### Codename: Firestarter

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### Codename: Firestarter

by **Trinket2018**

**Summary**

When the alien Wraith attack Nevada (!?), Dr. Spencer Reid helps the Las Vegas CSI team defend Groom Lake. But what they find in their sweep shocks them all, even beyond the presence of space vampire aliens in their home town.

**Notes**

Gen Crossover: CM/Stargate/Many (this is an ‘everything but the kitchen sink’ crossover). Tags for additional (surprise) crossovers, characters etc will be added when appropriate. Best if you know something of the Stargate and Criminal Minds shows already, not really necessary for the rest. I try to introduce each crossover character individually as they appear, with enough background to catch you up for the purposes of this story, if you aren’t familiar with their shows. Spencer Reid & Daniel Jackson-centric: Action/Adventure, AU-alt (the Wraith attack Las Vegas), Kidfic (Little Danny, semi-aware). Warning: past child abuse (off-stage), kidnapping and murder (all canon-level for CM). There is also one child death in this, canon-typical for Criminal Minds, so if any of this is a problem for you, be warned.
DISCLAIMER: Criminal Minds belongs to Mark Gordon Productions, CBS Television Studios, & ABC Studios. Stargate SG-1 & Stargate Atlantis, the characters and universe are the property of Kawoosh Productions, Showtime/Viacom, Sony/MGM/UA, Double Secret Productions, Gekko Productions and the Sci-Fi Channel. CSI: Crime Scene Investigation, owned variously by Jerry Bruckheimer Television, CBS Productions, CBS Paramount Television, CBS Television Studios. No copyright infringement is intended. I have absolutely no right to be playing with them or their universes. I just gotta. I promise to get nothing out of it but personal satisfaction. Spoilers: Canon for Stargate SG-1 (post series, Ark of Truth & Continuum) & Stargate Atlantis (post series, Atlantis still on Earth); Criminal Minds (mid-season 11, after 11-11-Entropy, Aaron Hotchner, Derek Morgan and Tara Lewis with the BAU, JJ Jareau back from maternity); CSI (mid season 3-ish, Gil Grissom is supervisor for the night shift. I know this totally blows the chronology, so sue me, this is my AU and I like Gil best).
Across an immense ethereal gulf, minds that are to our minds as ours are to the beasts of the jungle - intellects vast, cool and unsympathetic - regard this Earth with envious eyes and slowly and surely draw their plans against us... *Orson Welles, ‘War of the Worlds’ broadcast*

The Bennington Institute, lying on the northern outskirts of Las Vegas in Nevada, was one of the most prestigious and well-respected facilities of its kind in the world. Some wings of the building were more like a local resort than a mental institution. When Dr. Spencer Reid came to visit his mother, they liked to spend the evenings lounging on the patio by the pool, watching the stars wheel across the desert sky. High ridges to the west tended to obscure this view, along with the notoriously bright neon lights of the Vegas Strip that sent a stain over the southern horizon, but the view to the north and east was still mostly clear.

Dr. Diana Reid, once a highly respected professor of medieval literature, had long suffered from paranoid schizophrenia, but lately, she had also shown troubling symptoms of a secondary mental illness, recently determined to be early onset dementia, probably Alzheimer’s. While incurable, both conditions could be treated with a range of pharmaceuticals that, mostly, worked to keep her on an even and coherent keel. That didn’t stop her son from worrying about her, wishing things could be different, already mourning the day she would inevitably forget who he was entirely... and wondering if either of those conditions, both with hereditary indicators, might one day effect him as well. He had begun a desperate search for alternative treatments to either stop or limit the progressive damage of both diseases, so far with indifferent luck.

Spencer liked to time his visits to take advantage of the various astronomical phenomena visible from Nevada, and this particular April, it was the scheduled Lyrid meteor shower. So on this clear, warm night, mother and son lay on pool loungers facing north, holding hands and looking up.

“Oh! There’s one,” his mother commented, pointing low in the north west.

“Really?” Spencer frowned, tracking the brilliant light in its passage across the darkness. “It’s at least thirty seven minutes early, and should be from the east.”

And then, against all possibility and reason... the light slowed, hovered, and a beam came from it... and then a flash of light on the ground... and after approximately six minutes and twenty one seconds (and therefore, after Spencer did a quick bit of rough calculation in his head, adjusting for air pressure, temperature, wind direction and speed, approximately eighty three miles distant to the north-north-west), the concussive sound of a distant boom. The moving light, still hovering, had already shot more beams, in different angles to different targets. Then it seemed to break into three pieces, or maybe they had been so close together, and far enough away, that they had only seemed to be one. There were three lights now, and one grew larger, evidently headed toward Vegas. More booms echoed across the desert, louder now. Sirens began to blare. Emergency vehicles and air-raid sirens, televisions inside the Institute suddenly turned on and volume turned up...

“Under attack by unknown...”

“All citizens to take cover immediately...”
While Spencer and his mother stood and stared, by turns mesmerized and appalled by the light show, nurses rushed out to hurry other patients and visitors into the building, and to the storm cellar facilities in the basement that had never before been needed. This part of Nevada had never been prone to damaging earthquakes, tornados or hurricanes, blizzards or sleet storms... the occasional debilitating heat-wave or flash-flood were the only natural disasters they looked to defend against. But with the Nellis Air Force Test Site and Range so close (among other more secret and supposedly hidden military sites) the possibility of nuclear or terrorist attack was taken very seriously.

“Oh my God... Spencer, look!” his mother cried out, pointing into the western sky.

Everyone still on the patio stopped and looked up, and stared in wonder.

It looked like a shining Christmas ornament, a silver snowflake base with a transparent glimmering globe over top, floating through the air... towers under the dome looked like fairy-tale castles... without any kind of perspective for reference, there was no way to tell how big or how small... how near or far. It hovered over the light heading toward Vegas, and began to fire beams of its own. More, but smaller lights descended from the darkness, fired on the snowflake, creating blossoms of orange, red and gold across the dome... tiny specks began to issue from both the snowflake and the lights, and more tiny specks buzzed from somewhere close. Aerial dog fights seemed to break out all across the heavens. One speck seemed to burst, a gut of flame issued, then a broil of something that obscured everything behind it, probably smoke, and it fell from the sky, growing larger and larger... until it grew to the approximate size of a jet fighter, and crashed, all too near the hospital.

Okay, definitely time to take cover. Spencer rushed his reluctant mother through the French doors on the common room, and into the hands of an orderly.

Spencer and the other visitors volunteered to help move patients. The activity and urgency should have been upsetting to some of the more vulnerable or unstable cases, at least those on the lighter forms of medication. Yet that wasn’t what was happening, and Spencer found it fascinating from a psychological point of view. Those only loosely connected to any objective reality, those who assumed this was a drill, and those who were rather enjoying the excitement, proved to be in the vast majority, even among those who needed to be transported in straight jackets. There was almost a festive holiday air to what might otherwise have been a claustrophobic and panic-filled atmosphere. A separate underground complex and protected generator kept the air conditioning and the lighting on full, and a giant screen TV was dialled to a local channel for further news.

Front row seats, as it were.

Local network reporters were being ridiculously reckless in trying to get too near some of the more accessible crash sights, or crowding around the various gates to Nellis, trying to talk their way in. They used telephoto lenses to zoom in on aircraft overhead that were... not anything like any aeronautic design on Earth, that Spencer knew of. The giant snowflake was displayed in all its seemingly fragile glory, and, to judge by the size of the little Quonset-hut shaped vessels issuing from its highest tower, the entire structure was obviously immense... maybe the size of the isle of Manhattan.

A flying city...

Their enemy’s ships, on the other hand, were neither beautiful nor whimsically shaped... jagged black blobs with spikes, and an oily, evil gleam across their skins that seemed almost organic in nature. Two of the really big ones remained to hover north-north-west of Vegas, firing in determination on their target there. The third was stalled, somewhere over Indian Springs according to the reports, blocked by the snow flake city in the sky. From openings in the third ship’s belly gushed clouds of needle-shaped flyers, all heading toward Vegas. Fast, yes, and they had silver-
white beams that flared from their undersides to strobe across the ground beneath them, but they weren’t very manoeuvrable, couldn’t turn or bank as well as the home team Quonset-craft, which meant a lot of them were crashing everywhere.

And yes, now, fifteen minutes to half an hour after the initial attack, there were more recognizable fighters out there, conventional jets sporting the stars and stripes... but they were in the overwhelming minority, and all the others, apparent friend and obvious foe alike, could only be described as... alien.

