and was inert. Vala didn't like being trackable, but Jehan would be on the bridge, ready to snatch her back with the Asgard transporter if anything went wrong. Meredith had a tracker too since he was accompanying her. Jehan had two, because Meredith was justifiably paranoid.

Til and Teyla completed their party.

"Let Captain Helia know we will be coming aboard now," Vala commanded. She cycled the airlock, checked there was atmosphere in the umbilical then opened the hatch. The umbilical had no gravity, but even Teyla navigated it without difficulty. Regular freefall drills were an excuse to have some fun while living in a stodgy corridors and cabins in space, but they served their purpose too.

Tria's outer hatch admitted them without a wait. Helia was waiting on the other side of the airlock.

"Captain Helia." Vala smiled widely at the woman, who appeared a little nonplussed by the four of them. Good. "We brought some fresh fruit with us. Delicacies." She gestured to the stasis box. "You didn't mention whether you crew had enough supplies, but we can supplement them, if you are in need."
"It isn't an urgent problem, but something other than rations will be welcome," Helia admitted. "Come, join me on the bridge."

"Delighted," Vala said. They walked together.

She handed the float control to Teyla as they passed. Teyla handed it one of Tria's crew, who looked at it in bafflement. Teyla explained it sotto voce. "Center, float on/off. The circle around it: forward, backward, tip side to side. Release the control to stop. Set the level with two clicks. It will automatically follow the remote." Teyla smiled at him. "Simple."

"Take it to the mess," Helia told her crewman before turning back to Vala. Tria's transporters were working and large enough to take all of them, Helia and two of her crew.

Vala waved at Teyla and Til as they exited onto the bridge "Tilawithes Tulafame and Teyla Emmagan," and then to Mer, "Meredith, my engineer." Til and Teyla presented a comical contrast: one massive and imposing, the other tiny and serene. Mer just looked mulish, as usual, if an observer didn't note the spark of genius in his eyes.

The other crew with Helia, who had tensed, looked relieved. "Interesting transport mechanism," Helia commented on the floating pallet.

"Inefficient but handy," Vala admitted cheerfully, "if you're on planet."

"I'm here to figure out what's wrong with your hyperdrive," Meredith announced. He looked around the bridge, but without too much excitement. It wasn't significantly different than Aurora or Hip's bridges and he knew those two well. They were all pale, bland, all whites and blues, with high ceilings for a space ship, and consoles that were operated while standing. Vala didn't like it, but it was preferable to a ha'tak and the Goa'uld fetish for open flame torches.

Helia's brows lifted. "That seems unlikely," she said.

"Who here has a working hyperdrive and who doesn't?" Meredith replied and Vala didn't hide her smile.

Helia pressed her lips together. "Why don't we talk in the captain's conference room."

"Why don't we," Vala agreed. She kept herself from rolling her eyes. It was an effort. Helia already reminded her of the Tok'ra: over-privileged, convinced of their superiority and boring.

Helia led them off the bridge with her back stiff and straight. Teyla and Til followed, but Meredith just looked around at the bridge crew and said, "Someone take me to engineering so I can get something done while everyone else is 'chatting'. I have better things to be doing than play AAA in space."

Vala didn't know the reference, but she knew Meredith well enough to guess the gist. The baffled expressions on the Alteran crew made her want to laugh. They were all so stiff she wanted to ruffle their feathers.

Once Helia and she were seated, with Til stationed next to the door and Teyla beside her, Vala asked, "So how did you end up in the middle of the Big Dark with no supralight capacity?"

"We were dispatched to secure a base in our destination galaxy as part of," Helia paused delicately before finishing, "our war effort."

"The war with the Wraith," Teyla said, speaking for the first time. Vala had worried Teyla and the
other Pegasus natives in the crew would be too reverent of the Alterans to be objective. Her time as
a runner had hardened her, though. Everything they'd learned from the Tau'ri and on Atlantis had
taken the shine off the Ancestors, too. Teyla was loyal to Revenge's crew first and foremost and
any faith she still had came in second.

Helia sucked in a breath. "Yes."

"You lost, by the way," Vala added carelessly. She wanted to see how Helia reacted. "I could be
nice and break it to you gently, but it wouldn't make the facts any more pleasant. Your people have
been gone from Pegasus for ten thousand years and the ones that went back to the First World in
the Stella Via all died. Everyone knows it was the Alterans who built the chappa'ai, but that was a
long time ago, and the Goa'uld have ruled pretty much every planet with one until recently."

Helia went very still, looking from Vala to Teyla and then back. Vala noticed she didn't pay any
attention to the kara'kesh. Which meant she hadn't recognized the Goa'uld tech or that it was a
weapon.

"I do not know of the Goa'uld," Helia said. "What of the Asgard?"

"Fucked off to do their own thing mostly. There are a few protected planets, thanks to a treaty with
the System Lords," Vala explained, "but they aren't really a factor. Everyone knows their race is
dying out."

"They were once one of the four races who controlled all of a galaxy."

Vala swung her foot. "Right, Furlings and Nox and the Gate Builders. No one even knows what a
Furling looked like, the Nox have one planet and aren't interested in the rest of the galaxy. Your lot
all went glowy and useless. No one's left except the second string. Hmm. And the Wraith." She
grinned. "Gotta say, they haven't forgotten you."

The tension behind Helia's smooth command mask kept ratcheting up as Vala deliberately
slammed her. It wasn't cruelty that kept made Vala do it, though she could admit Helia didn't strike
her as a potential friend. She wanted to crack Helia's composure enough to get a read on her.

"The Ancestors left the people of Pegasus at the mercy of the Wraith," Teyla added. "Thousands of
years of cullings."

"And have your people not fought back?" Helia asked.

Teyla stiffened.

"Hard to fight back when you're depopulated and bombed back into the stone age every few
hundred years," Vala pointed out. She didn't bother pointing out the Alterans had given up and run
themselves. She didn't like the faintly contemptuous way Helia had spoken to Teyla though and
wasn't going to forget.

"And these Goa'uld?" Helia asked in the silence that followed.

"Delightful creatures. They're an eel-like parasite that nests itself in the host's spine and takes over
the body. They're all power-hungry psychopaths, too," Vala explained lightly. "They enslave entire
worlds and consider themselves gods."

Helia twitched back at that. "And they rule the… Stella Via?"

"Pretty much. The system lords have taken a beating lately, but there's always a new Goa'uld eager
to raise itself up."

Helia slumped a little. "We were ordered to return to the Stella Via, without even a chance to make repairs on the Tria," she said tiredly. "Our hyperdrive failed. We were closer to the Stella Via than our departure point. There was no one to come to our aid, all our other ships were committed. Your news is disheartening."

Vala nodded, understanding the logic. "You chose to continue forward as best you could."

"At least my crew wouldn't starve waiting for an unlikely rescue."

It had to have been a hard choice, though. Helia and her crew knew they would arrive to a very different situation than the one they had been prepared for when they started.

"I had expected that if we ever reached the Stella Via, it would be to better results than you describe," Helia went on. She considered Vala. "You describe Pegasus as subject to the Wraith and the Stella Via under the boot of these Goa'uld. Yet, you are here."

Vala laughed. "Even the Goa'uld can't control all of a galaxy. There are other species than humans, other civilizations who have made it too costly to conquer them. Worlds with no chappa'ai or where they have disabled it. Avoid their interest or enmity and you can slide by for a while."

After all, every defeat raised the question of whether the Goa'uld were truly gods. Even Jaffa might doubt eventually. Indeed, they had. There was Master Bra'tac and the sholva Teal'c, Apophis' apostate First Prime. Vala had heard whispers of a revolutionary Jaffa movement, for all the good it would do them. They were tied to the Goa'uld by their biology and the need for a prim'ta to stay alive after puberty.

"The Grey Ones possess superior technology to the Goa'uld and occasionally cross swords with them." She almost giggled at the mental image of an Asgard with a sword. "The First World has risen against them more than once. The Tau'ri are a force to be reckoned with these days. And then there are the Tok'ra, but you should never trust them."

"I see."

"A lot of history to catch up with," Vala agreed.

"I need to reflect on the current situation."

"How many are there in your crew? We'll ring over some more fresh foods."

"There are one hundred of us. And you?"

Vala waved her hand and lied. "Not so many. Luckily, Goa'uld tech doesn't require crew that understand it to operate it." Which was true, but irrelevant to Revenge. Revenge had sixty-six crew: three ten-person boarding/assault squads under Ronon's command, eighteen people assigned to Engineering and eighteen to Command. Most of them doubled up their responsibilities and most of the boarding squads were also training for other crew roles. They had six non-crew passengers too: a Trade Consul from the city, four spies who would be left off to establish an intelligence network in the Stella Via and an Olesian Scholar determined to chronicle Revenge's voyage.

"Does your ship even have the capacity to transport a crew the size of Tria's?" Helia asked.