How ironic that Spencer was watching all of this from the bowels of a mental institution.

“Oh well,” Diana Reid commented off-handedly, her own thoughts in parallel with his, “This will make the bunch in the south wing happy... vindication, you know? Come to think of it, most of the east wing... and the west... they’ll all be pretty pleased too.”

Spencer had to admit, she had a point.

“... it seems the original target of the attack was the secret military base at Groom Lake...”

“Omigod,” gasped someone, “You mean I was right all along? Groom Lake? Area 51? It’s real!”

And, oddly enough, it was one of the doctors.

“... also attacks on Washington DC, Antarctica, and Colorado, six mother ships in all...”

Alarmed, Spencer pulled out his cell phone and attempted to dial members of his BAU team at FBI headquarters in Quantico, Virginia, all too close to the nation’s capitol. But as his cell reception cut out – no doubt cell towers were either flooded by traffic, commandeered or shot down – he had to wonder about the very odd collection of targets. DC, at least, made some kind of sense, he supposed, but Antarctica? Colorado? Las Vegas? What kind of demented attack was this? It seemed almost like the start of a bad joke.

Then camera shots zoomed onto the neon-flooded streets of Las Vegas, and crowds of shrieking people being herded... by seven-foot tall humanoids, the larger bulkier ones in a kind of bone mask, the more slender ones with albino-white faces and long white hair in ankle-length sweeping black leather coats, and all brandishing what appeared to be bazookas.

“Oh, you have *got* to be kidding! Marilyn Manson is an *alien*?” someone yelped in disbelief.

As one of the needle-ships passed over the trapped crowd, a white beam flashed out, and those poor people caught in it were just... gone! There were a few stragglers left on the periphery outside the light, paralysed in terror, backing slowly, desperately from the alien soldiers.

One white-haired alien approached a heavy-set man in a floral shirt and tan cargo shorts who had stumbled and fallen directly in their path. The alien grinned on a terrible set of jagged teeth as it leaned toward the man. One hand darted out to almost slam the downed tourist in the chest. The screams of the victim could not be heard over the television transmission, but the rapid withering of that florid face was all too clear, in seconds shrivelling into a desiccated mummy-like corpse, before crumbling to the street in a pile of dust.

“... report to your nearest base or branch office... Off-duty and retired personnel in military, reservist, law enforcement, first responders and especially EMT divisions also to report to your nearest base or office...”

Diana glanced worried at her only child. “Spencer...?”

He smiled at her and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Don’t worry, mom. I’ll be fine. I have my go-bag
at the desk. With any luck, the flying city will have finished the bad guys off before I even get to the FBI office.”

A worried Dr. Norman, one of Bennington’s directors, found him and asked if he needed the combination to the reception centre safe, where all visitors had to leave any kind of contraband forbidden inside the facility, from weapons to nail clippers to aspirin. Spencer only smiled and shook his head. He could easily pick the lock. He’d known the combination for years.

After he’d pulled out his go-bag, he stopped at the front lobby reception desk to study the chaos outside the front windows and use the landline phone to call in.

The sanitarium was right on highway 95, the main access road leading north west out of the city, toward Reno. There was a military road block being set up within sight to turn back tourists and civilians, causing absolute havoc. But anyone thinking to escape in that direction was clearly delusional in any case, since that way led to what seemed to be the focus of the attack. Still, it was making it difficult for emergency vehicles, military, law enforcement, EMTs, to get by. The road beyond Bennington’s manicured gardens, hedge-rows and high black wrought iron fence and gates, was jammed with traffic, mostly military, heading south, into the city. Emergency and military transports were sporadically making their way north, under sirens and wheeling red lights. To add to the din, there was the occasional distant explosion of more aircraft shot down, or attacks aimed at various points of infrastructure – roads, rail lines, landing strips, transmission and wire transport towers.

Shaking his head in wonder, Spencer managed to get through to the local FBI field office and announced himself and his current location.

“North of the city on 95? Okay, don’t try to get into town, there’s no way you’ll make it. I suggest you flag down a local emergency vehicle on the road. You’ve got your ID with you?”

“Yes, and my weapon, my backup, extra ammunition and my FBI flak vest.” As he spoke, he shrugged out of his sweater-vest in order to put on the black bullet-proof vest with ‘FBI’ printed across front and back in large luminescent white letters.

“Wow. Visiting your mother, you said? You come that prepared?”

Spencer chuckled, even as he started fastening his ankle holster, phone receiver tucked between chin and shoulder. “I’m with the Behavioural Analysis Unit out of Quantico. My team gets called on cases all over the country, we have to respond quickly, so I’m required to carry my go-bag everywhere, even visiting my mom.”

“Well, that’s good news for us, anyway,” and the woman sounded relieved. “None of the other visiting agents have anything with them more lethal than a tooth-pick umbrella with a cherry stuck on the end. We’re calling them all in to our field office to coordinate. Since you’re armed, see if you can’t flag down a ride heading north-west. That’s where the real action is. Let us know as soon as you do... we’ll log who you’re with. Most of the local LEOs and EMTs have secure comms, so they can reach us even with cell service down.”

“Yeah, okay. Good luck.”

“And to you, Agent Reid.”

Bennington was listed with FEMA as a tertiary emergency medical site, so some of the doctors and
nurses were still on the main floor, preparing for overflow triage cases, even though the sanitarium didn’t really have any surgical facilities. These were the members of staff with experience in other areas of medicine than mental, addiction and behavioural issues. They could handle basic first aid, stitching cuts, setting broken bones, setting up basic saline IVs, and even just temporary beds for those seeking refuge. Spencer was rather impressed with how well-oiled they seemed to be in their response. His mother had told him that almost every hospital and medical facility in Nevada had been holding disaster response drills lately, coordinated by people wearing FEMA jackets... he had to wonder, now, if maybe there had been a reason for that.

He waved goodbye to the members of staff he knew, and hurried out to the main gate. The security man opened the electronic gate and Spencer, quite eye-catching in his FBI flak vest, began waving his arms to catch the attention of any Law Enforcement Officers heading out of the city.

It was a black CSI SUV that slowed and stopped for him. A husky young man with dark hair and a contagious grin hung out the front passenger window, and waved him over. “Going our way?”

“Yes, I am, thanks.” Spencer jumped in the back seat. There were three men in the SUV, in flak vests labelled CSI, Crime Scene Investigators. He had worked with local Las Vegas CSI teams in the past, and had always heard good things about their expertise, closure rates and professionalism. Behind the wheel was an older man with greying hair and an intent look focussed on the road ahead. Next to Spencer in the back was a young man in his early thirties, so probably around his own age, blond hair an untidy mess, with an excited grin and a twinkle in his green eyes.

“I’m Dr. Spencer Reid, with the BAU out of Quantico. I was told to hitch a ride with anyone willing to take me north-west, and call in once I did.”

The man in the front passenger seat leaned over to introduce himself, just the trace of soft Texas drawl in his accent. “I’m Nick Stokes, this is my boss and unit chief, Dr. Gil Grissom, and that’s our probie bouncing beside you, Greg Sanders.”

Spencer acknowledged them all with a nod, and Nick passed back a sat phone. He dialled up the FBI field office and told them he was riding with Dr. Grissom’s CSI team.

“Gil? That’s great. He’ll take good care of you, Dr. Reid.”

And Spencer realised that was true when Dr. Grissom’s first words were, “Are you armed, Dr. Reid?”

“Yes. My FBI service weapon, and a backup in my ankle holster. I have extra clips for both.”

“Wow,” Greg commented. “They still won’t let me carry a backup.”

“Yeah, well, tonight will be different,” Nick said, and passed an ankle holster to his younger colleague. “Just don’t hit any of us with that thing.”

Greg only grinned. Spencer noted that while Nick and Greg seemed excited by events, Dr. Grissom was tight-lipped and grim.

His next question was, “Have you seen any briefings on the attack, Dr. Reid? What we’re facing?”

“No. I witnessed the first attack in the distance, and saw just a few glimpses on TV reports. Of... you know, the space vampire aliens, and the flying city.”

“Yeah, way cool or what!” Greg gushed. Spencer had to grin. It was, after all, just like stepping into a Doctor Who adventure all his own.
Grissom actually growled from the driver’s seat. “For God’s sake, take this seriously! You remember the mummified bodies we found last week? That is how you’re going to end up tonight, if you’re not careful!”

Only slightly chastened, Greg schooled his expression, but still bounced his knee in an excess of energy. Spencer himself felt much chastened, as he realised that the aliens must have sent an advance scouting group, if bodies had appeared as early as last week. He didn’t waste time wondering why no one had heard about this – he was familiar with government secrecy protocols in the face of major threats, to avoid widespread public panic.

“Okay, Gil, give us the 411,” Nick recommended, casting an understanding smirk back at Greg.

“Okay. I don’t know much, but there’ve been private briefings going on for the past three weeks. I was read in after we found that first mummified John Doe in the desert...”

“After the Air Force swooped in and commandeered the whole case away from us,” Nick added for Spencer’s benefit.

Grissom gave Nick an irritated glance, and continued as if he hadn’t been interrupted.

“If you’re thinking aliens, and you have to be after what we’ve seen tonight, you would be right. The bad guys in the oily black Hive-Ships and the needle-shaped Darts are called the Wraith, and they have some kind of insect hive biology, drones obeying a Queen. Think Marilyn Manson space vampires, and you have it about right. They eat us. Well, they suck the energy out of us, leaving us a withered mummified corpse. And that can happen in as little as a few seconds.

“They’re bigger than we are, faster and stronger. They’re very difficult to kill, even harder after they’ve fed. Luckily, they aren’t totally impervious to bullets, but best if you take head shots. The only way to make sure one stays dead is to decapitate it once you’ve got it down. Greg, get Dr. Reid an extra K-Bar out of the kit. He can use that if he has to. Saw through the soft tissues of the neck, then give it a good swift kick to sever the spine.

“If one gets close enough to shoot, take head shots only, torso shots won’t even slow it down. Don’t try to talk to it or reason with it, we’re just a chicken sandwich as far as they’re concerned. Don’t let it get close to you or anyone else. It feeds by sticking its hand on your chest. If it gets that close to you, try jamming the knife up under its chin and into the brain case and twist... it’s the only chance you’ve got at that point. Then decapitate, to be sure. Some of them can mess with your head, make you see things that aren’t there, and while you’re confused, they strike. The weapons you’ve seen them carry? They’re mostly set on stun, so they can feed on you as you lie helpless.

“That white beam you’ve seen the darts spray beneath them? It’s some kind of teleport. It catches humans, can keep dozens, maybe hundreds at a time in some kind of holding buffer in the dart, so it can take them back to the big ships and transfer them to their larders. So don’t get caught in the beams. If we find a downed dart, we make sure the pilot is dead – the darts are one-man ships only – and tag it for clean-up. If not too damaged, they can sometimes retrieve the people caught in the buffers. If we find a downed dart without a pilot, it means the bastard is probably creeping up behind you, so act accordingly.

“Any questions?”

“Yes, actually,” Spencer admitted. “Where are we going?”

“We’ve been ordered to rendezvous with the rest of the armed Law Enforcement units at the gates of the Groom Lake base, deep inside Nellis Air Force Base. That’s apparently where the brunt of the
attack is happening, and Nellis just doesn’t have enough manpower for containment at this point. Air
Force special forces are in command of this operation. Regular military or police don’t usually think
much of CSI weapons training or hand-to-hand expertise, and I admit we’re not really cut out to act
as soldiers... so I imagine they’ll assign us something like clean-up sweeps or perimeter guards. So
don’t get your hopes up that you’ll actually meet an alien, Greg. And thank your lucky stars for that.
Anything else, Dr. Reid?” Grissom sounded a lot more friendly now, as if Reid’s manner had
impressed him in some way.

Spencer knew he looked a lot younger than he really was, tall, skinny and gawky as any adolescent,
and his unruly brown hair and geeky appearance did not always help him make a professional
impression. So sue him, he was on vacation. Coming up with a useful question no doubt helped Dr.
Grissom accept him as a peer.

“No, I think that about covers it. It should take us about an hour and twenty minutes to reach the
rendezvous at this speed, if we don’t meet more obstacles in the way, and I notice there seems to be
considerably less action above us than there was half an hour ago. By the way, I’m not much of a
physical threat either, obviously, but my last three weapons proficiency tests, I rated ninety seven
percent and above.”

“Good to know,” Grissom nodded. Nick grinned at him. Spencer only shrugged. He was well aware
that he was too tall, too thin, too gangly-looking to seem an imposing threat to anyone. His strongest
muscle was his brain, and that was flexing at maximum at the moment.

Greg did seem impressed with his marksmanship, and said, “Cool. I can’t seem to do better than a
sixty one. Which, you know, is barely better than if I kept my eyes closed. Which is one of my
problems on the range... how’d you manage to do so well?”

Spencer sighed, his mood abruptly darkening, as he acknowledged the serious nature of their mission
tonight. He, or any of the other three men in this vehicle, might not be alive come the dawn. “My
team mates kept getting... hurt. I kept getting hurt. I decided that, if I was going to be serious about
being a field agent, it was time to grow up and take responsibility for the safety of myself and
everyone around me.”

Greg blinked and slowly nodded, casting a brief glance at his boss in front of him. Nick smiled
warmly and reached back to shake Spencer’s hand. Grissom said, in a much friendlier voice,
“Welcome to the team, Dr. Reid.”

As it turned out, Dr. Grissom actually knew who he was, had read some of his academic papers on
serial killers and followed a few cases, including those few that had brought the BAU to Las Vegas
in the past. Spencer suggested some behaviours that, he could only guess, might cross species lines
and apply to the insect-like aliens called the Wraith. He had, after all, encountered many a similar
monster, who regarded humans as nothing but prey. As his first attempt at an alien profile, and
without more empirical experience, he figured it was the best he could do.

Å

They had almost reached their rendezvous when an especially bright light bathed the desert
landscape, and the flying city had shot down the last of the three hive-ships over Nevada. Nick, Greg
and Spencer all leaned out of their windows to try and see what was going on above, and so they
had a decent view of the snowflake city hovering, drawing in her scattered blunt-nosed children
before speeding away. There were a very few dog-fights still going on, less than a dozen, and even
those ended in favour of the friendly fighters. Grissom slowed down the SUV at the road block, and
was directed by a very young Marine where he should park.
Armed, vested and kitted, the four of them made their way on foot through the crowds to one of the hastily-erected tents. It was like a small town, pitched at the side of the road outside the barbed-wire fence encircling the not-so-secret Groom Lake base, deep inside Nellis. Tables were stacked with heaped ammo clips and nearby there were piled flats of water bottles. FEMA, Marines and Special Forces in brightly-coloured bibs circulated, advised people to get as many extra clips as they could carry. They checked off arrivals, and assigned duties and sorted them to secondary gathering spots for additional orders.

Spencer and his CSI friends pawed through the available ordnance for the appropriate clips (Nick taking the ones Greg held to put them back and pick out correct ones). Since Las Vegas was home town to all four of them, no one needed to tell them how necessary it was to fill pockets with water bottles. There was a chill in the early spring desert air right now, but with the sunrise, it would get hot and killingly-dry.

“Gil! Gil, over here!” called a voice, evidently familiar to the CSIs, considering the smiles that lit up their faces. Spencer followed along to meet a smaller middle-aged man with a bald spot. Grissom quickly introduced him to Detective Captain Jim Brass.

Captain Brass shook his head. “Wild night, hunh? Aliens, for Christ’s sake. As if we don’t get enough weird around here on a regular Saturday night...

“So, here’s the deal. The mother ships, hive ships, whatever they are, are history around here, and the floating snowflake is off to bring down the three others circling Earth. Our boys upstairs have brought down all of the dart things... yeah,” he said, touching his earwig radio. “So, they’ve accounted for all the flying vermin in our region. But, apparently, a bunch of troops were beamed down, some darts landed before being shot down, and some survived the crash landings of the hives and darts, so we’ve got space vampires wandering around loose. This is not good. We’ve got one lot in downtown Las Vegas making a mess, but they’re contained mostly to one area around the Pyramid, and the military has that in hand, and have surrounded the hive that crashed near Indian Springs. The rest of the alien ground forces are focussed on the Groom Lake base, so we’re hoping none of the strays are walkabout, and we can contain them long enough to put them down. Even one of these guys walking free means more mummified bodies in his wake.