"Oh, they might have to share cabins, but environmental and supplies are no difficulty." Revenge had been constructed with a large and complete crew complement in mind, along with a F302
squadron and as a ground troop transport. Captain Helia did not need to know any of that. Vala heard Helia's sigh though and felt a spark of compassion. "We'd hot bunk and dump cargo before we left anyone out here."

"When my second in command reported the hyperspace signatures directly in our path, I thought it would be our people come to our aid," Helia admitted. "This is very much different than I had expected."

Vala nodded. "The universe doesn't stop for any of us." Vala hadn't been Qetesh's host for nearly as long as Helia's people had been lost, and no one had remembered her when she passed through her home planet after Qetesh's removal. Another five hundred years and even Qetesh would be forgotten. That had been just as well, but still left her feeling unmoored. Helia's crew was going to face the same sense of being adrift in the future.

"I shall inform my crew to begin readying themselves to transfer to your ship," Helia said.

"Oh, wait a bit, you'd be surprised what my engineer can accomplish."

"From our scans of your vessel, I feel our technology may be… incompatible with what you have, ah, achieved." Helia sounded like a teacher congratulating a toddler on their mud pie. "There are facets relating to security that will make it impossible for a non-Alteran to interact with it."

"Didn't want the Wraith to get hold of any of your toys, did you?" Vala joked. Helia was a smug bitch, considering the position she found herself in.

"Your people are still very young. Someday, perhaps, you will understand."

Ba'al's balls, this woman was as arrogant and annoying as the Grey Ones. Vala smiled back tightly. "Give Meredith a chance."

Dumais

Lydia was glad to be back on Revenge. The Alterans were a huge disappointment.

She flipped the ceramic knife Polamalu had given her just before Revenge left Atlantis through her fingers. Ronon had taught her the exercise. She'd been leery of him and the other Satedans after the Kell mess, but that mess, along with the Genii, had convinced her she had to learn to protect herself. Her hands were much stronger than they used to be, not just from weapons training. She spent much of her time now maintaining or repairing space ships or working on Atlantis, seldom delving into pure, theoretical work. Hands-on work no one would ever have trusted to bitchy, feminist Lydia Dumais on Earth.

She smirked. The crew of the Tria had that same better-than-thou attitude when she'd joined Meredith aboard their ship. They couldn't imagine the monkey humans could even grasp their exalted technology. Snobs. The monkeys weren't the ones stuck chasing $c$ in the middle of nowhere space.

Meredith had already fixed their hyperdrive. Speaking of jackasses… but Meredith could back up his attitude; he was the most competent, brilliant scientist Lydia had ever met. All they had left to do was restore the control system connections. Lydia had spent her time hacking into Tria's systems, downloading the logs, and looking for anything useful. As Jehan had said before she ringed over, it would be plain embarrassing if the answer to where to find potencias was sitting in
Tria's database and they didn't check.

Just as on Hip, Aurora and even Atlantis, their system security was terrible. The Alterans relied too much on the ATA and no one else reading their language. Lydia had taught herself to read and write Alteran as soon as they took over Atlantis and now she had a decent expression of the ATA too. Not as strong as the naturals; Jehan could command things with a just a thought. But Lydia suspected that was more than some of the Alterans could do, as she'd observed most of them brushing their hands over the gene sensors exactly the way she did. Some pigs were always more equal than others.

"You're going to cut your fingers off," Nakez said when Lydia spun the knife again. Nakez came from Taranis and was a fucking genius with electronics. He had dreamed of making Hip spaceworthy long before anyone from Atlantis showed up. He'd jumped at the chance to have a spot on a ship crew. He was still a little too in awe of Meredith, but Lydia liked him. With a wicked smile she modeled on Vala, she tucked the knife back in its sheath in her boot top.

They were all just waiting now. No one trusted the Alterans not to try something; everyone who had interacted with them found them arrogant and condescending.

Meredith was still on the Tria, with Teyla watching his back, because Teyla was delicate-looking and Athosian and the Alterans were idiots who underestimated both, along with all humans. The rest of the command cadre were gathered in the rec room. Val, Jehan, Signe, and Dushka sprawled on chairs and pillows, Radek perched on the edge of a table, Ronon and Melena were cuddling on a couch with covered with a fur throw, and Filan had a laptop open in front of her. Til was leaning against the bulkhead beside the hatch. Beta shift had the bridge. They were all waiting for Lydia to speak.

"I don't suppose you found a potentia for us?" Jehan asked.

"No," she admitted, "but I did get into the log of Helia's last meeting with her bridge officers."

"By last you mean latest?" Vala sounded lazy and unconcerned. Lydia knew better.

"Four hours ago."

"Oooooh, gossip. What is good Captain Helia saying about us?"

"Something snotty, I'm sure," Nakez commented. The enchantment of meeting living Ancestors had worn off fast. One of them had implied Nakez couldn't even read. Lydia would bet most of the Alterans weren't as multi-lingual as Revenge's crew. Nakez was fluent in his native Tarani, Ring runes, Tau'ri English, Alteran and he could read Goa'uld. Helia's crew could barely speak Trade Common.

Lydia nodded. "Worse than that."

"What, they don't like us?" Filan didn't look up from the laptop they were using sync with the bridge. "Boo hoo." Filan had a lot in common with Mer. A lack of patience for one. Filan also had fluent Alteran and Goa'uld already and had been monitoring Tria since Revenge matched speeds and course with it.

"Don't like us, don't believe us, don't think 'jumped up humans' could ever fix their hyperdrive when they couldn't," Lydia said. Her fingers itched for the knife or something to do. She shoved them through her hair, pushing it back from her face. It needed cutting again, because it was annoying but not long enough to tie back. She dropped her hands to her sides. "They mean to take
"That's gratitude for you," Vala remarked, wriggling a little further down the chaise lounge she'd appropriated. She still wore the kara'kesh. The gold and ruby looked decadent, gleaming warm even in the cool ship's light.

"We should leave them to drift," Ronon growled.

Vala laughed.

"Screw that," Signe said. "They've broken whatever faith there was between us. Meredith fixed it; we take the ship." His gray eyes were narrowed. "Space them all."

"There are a hundred of them," Melena pointed out.

Jehan snorted and Vala laughed.

"There were more than a hundred crew on Prometheus," Jehan said and smirked at Vala.

"Better people than these Alterans," Vala commented. "I almost feel sorry."

"Only almost," Jehan agreed and they both laughed. "But we didn't space them."

"We did screw them over though."

"You're getting soft," Jehan accused. "Pirates, remember?"

"Prometheus?" Melena asked.

Lydia waved a hand at the nearest bulkhead. "This ship used to belong to the SGC." Melena must have known that, but now it became real to her. All those SGC crew people dumped off and this huge ship taken by Vala and Jehan. She frowned, "It was really just the two of you?"

"Kull armor," Jehan confirmed.

"We stole Janet, Lindsay, and Daniel too," Vala confirmed nostalgically.

"Where was Meredith?" she asked.

"The Oranians had him, that's why we needed a better ship." Jehan smirked. "Or any ship that worked."

"So not that different than Helia and her crew," Ronon rumbled.


Lydia glared at him another moment then cleared her throat and said, "Captain Helia has a plan."

"That's nice," Til commented, speaking for the first time all day. "Those are always easier to fuck up."

Vala just laughed again. "Everybody to their posts. It won't be long now."

Ronon
Ronon recognized the irony of his situation. Not that long ago, his commander and his people were trying to take this ship. He allied himself with a traitor and forgot honor. Ronon's squad mates threw theirs away, willing to attack scholars and technical specialists. Worse, for Ronon, was acknowledging that if Melena had not been with him, he would have thrown himself away with them. But Kell had lethally underestimated Vala Mal Doran and her crew.

Now he was defending the same ship as one of its crew, against people who shamed the Ancestors. Helia had made Kell's mistake. No wonder the Wraith won the war.

He angled his Wraith stunner around a corner and fired, jumping back just in time to save his head from an energy blast. One of his dreads singed, adding the stink of seared hair to the mingled reek of burnt plastic, melted metal and ozone. Helia's boarding party weren't playing games; no stunners for them.

Ronon fell back against the wall with a loud thud. Maybe it would convince the Alteran around the corner he'd been hit and fallen.

They'd come from *Tria* in a cloaked gateship. The pilot was good and nudged the gateship's rear hatch right up to *Revenge's* outer hull, then extended its shield to seal against it. They'd used a plasma cutter to peel open the hull, the shield holding in the atmosphere, so the ship didn't slam all the internal hatches shut in response to the breach.

*Revenge's* sensors had tracked the gateship from the beginning. Ronon and his squad had been waiting when the boarding party poured into the next compartment. Helia sent almost thirty in the boarding party, more than any gateship could support for long. But long enough, in this case. Ronon's small band of defenders had been forced to fall back. They'd slowed down the invaders long enough for the bridge crew to shut all the bulkheads, but Helia's crew were using the plasma cutter to go through them.

The bridge crew had retaliated by venting compartments along the path the invaders were taking, forcing them back into the corridors and chokepoints. Jehan had joined the fight wearing Kull armor, which offered protection from the energy rifles.

It became a fight of steady attrition; take out the invaders on point or their stragglers in ambushes. The defenders moved around the ship much faster since they had the advantages of familiarity and the bridge crew throwing up obstacles behind them or opening hatches for them.

Ronon wished he had a blaster instead of the Wraith stunner. The Alterans had cut into a compartment where Scholar Weela, who tended the plants, took shifts in the galley, and remembered all the Athosians' history songs, had taken refuge when the alarms sounded. She'd wanted to see Earth because the stories the Tau'ri told were so strange and sing the song of *Revenge's* return to the Stella Via. She was an elder with a full six decades and the most harmless person Ronon had ever met. The plasma cutter burned through her, slicing her arm and leg from her torso.

He'd make do with what they had and make sure he kept his blaster with him from now on, whatever Melena said about penis sizes and compensation. He had nothing to worry about in that area anyway.

He gestured to Nillan and Ogell to come up from their places behind him.

He pointed to the corner and held up one finger. Nillan and Ogell nodded. Ogell brought his stunner up to his shoulder and aimed at chest level. Nillan dropped down on one knee and aimed. Ronon sank down into a crouch and let his stunner fall from limp fingers so it skidded into the
intersection. Then he slid his best knife into his hand and waited, listening for movement.

The invader took the bait and came around the corner. His attention was on the deck where he expected to find a body. Ronon bared his teeth in a big, mean grin as Nillan and Ogell both hit him with stun fire. He dropped like a sack of rocks.

Ronon scooped up the Alteran's energy rifle and left them to tie the man up. Make do, do better.

He tested how the energy rifle functioned and grunted in frustration. ATA-locked and Beckett's treatment hadn't worked for him. No latent genes to turn on in Ronon's case. Like most of the Satedans though, he had taken the second treatment to let him use Goa'uld tech successfully.

He handed it off to Nillan. The therapy had worked for him. Nillan handed over his big stunner in return. Ronon scooped up his own from the floor.

Nillan and Ogell caught up at the next corridor corner. This time Ogell played bait. Ronon had to admit, the kid had a flair for it. Nillan burned down two of the boarders with the confiscated weapon. The twin expressions of shock on their faces pleased Ronon.

The sizzle-shush of Jehan's blaster heralded another firefight. Ronon grabbed Nillan's shoulder and pulled him to run toward it. Ogell followed, pausing only to grab up the dead Alteran's weapons. Ronon nodded to himself: never leave a weapon for the enemy.

Meredith mumbled some curses in Goa'uld and typed gibberish into his laptop, pretending at frustration. The crewman standing guard just beyond the engineering space barely glanced at him. Mer was killing time, faking work he'd finished hours ago. He just needed to give the command to enable the sensors and controls on the bridge and Tria would be hyperspace capable again. The frustration wasn't really faked; he hated wasting time.

Teyla smiled at their crewman. It even looked real, just like the calm radiating from her. It certainly fooled the Alteran crewman. Mer almost felt sorry for him.

He'd been cautiously excited to meet real, living Ancients. Alterans. They had achieved so much, created so many amazing things. He should have remembered that it would have been the extraordinary among them who accomplished those things, not the average crew on a military ship. These dolts likely had as much idea how their technology worked as the average Earth politician understood the physics of a combustion engine.

Vala had told him to stall though. Besides, Meredith thought as he eyed the guard in his peripheral vision, he had a feeling he wouldn't be allowed back to Revenge without a fight. He'd been a hostage before.

He smirked. That hadn't worked out too well for the Oranians.

He bypassed the security measure using Dumais' backdoor program and slid back into Tria's system. There was a lot you could do without shooting a gun.

He wouldn't vent the ship's atmosphere the way Jehan had when the Travelers were holding him, but that strategy had given him some ideas. First, he was going to make sure Helia's people couldn't do the same to any non-ATA people who came aboard Tria.

He'd just finished the last program when the crewman at the door straightened and Helia's first officer marched in ahead of four guys who had to be security. They carried heavy energy rifles at
arms. Two of them leveled the muzzles at Meredith and Teyla.

"Turn over your sidearms."

Meredith didn't bother acting surprised. He was a crap actor. "You're going to regret this," he said instead as he unbuckled his gun belt and held it and his blaster in its holster out. He'd been expecting that. He wondered if they would search him and find the zat in the hidden pocket of his jacket.

"I carry no arms," Teyla said. She turned slowly, showing her closely fitting clothes had no place to hide gun. Moving slowly, she lifted her bantos rods from her belt. "Merely these."

"Fories, take them."

Oh, Fories was the crewman who had been on watch. Meredith considered warning him against messing with his blaster. He didn't. Fories took it and Teyla's bantos rods.

"Come with us," the officer ordered.

Meredith rolled his eyes. At least they hadn't punctuated it with a fist. He tapped the shortcut key that set all his 'surprises' running and got to his feet. "Keep your pants on. Teyla?"

"I am with you, Meredith," she said with the poise of a lioness at a waterhole.

The officer glared as they strolled between the four security men. "So what's up?" Meredith asked. He had a good idea, and despite his confidence in Vala and Jehan and the rest of the crew, it still made his hands sweat. Helia wasn't another Kolya, but she had to be desperate. Desperate people made stupid decisions.

Meredith did not want to be tortured again.

Helia was waiting on the bridge when they arrived. She gave them both a dismissive glance.

"Open signal," she commanded. A column of orange light surrounded her. That must mean another hologram being sent, Meredith theorized.

"They are receiving."

Hands folded before her, Helia began to speak. "Captain Mal Doran, I am commandeering your ship into the Alteran Defense Forces. My people have boarded your ship and will secure it. You will hand over any security passcodes necessary to its operations."

Vala's dry laughter sounded across the bridge. A screen powered up and showed her standing on Revenge's bridge. She had on her Kull armor and the Goa'uld kara'kesh. "And what's in it for us?"

Behind her, Lydia and Signe were manning engineering and weapons. At the edge of the camera view, Mer spotted the new kid, Filan, on comms. Two more ex-Olesian techs were manning stations too. Radek would have engineering buttoned up. That meant Jehan, Ronon and Til were doing something. Mer smiled.

Helia lifted one hand and the security men aimed their weapons at Teyla and Meredith. "Surrender or your crew will be killed."

Vala kept smiling but the humor left her gaze. "And if I surrender what happens to them and the rest of my crew? Will you imprison us on our own ship? I don't think you're that foolish. So, you'll
"We are at war." Several of Helia's crew looked ashamed, but no one spoke up. "Sacrifices are necessary."

"People always say that, but they never mean they have to be sacrificed," Meredith said. He glanced over to one of the command consoles behind Helia. A warning light had begun flashing yellow. "It's always someone else."

Helia glanced back at him, then lifted her chin.

A warning tone pulsed through the bridge. Vala's smile sharpened. The subtle, always there susurrus of the air circulators, the life's breath of everyone on a spaceship, stopped. *Tria* held her breath and in the silence, as console after console on the bridge went dark, the echo of emergency hatches slamming bulkheads shut carried through the ship.

"What – " Helia glared at her crew as they all began urgently trying to bring their controls back to life.

On the screen, Vala tutted. "Did someone forget to mention that some of you Alterans were happy to fuck around with the monkey people when they ran away to the First World? Or that we're perfectly capable of manipulating our own DNA to allow us to operate your technology? It's been ten thousand years." Not quite the truth, the ATA sequence was rare, and Atlantis was the only place where the gene therapy was available, but *Revenge* had enough people who had taken it.

"Captain, we've lost contact with the boarding party," the first officer reported, "and control over the ship's quarantine protocols. We're locked out of our systems."

Meredith buffed his nails against his cuff and smirked.

Helia had begun breathing hard. "You dare – "

Vala tipped her head to listen to someone off screen. She gestured. "Bring in two of them."

Til appeared next, along with several ex-Hoffan soldiers who had signed on to *Revenge*. They were dragging two of Helia's crew, who had their hands bound behind their backs.

Vala waved at them as they were forced to their knees. "You have two of mine. I have all of your boarding party." Her expression had turned grim. She lifted the hand with the *kara'kesh* so everyone could see the crimson light radiating from the central ruby crystal. With a jerky movement that signaled both effort and anger, Vala turned the device on the closest captured Alteran, her arm extended, her palm hovering over his forehead. He leaned away, torso and throat arching back, then opened his mouth and began to scream.

Meredith winced and murmured, "In case you don't get it, she's frying his brain. Long enough and it will kill him."

Vala stopped when the screaming ended. The man slumped forward, half conscious, only held upright by the grip of the two Hoffans holding his arms.

"Torturer," Helia accused.