“The military thinks they’re better than us regular cops at dealing with aliens, go figure, so they’ve taken the high-risk assignments. Their strike teams are mostly surrounding the base complex to engage the main enemy force on the ground, but they do have a couple of roving teams to check out the two other crashed hives and any downed darts on Nellis grounds, both inside and outside the Groom Lake perimeter. That leaves us search and destroy in the outlying areas of Groom Lake, inside the fence, away from the main base, to sweep and clean-up, and make sure none of them get out of the contained area. But I gotta tell you, it’s gonna be a helluva job, because we’re talking maybe sixty square miles of open desert scrub, in the dark, and there’s nowhere near enough manpower here for a job like that. There’s reinforcements expected from every military base and police force within seven states, but... most won’t get here till morning. So it’s up to us to hold the line. The fence has censors to alert us if anyone tries to get over or through it. We’ve got a search grid, and each team is taking a section.”

Captain Brass led them into another, more distant tent, with a table and a topographical map with structures and landmark features marked, spread out flat, laid out in grids. A clear plastic cover allowed them to scrawl on it in dry-erase markers, to show enemy activity, downed craft, sections for search, and team assignments. Support personnel with earwigs kept up a constant hum of whispers as information was supplied, and more squiggle codes were added to the map to indicate progress of the various teams.
Spencer cast a quick, experienced eye over the map, easily reading the state of the operation.

“You’ve got a serious hole right there,” he announced, grabbing a stray red marker, and circling a symbol that meant a small out-lying building, seemingly unconnected to the main base facility. Ignoring loud protests from several people, he ran his eyes swiftly over the situation, tabulating evidence. It was probably Grissom holding people back, recommending they listen to what he had to contribute.

Spencer declared, “Of all the downed darts noted on this map of the Groom Lake section, thirty two percent landed within five hundred yards of that building, in section 61A, the southern part of Ikabod Valley. Five of them landed right on top of it. That’s not a coincidence, but a significant statistical anomaly. From these markings, the structure appears to be not much bigger than a garden shed, but that wouldn’t explain the extreme Wraith interest. There’s either technology hidden there, or people. They would have no interest in anything else. And judging by the pattern of search and destroy teams you’ve already deployed, from the fence line in, for containment, it’ll be hours before anyone gets in there. In that time, the Wraith will achieve whatever goal they have. And I’m guessing that would be bad.”

Now he looked up and around at all the shocked faces. “I’m a profiler with the BAU, geographic profiling is my specialty, and I’m telling you, you need someone to check out that building right now.”

Brass nodded to a woman in a FEMA vest, who appeared to be in charge in this tent, and she reluctantly called it in. But apparently she wasn’t forceful enough to persuade her superiors on the other end of the radio, because she merely shrugged and said, “If your team wants to take it, Mr. Profiler, it’s all yours.”

“That’s Dr. Profiler to you,” Grissom drawled dryly, and nodded to Spencer. “We’ll take it.”

“If he’s right, you’ll need back-up,” Brass protested, suddenly alarmed as the four of them prepared to leave.

“What, do you have any?” Grissom asked in surprise. “If so, send them after us. You got a radio for us? I’ll take it and keep in touch. Come on,” and he beckoned his team to follow him.
~ *If aliens visit us, the outcome would be much as when Columbus landed in America, which didn't turn out well for the Native Americans. We only have to look at ourselves to see how intelligent life might develop into something we wouldn't want to meet.* ~ Stephen Hawking, from ‘Into the Universe with Stephen Hawking’, 2010 ~

Armed with a small-scale version of the base topographical map, the four men tramped back to the SUV and drove past the heavy guards at the gate. Nick had shotgun again, and a small flash-light to study the map and get them to the right location.

Greg was still bouncing his knee in excitement.

“Okay, I get that this mission is a lot more dangerous than they wanted us to take, or we expected, but, I gotta say, I am so-o jazzed! And no guilt trips, Gil, if I’m the red shirt who gets eaten first, because, I gotta tell you guys, this is the coolest thing I have ever done in my life, bar none, and there is nowhere else in the universe I’d rather be right now. I mean. We are actually ground zero here, and saving the planet from an alien invasion! I mean, actually saving the god-damned planet! Right?”

Nick sighed and said, “Greg? Buddy? Can you please try to act just a little bit cool, here, so we can impress our celebrity FBI guest that we can actually do our jobs right?”

Spencer chuckled. “To tell you the truth, I totally agree with him.” Then he decided to share an earlier observation. “It’s like my very own Doctor Who adventure, and I couldn’t be more thrilled myself.”

Nick groaned out, “Twins separated at birth”, even as Greg declared, “Oh man! You a fan of the Doctor?”

“Card carrying since I was four.”

“Oh wow. Who’s your favourite?”

“Number four.”

“Dude! And here I was about to vote you the coolest FBI agent ever, and you go and loose points on originality! Tom Baker is everyone’s favourite.”

“Hey, not my fault. The one you grew up with will always be your favourite. Psychological fact. It speaks to a sense of home, security and your preferred father figure. I’ve seen studies that indicate...”

“Do you both mind?” Grissom interrupted them. “You need to be focussed on the mission at hand, or we’ll all end up dead! And no, I will not feel the least bit of guilt if either one of you are still arguing TV shows while a Wraith grabs you by the neck! So can it.” After a moment of silence, Grissom re-settled in his seat behind the wheel, still following Nick’s directions over the rough desert terrain. “Okay, Dr. Reid. You expect us to walk into a Wraith convention when we get to this shed, right?”

“From the coded notes on the source map, most of the downed darts around that point crashed, but at
least four of them evidently landed by choice. I’m assuming the shed is a surface access point for a larger underground structure. I doubt if much of it is still standing by now, so we may have to dig through debris, which is why I recommended we all grab shovels at the embarkation point. I expect the Wraith will have had to do that too, and it may have slowed them down somewhat. But they’ve still had well over an hour already to pursue their mission, whatever it is, and entrench their position.”

“What do you think they’re after?” Nick asked.

“No way to tell. We don’t know what may be hidden there, and we have very little evidence as to Wraith goals or motivations. Apart from hunger or avarice... I couldn’t even speculate. The only thing I know for sure is that, after the main base, and the nearby city full of walking Wraith take-out, this point is the only other location in the region of any interest to them.”

“Oooh... could be freezers full of alien corpses,” Greg guessed, hard to suppress with all the excitement. “This is Area 51, after all, right? Legend says they’ve been collecting alien trash and crash-landed little green men since Roswell in the fifties. This could be the bunker where they keep the bodies... the Wraith could be looking for friends.”

Grissom sighed. “Greg, are you or are you not a CSI? And what do CSIs do?”

“We follow the evidence.”

“Right. And so far, our only evidence is a lot of crashed darts around a tiny shed. So what do we need?”

“We need more evidence before we speculate about anything.” Greg slumped like a punctured balloon, and Nick laughed at him.

“Interesting,” Spencer commented. “My job is quite the opposite. Our unsubs, unknown subjects, are almost always strangers to their victims. We usually don’t get crime scenes, sometimes not even bodies, just missing persons reports or dump sites. As a profiler, I almost always have to work from a dearth of evidence, taking the smallest of clues, sometimes just trying to draw some kind of conclusion from victimology and geography, to build a suspect base from what is, ultimately, educated guesswork. Having actual physical evidence is usually an unexpected and much appreciated boon for us.”

“Yeah, well, tonight,” Nick observed, “we’re kind of hoping on less evidence and fewer victims. Space vampires who suck the life out of you is plenty profile for me.”

~0~

It was a little like coming upon a fifty-car pile-up on the freeway. Or rather, as Spencer corrected the mumbled comment by Nick Stokes, a fifty-one car pileup. But as they parked and got out of the SUV, each taking a weapon in hand, the desert was unnaturally still. No breeze, no motion and no noise, except for the faint echo of sporadic gun-fire coming from the distant base, obscured behind a high rocky ridge.

A brief flare of light across the sky above them made them all cringe and duck... and then Spencer laughed a little in reaction. “No, it’s only a meteor. The Lyran shower is tonight. Too bad my mom is missing this.”

The other three men straightened and sighed, getting themselves back in hand.

Working cautiously as a team, they checked each and every dart. Spencer kept a careful tally of
which ones had pilots still in the cockpits, and therefore how many they presumably still had to face. They just had to hope that these “darts” had not beamed down additional ground troops. Nick and Grissom were calm and efficient in decapitating the bodies they did find. Greg was violently sick at the first... his first alien, and his first deliberate decapitation. The others refrained from comment, Spencer merely offering a tissue and a bottle of water for him to clean up.

“They really are that ugly,” was the only thing the youngest CSI had to say, but he shivered a little, and claimed it was just the low temperatures of the desert at night.

Five darts seemed to have landed in one piece, with no apparent damage, and all were presently empty.