"Take them to the brig." Vala ordered. She turned back to the camera and Helia. "You tried to take my ship. Two of my people are dead. Threaten Meredith or Teyla again and I will kill all of you. Painfully." She slashed her finger across her throat, Goa'uld gold shining, and the transmission cut
Helia wheeled around and glared at Meredith and Teyla. "Take them to the security cells," she snapped.

Mer thought of doing that disarming move Ronon had taught them when he was seized, but it was easier to just go limp and make them lift him. Besides, they weren't going far, just as far as the aluminum blue hatchway, because the hatch sealing off the bridge wouldn't open for anyone.

Well, it would have opened for Meredith or Teyla, since they had the codes, but the Alterans were thwarted.

And they were still not bright enough to figure out that if Meredith had wrested control of their ship from them, he had given it to himself. They just couldn't grasp the idea anyone could be smarter than them.

No wonder the Wraith won their war.

Helia strode over and input a command override. She hissed, the sound of steam escaping a boiling kettle, when it failed.

"Open it!" Helia turned on Meredith, fury boiling over. "Balis. Shoot the woman in the head – "

Teyla ducked forward and twisted away smoothly before Balis or anyone else could react. She kicked in the side of one man's knee, punched the next one in the dick hard enough Meredith winced, and used the heel of her hand to shatter the third crewman's nose. Meredith couldn't have followed her moves if he'd tried and he didn't. He used the opportunity to pull the zat he'd had concealed and stun the fourth man, then aim it at Helia.

Teyla wasn't exactly a heavyweight, but she used one boot heel to grind the first man's fingers into mush before scooping up his dropped weapon and aiming it at the rest of the bridge crew. The one she'd punched was still curled up clutching his nuts. The third man, Balis... wasn't breathing. Dark blood seeped from his wrecked nose and eye sockets.

"Switch?" she asked Meredith.

Helia stood completely still, unable to look away from the Goa'uld weapon. Meredith's pulse thundered but his hands were steady. His hands were always steady.

"Switch," he agreed, and they spun. Teyla staring Helia down over her weapon while Meredith zatted everyone else. Vala had said they'd lost two people. They still weren't even.

**Jehan**

Jehan left Ronon cleaning up the last of the boarding party and ringed onto the *Tria*. He took third shift's complement of boarders with him, minus Viemeyer, who had broken his ankle. The ship felt like all the Alteran warships he'd been on so far. Indefinably alive and eager as a hound ready to hunt. *Tria* felt brighter than *Hip or Aurora* though and less interested in him, not starved for purpose. He almost wanted to say healthier. In a sense, that was true. Except for the failed hyperdrive, the ship was in good repair. It hadn't been adrift and filled with stasis pods for thousands of years like *Aurora* or damaged and powered down, sitting in the Tarani gravity well like *Hip*. Or powered down, left behind and forgotten the way *Tempestas* had been.

As it was, it was easier for him and his two squads to take *Tria* than it had been to defend *Revenge*. If he'd had an ounce of sympathy for Helia, he would have felt bad for her. It was embarrassing.
Prometheus' crew had fought back at least. The Alterans gave up without trying as Jehan unlocked each compartment and stepped inside.

He stunned them all anyway.

The doors to the bridge opened for him with a thought. He heard someone on the other side speak in Alteran, voice full of shock, as Jehan stalked in, blaster at ready. "Impossible."

Meredith and Teyla had everyone in zip ties already, except the dead man. Jehan raised an eyebrow at that. Neither Mer nor Teyla were hotheads. Either matters had slid out of control at one point or the dead man had done something to merit it. They were both okay, so he didn't have a problem with the outcome.

"Trouble?" he asked instead.

From her place on the deck, Helia glared. Most of the bridge crew looked horrified or frightened. Maybe they noticed the smear of chalky white where one of their energy guns had grazed him. The Kull armor had shrugged it off.

A polished bulkhead of pale metallic blue mirrored them, ghostly black-clad intruders in the bright space of Tria's bridge. The Alterans favored pale colors, matte fabrics; their military dressed in white uniforms as if to prove they didn't have to get dirty. It didn't make them good guys. Life was more complex than white and black hats. The best people Jehan had ever known were pirates and thieves or the misfit exiles of the Atlantis Expedition, along with the Athosians. They were a dirty, brutal bunch and every one of them was better and braver than Helia's crew.

"Not really," Mer said from one of the main consoles. He turned and frowned at Jehan. "Were you hit?"

"A graze," Jehan said. He holstered the blaster so he could lift the helmet off. He couldn't take being stuck in it any longer than he had to be. Once he started to sweat, the stink started getting stronger and stronger.

"Hathor's tits, your hair," Mer exclaimed.

"You try wearing this damned thing."

Mer smoothed his hand over his head.

"How can you use our technology?" Helia demanded.

"Wow, I thought I explained that," Mer said. "Were you one of the slow kids?"

"That was cruel, Meredith," Teyla chided. She considered Helia. "I believe she is stupid with arrogance, not through ill-luck."

"Yeah, I noticed that too," Jehan agreed. He smiled at Helia as he said it. Handicaps slowed people down the same way they did racehorses. You go through life carrying a boulder on your back, you don't win any footraces. It doesn't make the guy with running shoes and shorts better. The one that finishe the marathon carrying that boulder? That was the person Jehan respected.

He walked over to Mer and leaned against the console. "So, you didn't wait for me."

"Captain Kill 'Em there threatened to shoot us if Vala didn't surrender and then told Dumb Ass One," – Mer shrugged in the direction of the dead man – "to shoot Teyla when she realized I'd
locked us all in here."

Jehan turned a flat look toward Helia. "That wasn't smart."

"No, it wasn't," Mer agreed.

Teyla just smiled at them all. "They were hardly a challenge after hand to hand with a Wraith."

One of the crew choked.

"Well, you want to comm Vala and let her know the rest of their crew is ready for whatever she decides?" Jehan said. "I'm thinking Til was right: space them all."

"Hmm. That would be easier," Mer agreed.

"No!" Helia shouted. "You can't. After so long, after everything we've – fine, kill me. Space me. Not my crew."

"That's the first thing you've said that didn't make me want to smack you," Jehan told her.

"Opening the channel to Revenge," Mer said. The screen resolved into an image of Vala.

"All good over there, darlings?" she asked.

"All good. Now what do we do with them?" Mer asked.

"Bring them over and we'll stick them in the starboard 302 bay since it's empty. We'll rig the locks to drop the shield on the bay and vent if they try to get out."

"That seems like a temporary solution," Teyla said.

Vala shrugged. "I'm not taking them to the Stella Via. Besides, we'll need to take their – " She stopped and smiled in a familiar, wolfish fashion, " – our new ship home. It'll make a nice addition to our navy, I think."

"Well, you aren't taking them back to A – a – Alpha site," Mer stuttered as Jehan dug an elbow into his ribs. Helia did not need to know they held Atlantis.

"Hells, no," Vala agreed. "I'm thinking one of the culled worlds."

"Not if it has a chappa'ai." Mer crossed his arms over his chest and looked mulish.

"No. Let them live as my people have had to since they abandoned us to the mercy of the Wraith," Teyla said. "Only what they can make with their hands and no escape."

The Alteran bridge crew had gone gray-faced with horror. Reap what you sow. Vala would have seen Tria repaired and on its way if Helia hadn't tried to hijack Revenge. Amateurs.

"I can think of three planets off-hand with orbital chappa'ai." Jehan wasn't sure the Alterans should even have that hope. Except it would be more of a taunt, wouldn't it? They hadn't been able to repair their own hyperdrive. He doubted they'd be able to recapitulate progress from stone age to orbit in their lifetimes. If they did? Well, then they deserved to go where the hell they wanted. It wouldn't bring back the rest of their civilization.

If the Wraith came… that was a threat every civilization in Pegasus lived under.
He could see why they needed to leave them in Pegasus, too. If the Wraith found them, they'd feed on them. If they left a bunch of Alterans in the Milky Way, it would be just their luck some Goa'uld would find them. The idea of Ba'al having a host with the sort of knowledge any Alteran might have was unacceptable. Jehan would shoot them all in the head first. It would be kinder and better for the galaxy.

He wasn't much fonder of the idea of Earth getting hold of them either and Helia had said Tria had been tasked to the First World. If they were in the Stella Via, they might connect with the SGC. Nope. Bad idea. All apologies to Daniel, but bad idea.

"I'll start my people transporting them over," was all he said.

"You can't take my ship!" Helia shouted.

"Darling, we already have. Considering you just tried the same thing, you don't have a leg to stand on. – Is that the right vernacular, Mer?"

"Yes."

"Because she's sitting on her butt, not – "

"It's not – you know what? Never mind," Mer exclaimed. Jehan nudged his shoulder against Mer's and then headed off the bridge. He exchanged a nod with Teyla. She would continue watching Mer's back.

Before the hatch shut behind him, he heard Teyla say, "Don't look so upset. You can always ascend," and had to chuckle.
Caldwell

Steven rose to his feet in preparation for opening contact between *Daedalus* and Atlantis. He believed in showing respect, even for these renegades and pirates. His orders from O'Neill would require him to deal with them in a professional fashion whether he liked them or not; they might possess information Earth needed to defend itself. Alienating the people of Atlantis from the beginning – something O'Neill had apparently managed – wouldn't serve him well.

Daniel Jackson arrived on the bridge as Marks brought up a display of the Atlantis' pretty blue and green world on the main screen. The Alterans hadn't bothered with planets that needed much terraforming unless they had something special.

It had more water than Earth did and just one super continent, but it circled another calm, long-lived yellow dwarf star in the habitable zone. A lot of big, swirling storms courtesy of axial tilt derived temperature variations. From the distance of space, the spirals of white were pretty.

He took a deep breath. *Daedalus* was a good ship and Steven hadn't worried about it quitting in the middle of the Big Dark between galaxies, but it was always a relief to reach some place with air and water and comfortable gravity.

Jackson was practically vibrating next to him. Steven wondered how Jack O'Neill had dealt with that day in and day out on missions in the field. He found Jackson more than a little exhausting.

"Energy reading in the outer system," Ambrose reported. "Wow. That's a lot of energy."

"That's the defense satellite," Jackson remarked.

So that was still up and working. Steven had hoped it wouldn't be. According to O'Neill's reports, that thing could punch through an Asgard warship's shields the way the Ori had. They had learned from P3Y-229, though. The Asgard had turned over a shitload (O'Neill's phrase) of technology and information after the Ori cut through the combined fleet there like a hot knife, so *Daedalus'* shields were better than before, but Steven didn't hold out hope they could stand up to repeated hits.

"Any sign of *Prometheus*?" he asked.

"Not so far, sir. We're scanning for any signs of a Goa'uld cloak too." Ambrose was a damn fine officer. Always two steps ahead and ready with what Steven needed. Now if he could just keep her and Pat Meyers out of Hank Landry's sights until they had a little more rank and he had enough clout to protect them the way he hadn't been able to save Erin Gant's career. Of course, this mission was probably going to cost him his rank and command, even if the Atlantis people didn't shoot his ship out of the sky.

He'd made his decision before *Daedalus* left Earth. Hank Landry didn't have the balls to actually countermand O'Neill's orders. Instead, he'd invited Steven to have lunch with Coolidge and Stern. The two IOA representatives had turned on the charm. Coolidge had practically promised Caldwell a star and Landry's job – it was understood Landry would be moving up too – if Steven brought
back the errant Expedition personnel and the secrets of Atlantis. Two stars if he captured *Prometheus* too.

He hadn't gagged and he hadn't said anything when Landry handed him the sealed envelope from the IOA. He hadn't been sure then, not until O'Neill proved he knew exactly what the IOA was doing. If they couldn't keep their covert plotting secret from the man they were undermining, they weren't competent enough to succeed.

The IOA wasn't in his chain of command anyway. His commission said he was an officer in the US Air Force, not a contractor for the international oversight agency.

Steven folded his arms. The IOA wanted *Prometheus* back and he didn't see how it could be done short of destroying it. The pirates would just take it and run and they knew this galaxy and the Milky Way better than the SGC did. He might despise them, but Steven could acknowledge it took skill to have preyed on and escaped the System Lords for years. Chasing them down would be hopeless.

The IOA wanted Atlantis under their thumb, too, perhaps as a possible place to run if the Ori War made it to Earth. He'd read the 'secret' orders before handing them over to O'Neill. What O'Neill did about them undercutting Homeworld wasn't his problem. Dealing with Atlantis was.

Taking Atlantis wasn't going to happen. *Daedalus* had its F302s and two companies of Force Recon marines trained for urban investments were aboard, but none of them had experienced off-world combat yet. From the reports Steven read Atlantis wasn't like an Earth city – more like a city-state. Atlantis had *Prometheus*' F302s and Atlantis' people were veterans fighting on home ground. The city itself would have security protocols in addition to its human defense force.

They'd driven out one occupying force. Sam Carter's people were not going to let another one in. The IOA were gambling Sam Carter and the rest wouldn't send Atlantis to the bottom of the ocean in pieces rather than give it up. Steven wouldn't take those odds in Vegas.

It that didn't sit right. None of it. To take Atlantis, he'd have to trick its people and then imprison or put them down. Infiltration, sabotage, ambush, capture; you did that to the enemy. And while Steve might consider the former Expedition members renegades, that didn't make them traitors. They'd done nothing to harm Earth.

And what would Earth gain if they succeeded in occupying Atlantis? A city full of enemies. They would be forced to assign ships and manpower needed to fight the Ori just to keep control. Neither the SGC or the US Air Force had ever been meant to be an occupying force.

The IOA hadn't given clear orders over what to do with the Pegan nates living in the city either. Just throw them out through the stargate? Again, that was a great way to make enemies.

Of course, Steven knew why the orders were so damned vague. The IOA didn't care how he accomplished what they wanted and if they didn't confirm a course of action, then if it came back to bite them on the ass, they could disavow anything he did.

He turned to Jackson. O'Neill had saddled him with Jackson and his own orders, nothing in writing, and if Steven messed them up or the IOA got wind of them, O'Neill would leave him swinging. At least O'Neill had been honest about it, saying he couldn't leave Earth's defense to someone who hadn't been off it, and that running Homeworld and counterbalancing the IOA was too important to throw himself on a grenade for Steven Caldwell if it all went to hell.

O'Neill had even apologized for asking Steven for so much, but Steven considered it justified. He'd
joined the Air Force to defend his country and expanded that to defending his planet when he was read in to the Stargate Program. If sacrificing his career was what it took, he would do it, with sorrow but not regret.

It was an easy decision, ultimately: his career and chance of promotion or the lives of many, many people. He hadn't felt any urge to explain that to O'Neill. Either the man already understood that or he never could.

Maybe he should have explained some of this to Jackson, but it was too late now. Jackson didn't have a clue. All he'd talked about during the trip was the chances of Atlantis having information on the Ori or anything that could be used to stop the Ascended.

"Sir, the satellite's sensors are painting us," Ambrose announced. "Shields, sir?"

"Not yet. Stand ready," Steven told her. He didn't want the clever minds on Atlantis getting a look at the new shields any sooner than necessary. "Hail Atlantis and identify us. Open a visual as soon as possible." was a big stick, but they'd do well to walk softly: Atlantis had a big gun.

"They're responding, sir. Visual ready."

He nodded.

The screen view switched from the distant planet to the interior of a room in Atlantis. Samantha Carter stood front and center. Beside her, Steven recognized several faces from the expedition files, but there were many he didn't know manning the consoles. Peganan natives, mostly likely, people the IOA had dismissed as ignorant and inconsequential. He noticed no uniforms; everyone wore practical leathers and cloth dyed in dark colors and they were all armed.

"Greetings from Earth, Director Carter. I'm Colonel Steven Caldwell, commanding the SGCS Daedalus."

"Daedalus was still in the planning stages when we left," Carter commented. Her eyes were bright; she looked as interested in Steven's ship as he was in her control room. Carter's blond hair hung in a braid over her shoulder, tied off with a beaded braid ending in a heavy tassel. He wouldn't have known she was Tau'ri without the personnel file picture and maybe that was something to hold in mind: Carter wasn't, any longer. "We weren't expecting a visit from the SGC so soon."

Steven smiled tightly. Jackson took a step forward and then back, unable to conceal his eagerness. Carter's blue gaze took Jackson in, but she didn't acknowledge him.

"There have been developments in the Milky Way, Director. The Asgard's Rakisattir, among others, was destroyed." He gave her the title without resentment. She might have gone native, but there was no doubt that she earned the position by doing everything possible to preserve the lives of the expedition members and exert control of Atlantis, safeguarding it from anyone inimical to the SGC and Earth.

He didn't see any point in lying to her about the situation with the Ori, either. The IOA and O'Neill had given him latitude for different reasons. If he could convince Carter of the threat, she might return Atlantis to the fold and help recapture, instead of fighting him. He had little to lose if the gambit didn't succeed.

"A great loss to the Asgard and Earth. We would be gratified if you were to share that news with us, Colonel," Carter replied carefully.

"If you would allow Daedalus to dock – " Steven proposed
"I'm sorry," Carter replied, "we're currently undergoing maintenance on the docking piers since they weren't in use. If you'd like to assume a parking orbit, we can send up a gateship to ferry you and anyone you like down." She smiled. She wasn't sorry and he didn't blame her. "Or we can come to you."

Steven knew damn well she didn't mean that last offer, any more than he wanted any of the expedition loose on Daedalus where they could study it for weaknesses. They already had the first Prometheus along with one of its primary engineers and designers. Even with the changes and improvements on the ship designs, these people knew too much. It was another reason they shouldn't be left running loose on their own, but would be.