“Count?” Grissom asked.

“Forty-two bodies accounted for, so nine missing,” Spencer supplied as they ducked under one up-ended dart at a forty-five degree angle, its nose propped on a couple of other wrecked craft. “Since there are undamaged darts here, we have to assume whoever got this far hasn’t left yet, and is still below.”

“Yeah,” Grissom commented, “Or they’re out there hiding in the scrub, waiting to catch us off-guard.”

“Pleasant thought,” Spencer granted.

Grissom keyed his ear-mounted radio and reported in. “Yeah, we have a potential nine Wraith pilots who survived landing their darts. Forty-two confirmed dead Wraith. Any time you want to send help our way, it would be appreciated. We’re about to go in and see what they were after. Grissom out.”

The shed, or whatever it had once been, was all but sheared off at the ground level, but there was the remains of an elevator well, the empty car jammed at an angle about halfway through the surface floor. Beside it, however, there was also a stairwell, and, ominously, it had been cleared enough of debris that it was passable. The team shone their flashlights down, and stood silent, listening intently. There was nothing to be heard from there but the whisper, and occasional echoing crash, of settling debris.

They knew that there was more to this structure than they could see, since some of the dart impacts had caused cave-ins and sink holes for fifty yards to the north and south. No way to tell how deep this place ran, however.

Cautiously, they climbed down in a tight formation, Nick taking point, Grissom at their rear. At the first landing, they found several desiccated husks in military desert brown BDUs. There were no insignia on the uniforms to indicate branch affiliation or rank. P90s still hung from their vests. There were windrows of brass shell casings drifted against the walls and around the bodies, mute evidence of how much firing had been done, to no avail.

“Anybody want a weapon upgrade?” Nick whispered, prepared to holster his own handgun at his side as he picked up a small, easily carried automatic rifle and extra ammo cartridges.

“Don’t know how to use one,” Spencer admitted. “I feel better with a weapon I’m familiar with, all things considered.”

Grissom merely shook his head, scanning the way they had come, and Nick smacked Greg’s hand away from another rifle.

There was a fire door on the landing, and although the thick and heavy metal door had once been
sealed with electronic locks, it was now propped open and ajar, unable to close due to the warped frame. Beyond was a corridor with LED emergency track lighting in the floor against both walls, still operational. Ceiling-mounted search-lights were also still running off their attached battery packs, barely penetrating the dust in the air. Grissom pulled out surgical masks from his vest to hand out, so they could breathe in the murky air.

Cautiously, they ventured through, and scanned up and down the long north-south running corridor. To one side of the elevator shaft was a windowed control room. They went to have a look.

It was a monitoring station, with a few dead and damaged laptops and a row of twenty monitoring screens, all evidently shot out. Oh, and more bodies of humans who had been fed upon by the Wraith, some in white lab-coats who did not look even remotely military in physicality. But there were also two Wraith bodies in their black leather (or, disturbingly, was it a kind of black rubber?) uniforms, their trunks peppered with bullet holes – at least fifty each.

And they were both beginning to move.

With a scream, Greg shot one in the head, and kept firing... until Grissom, having dispatched the other along with shots from Nick and Spencer, grabbed Greg’s wrist and held it.

“It’s okay. It’s dead,” he eased the young man. “Better reload.” Greg’s last four shots had clicked on empty chambers.

Greg nodded convulsively, and looked embarrassed. “I’m not doing so hot, hunh? Think the Doctor would kick me off the TARDIS for this?”

Spencer shrugged, as the two older men went through the decapitation ritual once again, now definitely assured of its necessity. “We’re not dead yet, and that’s the main thing. I think we just need to be... acclimatised. It took me almost three years at the BAU before I could walk into a crime scene without feeling at least a little sick to my stomach. I still get nightmares, sometimes.”

Glancing up and down the corridors, noting the regularly spaced heavy metal doors, each one with small hatches dead-bolted in place... Greg said, “Guys? Is this what it looks like...? A prison?”

Spencer moved into the control room, studying the set-up. “Five levels. Four monitors per level, but they obviously rotate between multiple cameras. Ten cells per level. Fifty potential prisoners, if they’re kept in isolation, and it looks to me like they are. We’ll need to check all the cells. A Wraith might be hiding, or there may be survivors. There’s another couple of rooms on this level that don’t appear to be cells... interrogation, maybe?”


Nick grumbled, “You know, I’m going to be really pissed if we find out the invasion of Earth was just a diversion for a glorified jail-break. Like, they have the Wraith general locked up down here, or some intergalactic super-villain they think will lead them to victory, or whatever.”

Spencer grinned wryly. Nick might not be a Whovian, but he was apparently well acquainted with comic books.

“Maybe we should split up, two by two, take a wing corridor each...” Grissom suggested.

“No!” both Greg and Spencer objected, and Greg continued, “Classic mistake made in every horror flick ever filmed, boss! We need to stick together.”

Nick shrugged. “I know it’ll take more time, but I kinda agree, Gil.”
There was too much structural damage to make a complete search. Not that any of them thought it was necessary after the first few cells were checked. The captives within were definitely human, and way past dead. But a couple of them had been flattened by falling ceiling and walls, dead before they could be fed upon, and a few cells were missing altogether, having caved into levels below. At one spot, they could see down through three levels of ragged floors, hanging wires, felled metal struts and beams, and a couple of human corpses immediately identified as prisoners by the lime-green scrubs they wore.

The extra rooms on this level that weren’t cells were interrogation rooms... one of them fitted with what looked like a dentist’s chair. Complete with leather restraints. Another room was an infirmary... but none of the four men thought much medicine was done there. A shudder went through them all. Yeah, space vampire aliens were scary and all, but... humans could evidently still teach them a few things about sheer evil.

Just as cautiously, they descended to the second, then third level. No living prisoners, although a couple of cells were empty, more dead guards, more Wraith they ensured would stay dead... but by the time they reached the fourth level, there were still three Wraith unaccounted for.

There was less structural damage this far underground, but that didn’t mean there was none at all, as in places, particularly in the south wing, there had been a domino effect, of fallen roof caving in floor, caving in ceiling, and so on down.

The prison bunker had been exceptionally well guarded. Spencer had counted sixteen uniformed bodies so far. And as the Wraith had attacked, the military had retreated downward, rather than attempt to break out to the surface. Something down there was worth their lives to defend.

Grisson’s team dared not leave any level unchecked, and on level four they found another Wraith who needed a swift decapitation. Two left.

But they also heard the first faint echoing suggestion that they were not the only living beings down here.

Level five. Each level had shown evidence that stricter and stricter security was needed to keep control of their inmates. From more elaborate electronic locks to heavier bars, and on the bottom landing, the fire-door had canisters of what looked like some kind of gas attached. Disabled now, no doubt after the defenders had died. And another Wraith stirring groggily when they reached him.

This time, echoes beyond the fire-door told them that there was someone throwing things around and swearing in a deep gargled tone, so they dared make no extra noise. The K-bars were enough to deal with their current Wraith, and then a quick kick to decapitate. Luckily, this Wraith had been too wounded still to put up resistance.

There should have been only one Wraith left, and they could hear him down the south corridor, trying to do some excavation in the debris, which made it hard to understand how they could come across one more Wraith half way along the north wing.

This one lay half in and half out of a cell that, oddly, had no door on it. The corridor-side cell walls down here were not cinder block and steel slab as above, but some kind of pexi-glass that allowed maximum visibility of the captives inside. Unfortunately, whatever the material used, it wasn’t structurally as robust as the concrete or steel would have been, and falling ceilings had crumpled them, cracked, bent or shattered like safety glass, flattening everything within. This Wraith had been pinned by a steel I-beam a foot across, debris on top of that, and a shard of the transparent wall had
mostly done the decapitation for them. But it was obvious he had been a prisoner before the attack even began. He was wearing the oh-so-uncool lime green scrubs, not fetishy black rubber.

So, if the crowd of Wraith had stormed in here trying to reach one of their own people, accounted for every defender, and found him dead already, past recovery, why hadn’t the survivors just given it up and gone home? Why stick around? Maybe there was another one down here, not so dead?

Halfway along the south corridor, a major cave in blocked the passage. Although the gaps were big enough to give them a view beyond, they weren’t big enough to walk through. They’d need to crawl to get past it. Grissom and Nick were both too solidly-built to squirm in the tiny crevices, so the much-more slightly built Greg and Spencer would have to go on alone. How the larger Wraith had managed it, they didn’t know, unless he had already been down at the south end when the cave in occurred.