The expedition itself had been a terrible idea in Steven's opinion. No one had considered the ways it could go wrong, any more than Jackson had considered that he might be stirring up a hornet's nest when he contacted the Ori galaxy. Scientific exploration was all well and good, but someone needed to have a sense of basic self-preservation.

"A gateship would be welcomed," he said. "I'll admit to wanting to see your city with my own eyes." It was the truth. He'd instruct his people to record and analyze everything they could about the gateship too.

Atlantis didn't have its shield up either. Like Steven, Carter was playing her cards close to her chest. He wished to hell Daedalus had something like the life-signs detectors Mitchell and SG-1 had described. He'd like to know how many people were in the city and where they were if he had to try beaming the marines in.

He wondered if the scans that had painted Daedalus from their defense satellite had told them how many people were aboard his ship. The numbers would make them even more suspicious.

Carter finally acknowledged Jackson. "Daniel. It's good to see you, even if I suspect the reasons you're coming back won't have us celebrating."

"Sam, I need access to the city archives," Jackson blurted out. "Anything there on an Ancient known as Myrrdin or Merlin and any weapons he developed against the Ascended."

Steven squeezed his eyes closed briefly. That could have been handled more discreetly.

"You'll need to explain to the command council," Carter replied. She arched her eyebrows at Steven and he grimaced.

"Part of the news we bring."

"And this is urgent?"

"Isn't it always?" Jackson asked. Some of the energy animating him drained away, reminding Steven that Jackson had already helped fight one long war with the System Lords, already. "We need help, Sam."

"I'll send the gateship immediately." She smiled abruptly. "I don't suppose you brought coffee or chocolate?"

"We have some supplies," Steven admitted. Not many were luxuries though. The SGC had sent basics, thinking the Atlantis expedition would be desperate. Another miscalculation. They'd have done better to have treated this like a trade mission and brought delicacies and comfort foods the people from Earth would have missed.
The man at the console nearest Carter, who was probably Charles Campbell, turned his head and told her, "Gateship One, on its way, ma'am. Gelzi piloting, Griffin has the co-pilot seat. It's ten minutes out at three-quarters power."

"You heard?" Carter asked Steven.

"Yes, I'll have my people ready. It can come aboard through the 302 launch deck."

Steven filed away the pilot's name. It wasn't anyone from the expedition. Gateships, at least the only one found in the Milky Way, required someone with the ATA to fly. Either Atlantis had found more people with the ATA or they had a way around that lock-out.

He left Ambrose in command and with instructions to plot an orbit over the Atlantis homeworld that gave them maximum beaming windows. Maybe taking a female officer with him to the city would have struck a better note with Carter, but communicating with his ship would depend on Atlantis once Steven arrived. Catherine Ambrose was the one he trusted most with Daedalus in his absence.

He took Marks with him along with two marines and Jackson. He either wouldn't need security or it would be wasted against superior numbers. A locked case held the IOA's orders (and demands) for Atlantis. Honesty would be the only way to convince Carter he wasn't a threat.

No one had mentioned Prometheus. Steven had to wonder where the ship was and how much of a danger it posed to his.

Daniel

He didn't know if he could ever move past the guilt.

There were days he regretted deciphering the cartouche and helping open the Stargate.

But he never felt guilty for it; someone would have figured it out eventually.

Revealing Earth and the Milky Way and even the Ascended Ancients to the Ori, though, was all on him. His hubris. His choices.

Teal'c had destroyed the communication stones and snapped Daniel back into his own body. The man whose body Daniel had occupied burned for Daniel's recklessness. He'd felt enough of the flames to realize the horrible death coming. He didn't think he'd ever get over that. Or that he should.

All because he didn't stop and think whether he should do something.

He always had to know.

Plus, he'd wanted to prove he still had something to offer the SGC in a post-Goa'uld threat era. Between his ascension and his original exile on Abydos, being an academic and a civilian, he'd never been quite trusted by the SGC. Not completely. After being kidnapped by Vala, and with Frasier and Novak defecting to the pirates, his loyalties were again in question.

But he'd been a fool and worse, because not only could he never prove himself to the IOA satisfactorily, he knew they weren't worth his effort.
Now Jack had had to pull strings and burn favors to get Daniel away from Earth before someone figured out he was the reason the Ori were now a threat.

He knew what Caldwell's orders were, too. At least, he thought he did. He couldn't support the IOA taking over Atlantis. It was in Pegasus. If it belonged to anyone other than the Alterans, then it was the people of Pegasus. If the Alterans had wanted Earth to have Atlantis, they would have brought it back with them when they fled the Wraith.

Wanting *Revenge* back, that part Daniel could understand. It had been an SGC ship, and Vala and Jehan had stolen it. And the SGC was going to need every ship it could muster against the Ori.

He didn't think they could manage stealing it back. Meredith was brilliant, Jehan was too wary to be taken by surprise, and Vala Mal Doran was the cagiest person, perhaps barring Jack, that Daniel had ever met. Not to mention that it would alienate Sam, the smartest woman in two galaxies, and all the other expedition members and crew on *Revenge* and in Atlantis.

The SGC was too used to fighting Jaffa that for the most part weren't used to thinking for themselves. Only a very, very few had ever been encouraged to think for themselves. Even now, most of them would rather follow a strong leader like Bra'tac or fall into thrall of the Ori than choose their own path.

And why not? The Priors could heal the Jaffa, free them of the need for prim'ta or tretonin. Why wouldn't they consider that a sign from true gods?

Daniel shook off his unhappy thoughts as the gateship sank smoothly down through the open top of Atlantis' bay. He wished they could get the designs for that small craft. Their size and maneuverability would allow them to operate out of the mountain, rather than relying on 302s stationed in a classified hangar out of Peterson AFB.

There was no jolt to tell them they'd landed. Inertial dampers were better than shocks. The back hatch lowered to become a ramp and Griffin swiveled out of the co-pilot's seat. "Home again, home again, jiggity-jig. Gel, hook her up to charge. I'm going to accompany our guests to the council conference room." He raised his eyebrows at Colonel Caldwell. "That okay with you, sir?"

"Thank you, yes," Caldwell replied.

"I would love to get a chance at really studying at one of these," Marks said.

Griffin patted the gateship as he walked out. "Yeah, they're the bomb. Piloting something with your brain? Awesome." He didn't offer Marks the opportunity though. He nodded to Daniel. "Hey, Dr. Jackson. Glad to be back?"

"In other circumstances," Daniel answered.

"Yeah, it's just one thing after another, isn't it," Griffin agreed. He guided them to a transporter hub, eyed the two marines, and asked, "You game to take Major Marks here to the control tower, Doc? It's gonna be tight if we all have to squeeze in together."

"I've used the transporters here before," Daniel assured Marks and Caldwell.

"All right," Caldwell agreed cooperatively enough.

Caldwell wasn't a bad guy, Daniel knew. His crew were fiercely loyal; when the SGC went through promoting and transferring just about anyone with time in grade to make up crews for the new ships being constructed to replace the ones lost at P3Y-229, they'd stripped the *Daedalus'*
crew and left Caldwell with fifty-percent newbies and over thirty-percent women, because the military still had an idiot's attitude toward women in combat commands. As if it took upper body strength to give orders on the bridge of a starship.

Studies had proven women adapted to deep-space, long-term assignments and closed societies better than men. They got along better, suffered less planetary separation anxiety, and handled high-gee better. Try to tell that to the dinosaurs at the Pentagon, though. Even Jack had hesitated to put women on the SG teams until Sam taught him better.

Caldwell didn't suffer that blindness though. He'd snagged every female officer other captains whined over having to have on their crews. As a result, performance ratings were remarkable and the crew united in a peculiarly us-against-them mindset compared to the rest of the SGC. If Caldwell himself wasn't so uncompromisingly loyal didn't hold to his oaths, Daniel wondered at how easily Atlantis might turn the entire ship's crew.

Daniel had been very close to giving his loyalty to Atlantis before Jack showed up with Thor and the Jacob Carter. The chance to go back to Earth reminded Daniel where home really was: not an alien city or a pirate's ship. Pegasus was fascinating but not his home.

But ship crews bonded to each other and their ships above all, something he understood thanks to being part of SG-1.

Daniel wasn't worried Caldwell would defect, but he'd bet Sam and Vala would give persuading him their best shot. It might even be amusing to watch, if so much wasn't at stake.

He led Marks into the transporter as soon as the door opened again and tapped the destination display absently. What was Caldwell going to do? He didn't want to see Atlantis at war with Earth; he'd noted the marines Daedalus was carrying and the F302 squadron and knew if Caldwell tried to use them that would be the result. How would Sam react to the IOA's demands? And should Daniel warn her?

Sam

"Status?" Sam asked Chuck.

Gelzi had commed when the gateship returned to the bay. Griffin would have Colonel Caldwell on his way up. The other city ministers, the Seconds, were on their way or already in the conference room.

She knew Caldwell would want to talk to her as one Tau'ri to another, and Daniel would appeal to her as a friend and former team-mate, but she was First of the City now. She had to keep in mind that her decisions affected everyone in the city and potentially all of Pegasus, and she needed to hear the concerns and advice of her seconds.

She spared a thought to wish Vala was on hand. Daedalus' appearance here meant Revenge might be sailing into more troubled seas in the Milky Way than they'd anticipated.

Chuck's hands floated over the console. Beckett's therapy had succeeded beyond all hopes with him. He didn't have the title yet – since it didn't exist – but he was for all purposes the control room First. Nothing happened at the top of the tower that Chuck didn't know about along with monitoring all incoming sensor data and communications.
"Daedalus is assuming a geosynchronous orbit above Atlantis," he reported. He didn't comment on the implication, but he didn't need to. "Aurora is in polar orbit, cloaked. Tempestas is continuing its patrol beyond the Oort Cloud – nothing new to report. Hip is still fourteen hours out from Manaria. No contact with Revenge since they went to hyperspace on course for Praxis." He glanced up at her. "SDS confirms they have weapons lock on Daedalus if necessary. Peter says the city is holding steady at DefCon Three, but word is out for people to be ready if we escalate."

"Keep everyone updated. Peter has over-all command if something happens," Sam said. She didn't anticipate an assassination attempt from an SGC officer, but it was good to have the chain of command in place. There had been one attempted poisoning during trade negotiations earlier in the year, a poison gas Atlantis had neutralized before it could affect anyone.

She turned her attention to Sgt. Bates. "Everything under control, Sergeant?"

Bates managed to come even more to attention, his hands folded behind him. "Yes, ma'am. Lt. Ford is in the back-up command center with First Grodin if anything happens. Doctors Frasier and Beckett are both available to take the command chair if necessary."

"Good. Stay sharp, that ship probably has Asgard beaming tech."

"Yes, ma'am!"

The transporter doors opened. Griffin led Colonel Caldwell and his two-man security team out. Sam noted the heavy metal case Caldwell carried and hoped someone had thought to scan it for explosives. A case that size could potentially hold a naquadah bomb big enough to destroy the entire city.

Of course, the SGC didn't have the plans for Meredith and Radek's little monsters, the tiny bombs Jehan had nicknamed Peanut Busters, but Earth had plenty of smart scientists who might have come up with something equivalent.

She forced a broad smile and greeted him. "Colonel Caldwell, welcome to Atlantis."

"Doctor Jackson is following with Major Marks," Griffin said quietly.

"Of course. Please direct them to the conference room. – Colonel, if you'd accompany me?"

"I would be delighted," Caldwell replied. His gaze ranged over the control room and down to the stargate, cataloguing the guards on station there and the other entrances.

He fell into step with her. The two Earth marines flanked them two steps behind. They were both armed, but so was Sam and everyone else except maybe Caldwell. It reminded her she wanted to work on the idea she had for a suppression field for the command center that would inhibit explosives, including gunpowder in bullets. The Earth marines warily eyed Bates' mixed fire teams, but no one flinched.

A suppression field would be useful onboard ships and the city, though the modified personal shields based on Goa'uld tech would likely be more useful in the field. Those would shrug off a zat or a Wraith stun along with bullets. Which left vulnerability to the slow knife, poison and gas according the Jehan and Vala; the System Lords and their assassins were endlessly innovative in those areas.

She noted the nonplussed look on Caldwell's face when he realized the conference room wasn't empty. The dismay disappeared quickly and he went along with the introductions graciously as the Air Force Academy had taught. Sam almost smiled, and so did a couple of the ministers whose
societies had similar diplomatic dances.

Sam stopped at the head of the new conference table. It was made from one solid slice from a tree that might have been older than the Wraith war; a gift from the people of Naone, who lived deep in their forest and cut down only one tree every five hundred years. Parrish found them a native plant that repelled an invasive insect species that had come through the stargate and wreaked havoc on their trees. Thousands of growth rings in the wood gleamed like tiger-eye where the sun soaked through the layers of lacquer. Sam felt guilty any time she set something on it, but it was also a reminder they could do good in this galaxy.

Daniel crowded himself into the room even though he wasn't technically invited or in charge of anything.

"Well, Colonel," Sam stated, "I think it is time you told us why you're here."

Caldwell managed to look grimmer than before. He set the case he'd carried onto the table with precise care and went through the routine of thumb print, retinal scan and passcode to unlock it.

"This," he said, "is the IOA's demands of Atlantis, along with their plans for it, and orders for every expedition member." He rested his hand on it and met Sam's gaze levelly. "You can look it over, so you know what they're thinking. I'm not here for this. I'm here under General O'Neill's orders."

"By what right does this Iohae seek to make demands of our city?" Kamelle Purna-Tau'ri asked. He had the most beautiful skin Sam had ever seen: a dense black with an iridescent gleam. His people had developed an amazing immunity to solar radiation; their world was primarily ocean with rare volcanic archipelagos. Kamelle and his entire sea clan had come to Atlantis to manage sustainable fishing. He preferred low-tech solutions when possible, but was comfortable with the advanced options on Atlantis and one of the canniest men Sam had ever met.

He looked at Caldwell sternly and added, "And how do they believe they will enforce such demands?"

"This is not their planet," Halling said.

"Insane," Mirane declared.

Caldwell met their gazes one by one and his mouth twitched slightly. "The workings of the IOA are beyond my pay grade. They ordered me to do this. They didn't to bother explain how."

"I've often observed that advanced stupidity resembles insanity," Kamelle said.

"General O'Neill disagrees with the IOA’s demands and so do I," Caldwell said firmly, standing straight and tall.

Mirane, who was the oldest person at the table, brittle and white-haired, snort-laughed at that. "Well, leave that case t there, boy," she told Caldwell. "We'll get one of the Tau'ri to read it to us when we need a laugh. Maybe we'll wave it at the Wraith."

"We always need toilet paper," Janet said.

Sam made a face at her friend. Caldwell would take some mocking from the Pegasans, but he wouldn't appreciate it coming from Janet or her. Janet rolled her eyes. She'd never been exactly downtrodden or lacking in authority back at the SGC, but running Atlantis' medical department -- or maybe her time with Vala's pirates -- had left her sort of stroppy sometimes.
"So," Sam said, "setting aside the IOA, how was an Asgard ship destroyed?"

"Not just Rakisittar," Caldwell answered. "Odyssey was crippled, while Korolev, ten Free Jaffa ha'tak, the Tok'ra ships, and three ha'taks Teal'c got from the Lucian Alliance were destroyed."

"You're not joking," Sam heard herself say.

"The Jaffa were too late to block the supergate. Four battleships came through. Not one of our weapons could penetrate their shields."

"Who – how?" What enemy could have brought even the Lucian Alliance to their side and still destroyed all of them? "Ba'al? A new System Lord? Replicators? Supergate?"

The command council listened in grim silence now. They'd understood that the Tau'ri had enemies in their home galaxy. Hearing of such a great defeat wouldn't help them believe the Tau'ri could help hold Atlantis against the Wraith. None of them enjoyed hearing of so much loss and death, either.

"The Ori," Daniel answered before Caldwell could. He looked pale and haunted. "The Originators."

Sam already didn't like the sound of them. What rest of what Daniel and Caldwell explained about them confirmed that feeling.

"I hope to access the city's archives," Daniel finished. "If there are any clues that could point us to where Merlin might have left his weapons, it could – it could make all the difference."

"You want a weapon that can kill the Ascended," Halling said.

"Only to stop the Ori," Daniel protested.

Caldwell shook his head. "Dr. Jackson, don't insult the man. Ascended Ori or Ascended Ancients, if this weapon exists would destroy either or both." He dipped his head toward Halling. "A thing that exists is a thing that can be misused. But only a fool fails to defend himself because a gun can be used by his enemies too."

"We wouldn't –"

Sam coughed and tapped her fingers on the case holding Caldwell's orders for Atlantis. The IOA would use anything they had to achieve what they wanted. An anti-Ascended weapon might be no threat to Atlantis, but what else had Merlin created that might be? "The council will discuss the merits of allowing access."

"Sam!" Disbelief colored Daniel's voice. Shock. Anger. Disappointment. But she suspected it was guilt that made his shoulders sag. She didn't know if it was guilt over something he'd done or something he planned to do.

"Colonel," she addressed Caldwell. "We can arrange guest quarters for you if you'd like to stay in the city or we can provide transport back to Daedalus."

"As lovely as the city is, I would be more comfortable aboard my –"

The radio earpiece Sam wore cheeped, followed by Chuck's voice. "Revenge just dropped out of hyperspace, ma'am – a second ship is exiting hyperspace." He coughed. "It appears to be an Alteran battleship. It is identifying itself as Tria along with the secure identity protocol."
Janet was receiving a shorter version of the update, along with several of the other ministers who handled security.