Speaking as quietly as possible, Grissom reported their progress and current situation over his earwig, begging for back up to come as soon as possible.

There was more than enough debris to allow Spencer and Greg cover as they prepared to creep up on the last Wraith. Weapons drawn, they took position, one on each side of the ruined corridor. Which was when Spencer noted, lying against the wall, motionless and dead-looking, another Wraith body. A falling thick steel rebar had pierced him through the chest, pinning him in place. He wore the black leather-like coat and uniform of the other invaders they had found... their last landed pilot, accounted for. Whoever was ahead, he had most likely been another prisoner of the bunker. Spencer signalled his find to Greg, a finger on his lips for silence. This one would certainly keep until they had a chance to come back to him.

As ready as they would ever be, Spencer and Greg prepared themselves, and quickly, cautiously, peered around fallen beams and crumbling concrete blocks at their last enemy.

The living Wraith was tall, long greasy white hair dangling around its shoulders, skin bleach white, mouth a gaping drooling wound around ragged, jagged, rotted teeth. It was barely a skeleton in a lime-green prison fatigue, the same scrub-like uniform that clothed all the prisoners in this horrific hole in the desert. Well, they wouldn’t have been able to feed him. Would they? Not daring to imagine a sufficiently ruthless black ops team might have tried to find a way to do just that, Spencer closed off the line of speculation, and studied the being for more clues.

It was trying, desperately, but with little success, to pry up a beam that blocked its way to the very last cell on this lowest level of the prison bunker. Yanking and kicking, fuelled by rage and, presumably, hunger, it trampled over several mummified human corpses in desert BDUs at its feet, ignoring them entirely, or kicking them out of its way.

“Come out of there, little mouse. It is useless to try and escape me. I will get to you eventually, you know. Come out, Daniel Jackson! I know it is you, destroyer of worlds!”

The voice was gravelly and deep, and seemed to echo oddly, as if there were three or four throats speaking those words, not just one. And when the being’s efforts failed, it roared and tossed its head back, and its eyes flashed, glowing gold.

Hunh. No one said anything before about glowing eyes. Spencer traded a blinking, confused look with Greg. Then they both shrugged, and traded hand signals.

One... Two... Three!

Together, they leaped out and, aiming at the creature’s skull, fired.
Greg’s aim might have been off, but Spencer’s wasn’t. He managed to get off at least two shots before the thing turned toward them both, roaring, eyes flashing, and Spencer’s fourth shot hit it dead centre of the forehead.

It toppled over backward.

Spencer approached first, wary, already holstering his handgun in favour of the K-bar. He glanced at the seemingly empty cell to the side, the one the Wraith had been trying so hard to get into, wondering who this Daniel Jackson, destroyer of worlds, might be.

“Greg? You want to do the honours, or shall I?”

“Oh hell no, Spencer, the honour is all yours. You’re the one who nailed him.”

“Then keep an eye on that cell, will you?”

“Destroyer of worlds, yeah. I get that. Super-villain who can win them the war, check.”

Spencer knelt and began to saw at the throat of the dead Wraith.

Oddly, there was something wriggling, just under the loose, wrinkled albino-white skin of the neck. Spencer paused and drew back a little, wondering what the hell it was. He hadn’t noticed this with any of the other Wraith they had finished off.

“No!” screamed a high-pitched voice to his left, in the last cell, and something very small darted out of a hiding place behind piles of debris, from under ceiling panels and struts, pushing the startled Spencer back, to land on his rump. Greg was still struggling with his gun to get it aimed properly, so luckily he had enough time to actually see what it was before he fired at it. Although, possibly, he wouldn’t have been able to hit it even then.

It was a small child. A boy, no more than five or six years old. He was Caucasian, though that was hard to tell with him coated in dust and speckled with what looked like blood from gashes on his forehead, shoulder and arm. He, too, was in the lime-green paper-product scrub outfit, sized to fit him. His hair colour was a complete guess at brown, maybe, when coated in plaster dust, but the wide-open eyes in his small, dirty face were a brilliant blue.

He cowered from the body, even as the opening Spencer had made with the K-bar widened, and the head of something else... something even more alien than a Wraith, peeped out and then gave an ear-splitting screech, and launched itself like a striking snake, straight toward Spencer.

With deft, tiny hands, the child caught the thing in mid-air, fists clenched around its throat, and with a quick twist, killed it.

Gasping, the child threw the dead thing away, and dropped into a slump on the filthy floor. He began to sob and shiver in reaction.

“Greg, grab him,” Spencer ordered, and when the CSI had taken the boy in his arms and started back for their team-mates, Spencer quickly finished off this prisoner-Wraith.

He stood, trying to calm his own post-adrenaline-rush jitters, and stared for a moment at the snake-like thing that had been inside an alien... just over a foot long, dark skin, fins that looked a little like wings, odd four-part pincer-like mouth... broken in half and leaking copious amounts of bright blue goo.

He was pretty sure none of the other Wraith had one of these. Whatever it had been.
In silent agreement, all four of the adults put getting out of this chamber of horrors as the first order of business. Greg had taken off his CSI jacket to wrap around the little boy, while Nick carried him to protect his tiny bare feet, shielding his view from the bodies littering the corridors and stairwell. Once they had left the fifth floor, Spencer went back to decapitate the last Wraith, the invader pinned by rebar.

Only when they reached the SUV, and pulled down the back hatch as a platform to unwrap the little boy, did any of them speak.

Greg said, “Destroyer of worlds? What the fuck!”

Nick bristled. “Language,” pointing at the child.

But the boy seemed dazed, barely aware of his surroundings. Until he blinked, and stared up at the stars. In shock, Spencer decided. But then his bright eyes tracked something across the eastern sky, and he smiled. “Ooh... fire rain,” he said, pointing out a Lyran meteor.

Nick pulled out a first aid kit from the back of the SUV and began to check the boy over. There was a shard of pexiglass in his shoulder that needed to come out. Other cuts and abrasions, from falling debris, no doubt. But there was no way the pronounced ligature marks on his wrists and ankles had anything to do with the invasion. A lot of the bruises revealed in the harsh halogen glare of their flashlights as they carefully peeled back his dirty green scrubs, were a lot older than one night. So were the vivid track marks on the insides of his spindly arms, from needles. And the burn marks littering his tiny chest, probably some form of electrical burns. And when the little boy twitched and moaned at an inadvertent touch, the swollen shoulder joints betrayed having been dislocated and reset – maybe more than once. And then they found the scars on his back... whip marks.

And he was shuddering, shivering, and maybe rather than just cold, he was terrified. Who wouldn’t be, locked away in a dungeon bunker, tortured, hunted by aliens...

“No!” the boy cried out, tears in his bright eyes, begging. “No, they’ll find me, and lock me up again!”

“We’ll protect you...” Grissom began, only to be interrupted again.

“You can’t. No one can. Even Jack couldn’t, and he’s a general! The bad men, the black ops men, they’ll come and take me away and lock me up again... they did... things to me. Bad things. ‘Speriments. Please! Don’t let them find me! And don’t let them know you found me, either, or they’ll kill you! They will! They’ll never let you tell anyone, if they find out you even saw me!”
Exchanging glances, none of the four men even thought about doubting the level of threat they were now facing. Even if it did come from the mouth of a five-year-old child. Not after what they had seen below.

A shudder went up Spencer’s spine. Destroyer of Worlds. The last cell in the last level of a secret high-security prison bunker hidden away in Area 51, where even those in the main building wouldn’t have any way of knowing what went on here... locked up with aliens so incredibly dangerous they could eat you, or burrow into your body...

After a dozen or more years of hunting the most depraved and evil human monsters on the planet, Spencer knew all too well what he was looking at in the facility below him. And despite Greg’s claim of it being Gitmo West, he knew it wasn’t a prison, so much as a torture chamber. Situated on one of the highest-security facilities in the country, staffed by military and whoever the lab-coated people were, so there had to have been someone highly placed who knew of it, paid to have it built and staffed, signed for the budget, and sanctioned its work...

Spencer murmured, “That infirmary...”

Grissom, Nick and Greg stared at him, all of them experienced crime-scene investigators, thinking about the horrors below. And a damaged and traumatized five year old crying there on the tailgate in front of them as the first glimmering suggestion of dawn broke to the east.

Nick ventured, “Maybe he’s a hostage... someone’s kid, here to make sure they play nice...”

“Yeah, right,” Greg agreed doubtfully.

Destroyer of Worlds, Spencer thought.

Grissom jerked, startled, and touched his earwig. “Yes, I’m right here... No, we finished the sweep. All Wraith from the darts are accounted for. There are a lot of dead humans here, though... some will have dog tags, but you’ll need dental records to identify the rest...” He winced, thinking, then stared at the shivering child. “No. The only living things we encountered down there were Wraith, and we finished them all off as recommended, with decapitation. Most of the darts are in good enough shape that you might be able to get the people out of their buffers. Other than that... We’re done here. We’ll start back to the main gate now...”

Grissom listened to something on the other end, glanced warily at the child, then nodded, resigned. “Okay. We’ll hold until relieved. How long for that?... Okay. We’ll wait.”

Tapping to sign off, Grissom traded looks with his team. “We’re stuck until someone comes, but we need to get our stories straight. The only standing thing we found down there was the last Wraith. Agreed?”

Nick and Greg nodded. Spencer said quietly, “Agreed. But I think I better take him with me when I leave. He’ll be too easy to find here in Las Vegas. Because if they don’t find a body when they come looking...”

“We tell the truth, the absolute truth, about everything, right up until the kid appeared,” Grissom said, thinking hard. “Including the Wraith trying to get into that last cell. But when you two looked, it was empty. Kid, what kid? Right?”

“And the creepy snake with the neon blue blood?” Greg asked.

“Goa’uld,” the boy whispered, tears streaming down his face.
“I caught it and twisted its neck as it came for me,” Spencer said. “Scared the shit out of me, and I acted on instinct.” And maybe he might have... but not fast enough, not to avoid whatever that foul thing had in mind, before a little boy burst out of hiding to save him. Spencer palmed a quarter, juggled it in one hand, sending it around his fingers, before making it disappear, and reappear behind the little boy’s ear. “Sleight of hand. I have very fast hands. Comes in useful sometimes. Although it’s also part of the reason why I’ve been banned from every casino in Nevada. Well, that, and the fact I count cards. I’m deadly at poker. None of my friends will play with me.”

The magic trick had at least made the little guy crack a tiny bit of a smile. “My friend Jack can juggle,” he volunteered.

Grissom resolutely pulled a swab from one of the forensic kits in the back, and carefully took a sample of blood from the little boy’s shoulder gash.

“Not that I intend to do anything with the information, and we will keep it between the three of us, but I think we need to know.”

Destroyer of Worlds.

Spencer reluctantly nodded, admitting the simple precaution was necessary. “If you run prints or DNA, it might draw the wrong attention. Let me look into it from my end. We’re always trolling for signs of serials at work, crossing jurisdictions, and monitoring all missing children reports is a standard part of our job. The BAU has sources of information that... well, we need to do this as clandestinely as possible. For all our sakes.”

“He still needs medical attention,” Nick reminded.

Spencer nodded. “Take me back to the Bennington, where you picked me up. My mom’s a patient there. It was setting up as an overflow first aid station when I left, so I should be able to get him looked at without drawing notice. There are going to be a lot of stray kids waiting for their parents to find them after this night is over. He’ll just be one more. After that... well, I think it’s best I handle it on my own. The less you know the better. If you trust me, that is?”

Grissom smiled wanly. “Goes without saying, Dr. Reid. Anybody who likes the fourth Doctor best can’t be all bad.”

Greg smiled wryly, and Nick laughed.

Spencer turned to the little boy, bending to look him right in the eyes. “What about you, Daniel? Do you trust me? Will you let me help you?”

He bit his lip and twisted the tail end of his fatigues in worry. “If they find out, they’ll kill you. If they find me, they’ll lock me up forever and ever. I don’t know what to do. I can’t go to Jack... he can’t protect me anymore. He couldn’t stop them this time. I don’t know what to do. I don’t want anyone else to be hurt because of me.”

“Well, you know what? It’s my job to save people from monsters. Me and my team find the monsters, and catch them, and even if we can’t do anything for the people they’ve already hurt, sometimes, we’re in time to save the people they’re about to hurt. That’s my job, and I’m very good at it. Me doing my job is how we found you in time to save you from the Wraith, or Goa’uld, or whatever it was. Now, most of the time, the monsters we hunt are human beings, very sick human beings, and not aliens, but...” he shrugged. “A little bit of danger is kinda usual for my job, and I’m okay with it. When a Knight fights a dragon, he has to expect to get a little bit singed. Right?”
Earnest blue eyes studied him a long moment, before he let another few tears fall, and reached out for the young man. Spencer held him in a tight hug. “I’m so tired. I can’t think any more. It’s hard to think, sometimes, and my memory kinda comes and goes sometimes... but I don’t know if that’s because I’m little now, or because of all the drugs they gave me, or... maybe I’m broken now. I can’t think and I don’t know what to do.”

“All you have to do is trust me, and let me help. Can you do that, Daniel?”

Wearily, shaking and starting to go loose, the little boy nodded, burying his head in Spencer’s shoulder. “Okay.” Then he frowned and said, a little bit scared, “Who’s Daniel?”

“That’s not your name? Daniel Jackson?”

The boy began shaking even more, clearly terrified. “I... I... I don’t know! I don’t remember! No, I’m not him! I don’t want to be him!”

“Hush, it’s okay. Do you have another name?”

“No... maybe... Arrom? Merlin? Carlin, maybe? No, wait, Murray maybe... I can’t mumember.”

“That’s okay. Don’t worry about it. We’ll figure out a really good name for you to use until you remember your real one. Okay? I have a friend who likes the name Ethan.”

The little not-Daniel nodded slowly, savouring it. “I like it too. It means enduring.”

Spencer smiled. “Yes, it does.”

The sun was just appearing over the eastern horizon. Nick warned in a low voice that helicopters were approaching.

“How about you come with us, and we’ll take a little ride to a place... not a hospital, really, not the kind you’re thinking of, and we’ll get you fixed up. Until then, you can go to sleep. Oh, here, drink some water first. Do you have to go to the bathroom?”

With basic needs hastily taken care of, they bundled the newly-minted Ethan into the SUV, hidden under Greg’s CSI jacket in the rear seat foot-well, while they waited for the helicopter and its gun-toting soldier-passengers to come and take control of the scene.

A grizzled Air Force Major took one look at the mess of darts piled around the hole in the ground and said, “Hunh. Who the hell knew this was here? This part of Area 51?”

Grissom shrugged. “Who knows. Five levels of underground bunker. Looks like some kind of Gitmo West to us. Nothing but bodies below, human and alien. The last one is a bit of a puzzle... you know if these Wraith things have some kind of snake parasite inside them? Or is it just that one guy we found on the bottom level?”

A shadow of consternation passed over the Major’s face. Clearly, to the CSIs and the FBI profiler, this man knew something about the odd snake-shaped alien. “Snake parasite?”

“Yeah, it was inside the last Wraith we found,” Grissom elaborated with a smile. “Dr. Reid was busy sawing the Wraith’s head off, per our orders, when this *other* alien thing came crawling out of it. Flew at Reid, some kind of attack, but Reid caught the thing on the fly and killed it. Weird though. Well, more weird. How many different kinds of aliens are we talking about here, anyway?”

The Major winced, and called into his radio. “We got possible Goa’uld presence here. I need
containment until we get it sorted. One snakehead confirmed dead. We’ll need to check for more... Yeah, they were running some kind of Gitmo West here, apparently... affirmative. Out.” He turned to Grissom’s team and said. “Thanks for the help. We can take it from here. We’ve got reinforcements coming to help with mop up. You guys have had a long night. Go home, try and get some sleep.”

“Yeah right,” Nick agreed with a sardonic edge to his voice. “Sweet dreams, right? After this, I may never sleep again.”

“I hear ya, buddy. Oh, hey... your team logged with the FEMA teams, right? They’ve got your names and contact information, and which sector you took?”

Grissom nodded. “Oh, yeah. You’ll be able to find us if you need us for anything. It’s gonna be one hell of a debriefing, I can tell you that much. Greg, Nick and I are all Las Vegas CSI’s. Dr. Reid just happened to be here visiting his mom this week, but he’s FBI out of Quantico, on the Behavioural Analysis Unit. He won’t be hard to track down, either.”

Oh yes, Spencer thought. They were all too good at poker. Nothing to see here, nothing to report, certainly no guilty consciences or anything to hide... these aren’t the droids you’re looking for... but then, Spencer didn’t think this clean-up team knew anything about what had really been going on down below, before the invasion. It would be the next team that came after them that they would have to look out for. Those would be the subtle, shifty-eyed, suspicious ones, trying to trip them up, looking for any possible chink, any tell that would indicate the shadow of a lie.