Sam sighed. "You may have to wait, Colonel. We have more unexpected arrivals. Care to come with me and find out what's going on?"

"I hope it's not the Ori," Daniel muttered.

They arrived at the control center in time to hear Vala's bright voice exclaiming, "Samantha! Look what we found! Once Mer fixed the hyperdrive, it was practically like new." Sam could picture the curl of amusement Vala's mouth would have, pleased with herself, and couldn't blame her.

Mer's voice interrupted, "Better!"

"Better!" Vala agreed.

"Thought you'd like an addition to our collection," Jehan added from Tria. He'd been a lot less spooky about using his ATA since Tempestas, but Sam was still surprised they'd got him aboard the other ship.

Caldwell looked confused. Sam took pity. "Our pirates have found us another Alteran ship. They're bringing it here now."

"Another," he repeated in a flat tone.

Sam smiled at him and nodded. "We have Aurora. We recovered her shortly after the Jacob Carter returned to Earth. Hippaforalkus was a gift to us from the Tarani for evacuating their planet."

She didn't mention Tempestas.

He cleared his throat. "Earth could use those ships fighting the Ori. And your pirates stole Prometheus."

"We're using them fighting the Wraith," Sam stated with no give. She laughed a little meanly. "If your Ori ever make it this far? They might find out why their Alteran cousins had to Ascend or run away."

"I need to notify my ship that the inbound vessels aren't active threats."

"Of course. – Chuck, open a channel to Daedalus for the Colonel."

Vala continued telling them about the ship they'd taken – Sam didn't miss that word choice either – and Sam reflected that some people had cats that brought them mice.

She had a pirate who brought her battleships.

Sam

The council debated for three days before giving Daniel permission to access Atlantis' archives. Corrigan and Balinsky offered their help combing through the vast amounts of data on Ascension (and all the failed attempts the Alterans had made at it – they had even created a retreat with an accelerated time field and placed humans in it to study their attempts at ascension). Digging up
anything on Moros or Janus or any of the other weapons builders was harder.

Daniel had finally resorted to the hologram interface everyone on Atlantis disliked. It appeared as a woman who had been one of Atlantis ruling council: Ganos Lal. Normally, it was unhelpful, demanding access codes no one had and misinterpreting information requests. It wouldn't even flicker into being for anyone without a natural ATA.

The interface loved Daniel. It was actively helpful. It offered suggestions to narrow his search and methods no one on Atlantis had been aware of before. It couldn't provide exactly what he wanted (a solution to the Ori) but it tried.

Sam wanted to stomp the hologram emitter into powder and shut the stupid interface down forever. But that was petty. Instead, she paid attention to the way Mer and Jehan studied the hologram and the suspicion that they weren't letting show on their faces.

Sam hadn't had much experience with Ascended. She hadn't been on SG-1 when they encountered the child Sha're bore while Amaunet's host. She'd only heard Daniel speak of Oma Desala.

She knew the Ascended were forbidden (but not by who) to interfere. Was that a self-imposed rule meant to keep them from becoming like the Ori? Or were there greater powers beyond the Ascended that they answered to?

No guessing if there were or if all the Ascended cleaved to the letter of their law either, but if Sam was a betting woman, she'd have bet that the interface was currently something more than a program using Ganos Lal's likeness.

Like Ganos Lal herself.

Either way, Daniel got what he wanted: a cryptic riddle that pointed back to the Milky Way and a hidden lab where Moros had left the Sangraal unfinished, stopped by the Ascended before he could finish.

Daniel hurried out of the library after the holographic image blinked out. Mer followed him. Sam lingered behind, along with Jehan and Vala, Mirane and Halling. She wondered why Daniel hadn't noticed the interface hologram was responding too inventively to his inquiries to be just a program. But Daniel had never been interested in computers. Or maybe desperation blinded him.

She glanced at the others. Jehan was leaning against the wall, blank-faced, thumbs hooked in his gunbelt. Halling looked unhappy, as he usually did when confronted with the imperfect reality of the Alterans rather than the myth of the Ancestors. Mirane was chuckling to herself, muttering about, "Young men," as she shook her head. Vala stared at the empty space the hologram had occupied, tapping her lips with one finger tip.

"Anyone else notice?" Sam asked when the silence stretched too far.

Mirane snorted and waved the hand that wasn't clutching her cane. "I'm old, not deaf or blind."

Halling dipped his head.

"Yeah," Jehan drawled, "that wasn't a hologram interface to the archive. If Mer almost had a a conniption."

"So we're all agreed?"

Vala laughed. "Yes, Samantha, that was an Ascended screwing around with poor Daniel. Arrogant
scrob drips."

"So much for non-interference," Sam muttered in disgust.

Jehan patted her shoulder as he went by.

"Nobody ever just gives me answers when I need them!" Sam called after him.

Halling and Mirane left as well. Halling paused to murmur, "Perhaps no one gives you answers because they know you will find you own."

"I think that was a compliment," Sam said to Vala, when they were the only two left.

"Mmm." Vala looked distracted.

"Something?" Sam prompted.

"Moros. Myrrdin. Merlin," Vala said carefully. "I have a tablet – or rather I have it stored in a safe place in the Stella Via – that I picked up not long after the Tok'ra removed Qetesh. No one could translate it, but I believe it is in Ancient. The only thing anyone knew was the author, who was called Myrros." She raised an eyebrow. "Sounds rather similar, doesn't it?"

"You still want to go to the Milky Way."

"I think we should visit your Earth."

"They'll try to take Revenge back."

"They can try," Vala agreed. "But I want one of the other ships to come with us and stay cloaked. Tempestas. Daniel and your Colonel Caldwell don't know about it. And both ships need to be equipped with all the Wraith storage buffers we can fit in."

Vala was serious.

"Why?"

"If Daniel fails to find a way to stop them, this may be the only opportunity to gather as much as possible from Earth before it falls to the Ori." Vala met Sam's gaze. "I've seen worlds after one System Lord conquered them. These Ori crush any people who don't accept Origin. If they reach Earth – "

"There's no way Earth's governments could unite enough to believably submit, even if they tried," Sam interrupted. She parsed out several scenarios until she found one that might work or at least give them an opportunity to accomplish their real mission while negotiations went on.

The situation had radically changed. They didn't know if Daniel would succeed in finding the Sangraal and using it.

"How about we send the Revenge back with the Daedalus. We propose a trade, that if they will cede Revenge to Atlantis, we'll send them one of the Alteran ships and ally with them against the Ori." Sam started walking, heading for her office, and Vala followed. "They don't know Tempestas from the Tria, so we'll offer them Tempestas; it's a wreck compared to the others. But Aurora leaves ahead of the Daedalus and raids Praxis before rendezvousing in Sol System, where it will stay cloaked. If the SGC gets stupid, they will be there to back you up."

"Tempestas will also goes with you, also cloaked. You can work out whether to turn it over if they
take the deal and actually honor it while you're there. Load both *Revenge* and *Aurora* with everything we need or would hope to salvage from Earth if the Ori take it. Covertly recruit as many people as we can to come here, too, especially families of anyone already here.

"*Revenge* is bait?" Vala asked. "I don't like that."

"*Revenge* is a distraction. You were going to do this on a smaller scale, weren't you?"

"Of course, darling, but I love it when you think big."

Sam glared at her. She'd been chewing this bone for months, but she'd on only cracked it just now. Earth didn't mean just the IOA. Earth was a planet of many millions and many governments that were not part of it. And that was the IOA's Achilles' heel.

They had a carrot: the tech. They needed a stick. A Theodore Roosevelt big stick. But it had to be right kind. Not just a threat of destruction; the SGC had stood up to the Goa'uld and fought them back when it seemed impossible. Their threat needed to be subtle and aimed precisely at the IOA.

Sam knew just the thing: Disclosure. The Ori threat would have the IOA even more worried about the truth coming out than usual. They would at least pretend to listen and negotiate with that possibility on the table. She'd always known their pirates could trade with one of the non-IOA countries, but that carried the double risk of those countries not having the deep infrastructure and materials Atlantis wanted and leaving them with tech which could easily precipitate a planetary war. Sam didn't want to see her Earth tear itself apart in another World War.

"This isn't thinking big, Vala, it's thinking of the worst-case scenario. Your other job will be to get that anti-Ascended weapon and anything else this Merlin created. You're going to be in a race with the SGC."

"And the Myrros tablet?"

Sam didn't blink as she gave Vala her verbal Letter of Marque and Reprisal to raid whatever she could. "Get it and anything else we need from the Milky Way, because if the Ori win, we won't be going back."

Chapter End Notes

This is the end of this story, but not 'The End', the threequel is half written and in current progress Comments on what should happen when they go to Earth or just the Milky Way are welcome. So are questions, though some of them might not be answered until the threequel posts.

I'm in the midst of chaos and won't have even intermittent Internet until the weekend, but comments will be well loved when I can finally get to them.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](mailto:https://archiveofourown.org) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!