The Major waved them away, glancing back suspiciously, talking into his radio.

Actually, the next team to stop them caught them at the front gate to the Groom Lake base, and sent them, under heavily-armed escort, straight to a tent where a portable X-Ray was set up. Technicians quickly ran all four through it, and then sent them on their way. The little boy asleep in the back seat foot well never stirred, and wasn’t found.

Back in the SUV and headed for home, Greg let out a heavy sigh. “So, X-Rays of head, neck and shoulders, all round? Looking for more snakes, you think?”

“Probably,” Grissom admitted. “I don’t think very many people even knew that bunker existed, or what they were keeping there, apart from the staff who died in the attack. It was a bit of a shock to the Major. And if we found one snake, he had to guess there might have been more, hitching a lift in any one of us.”

All four glanced down at the bundle on the floor. Destroyer of Worlds...

“Yeah,” Nick said. “We’ve got an X-Ray at our lab. Better stop there first. Just to be sure.”

“You need to check the neck. If it controls a body, it’ll be wrapped around the brain stem, somehow,” Spencer suggested. “And it just occurs to me that our little friend Ethan was right... whether or not they suspect we brought home an extra passenger, whoever was running that facility, or whoever sanctioned its activities, might consider all four of us an unacceptable risk.”

Grissom chewed on that as Nick and Greg traded alarmed looks. “Right. We’re witnesses to something very, very nasty, that no one is going to want to admit was happening at all. I’m beginning to think those bodies we found the last three weeks might have been food for their fifth-level guests. And that... that *really* burns me. No matter what National Security spin they put on
that place to justify themselves, or why they were holding a child there, feeding random people to the Wraith is just plain wrong. So our best defense is to disseminate what we saw as wide as possible before anyone has a chance to shut us up.”

“What are you thinking, Gil?” Nick asked.

“In this particular situation, red tape is our friend. We all discharged firearms on official business, so we all need to write up full reports on our actions. I say we write it up right now and spread it to our superiors, our teams, put it on the usual official databases, just like any normal night. That much is standard operating procedure, so they can hardly fault us for it, and by the time anyone realises, enough people in our circles will know what we found that it’ll be next to impossible to contain, and they’ll have a hell of a time making us disappear without raising one hell of a stink. Agreed?”

“I like it,” Greg nodded happily. “How beautifully subversive of you, boss!”

As the fastest typist, Spencer asked to borrow one of their iPads, and quickly composed a complete and comprehensive official after-action report on his activities that night, saving only a little boy with quick hands and big blue eyes. When finished, he emailed it to himself, and to each of his invasion-night team-mates, so they could use his as a template to write up their own reports. He cc’ed back to the BAU, to Unit Chief Hotchner, Section Chief Cruz, to all his BAU team-mates, and for archival purposes to tech specialist Penelope Garcia. Garcia, he knew, fan of the Fez-wearing eleventh Doctor, would particularly love reading about Spencer’s adventures with aliens. None of them doubted there were any number of interested parties who would also want a copy.

And while he was doing that, he considered their other little problem, asleep at his feet under Greg’s CSI jacket. He would need contingency plans...

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Spencer made sure his temporary team-mates all had his card before they dropped him and the little boy in his arms off at the gates of Bennington.

“Are you going to tell your BAU team about the boy?” Grissom asked.

“I think I have to,” Spencer admitted. “I won’t be able to do this on my own... either hide him effectively, or find out what’s really going on here.”

“The more people who know...” Grissom warned.

Spencer sighed. “I know. And anyone I tell will be in equal danger. But I do trust you guys, and I do trust my team. But I’ll have to wait until I see them in person to brief them. Can’t risk any remote lines of communication.”

“Just remember the protocols and codes we worked out,” Grissom said, “because you’re right to be wary. Any communication we have can be hacked, no matter how secure, especially if his enemies have the clout and the connections we think they do.”

“I have an eidetic memory. I quite literally can’t forget. But I won’t tell anyone a thing unless I’m face-to-face. I won’t destroy my cell, it’s government property, but it’s too easy to track if I carry it, so... I can leave it behind with my mom, and pretend I forgot it in all the chaos. Oh, and Greg... I think it might be time for you to take your weapons training a little more seriously. Right?”

Greg smiled ruefully. “I got you. Time to grow up and take responsibility for my own safety and that of my team. Thanks, Spencer. Good luck.”
The driveway up to the facility and the front lobby was a hive of activity, just short of true chaos. Spencer easily spotted his mother’s tall slender form and short blonde hair, not surprised to find her helping out with the first aid. He went to her first, settling the sleeping little boy on an empty cot. He quickly covered up the tell-tale lime-green fatigues with a thin grey blanket.

“Hey, Mom...”

“Spencer! Oh thank God. You’re okay? Yes, I can see you are... Oh my... who is this?”

“This is Ethan. I picked him up out front. I think he’s lost and confused, got separated from his parents in all the confusion, and I think he got hit by some shrapnel from one of the crashed darts. Can you get someone to look after him? And... are there any clothes his size around here we can get him into?”

Diana Reid straightened and took a long, hard look at her son.

“How bad?” was all she asked.

Spencer sighed. He should know better by now. Paranoid schizophrenic or not, dementia or not, his mother possessed awesome gnarly psychic powers, particularly where her son was concerned, and she always knew.

“We need to get rid of those green things sooner than soon. They can’t be found, and I don’t know how much time we have before someone comes looking for him. But he does need medical care before I dare take him out of here. And... it’s very very bad. Maybe even worse than that.”

Diana gave a decisive nod and said, “Then we’ll do what has to be done. Go find Martha. I’m the one found him wandering dazed on the front lawn, I don’t know where he came from, you were coming in the other doors. Now scoot.”

Spencer got a lot busy after that, Dr. Norman collaring him to help with the triage, given his experience with forensic pathology. He could certainly tell a life-threatening wound when he saw one, and a broken bone at twenty paces.

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Sometime halfway through the morning, a young woman with dark hair in a black CSI windbreaker came in the doors carrying a large cardboard box. She scooted around the cots and confusion of people to the reception desk to set down her load and called out, “Dr. Reid?”

Spencer was already on his way to her. “I’m Dr. Reid,” he announced, giving a little wave before tucking his hands out of the way of an offered hand-shake. The woman gave him an instant once-over and assessment, and smiled.

“I’m Sara Sidle, pleasure to meet you. I work with Dr. Grissom. He sent me over with a care package. We’ve been collecting donations of clothing and toiletries… at any one time, Las Vegas has the largest transient population in the world. With a half dozen major hotels wrecked, more shut down with no power or water, McCarran airport bombed to hell and back, and air traffic downed for the foreseeable future anyway, all rail and road lines in and out taking some degree of damage, and not enough buses or rental cars… well, somewhere around a hundred thousand people are stuck for the duration, a lot without even a change of clothes. So we’re helping the Red Cross deliver supplies for the displaced. We’ve got kids clothes in here too… Gil said to be sure to let you know. Oh, and thanks for taking good care of our boys, by the way. We’re all a little jealous, over at the labs… You guys had quite the adventure! The rest of us were mostly directing traffic and clearing up jams.”
Spencer blinked, wondering if his team sometimes felt as flummoxed when he went into briefing mode. But several points did just make themselves clear… “He gave you his official report?”

“Yeah. He said until someone showed up on his doorstep to tell him different, what happened last night was in the public domain. Barring things like… how bad a shot Greg might have been, how bad he was at holding his dinner, things like that. Oh. Gil asked if you needed any help organizing a ride home. He thought you might already have a plan for getting back east.”

“Um, I do, actually,” Spencer confessed. “Las Vegas is my home town. When I was attending Cal Tech and trying to get home for my mom as often as possible, I relied pretty heavily on the starving student underground railroad.”

“Oh!” Sara Sidle exclaimed. “I hadn’t thought of that. The student message boards? Car pooling in exchange for gas money, and someone to spell the driver.”

“With Vegas being party central, it’s usually pretty easy to catch a lift to anywhere in the country. I was going to check out the options later today.”

“Well, that’s good, then. We had a whip-round for all the loose cash we could scrounge up… ATMs and credit card machines will be wonky till communications are back up…” Translation, if you need to go off the grid, you need to not leave a paper trail behind. “There’s a couple thousand, should be enough to get you home. Don’t worry about paying us back. Oh, and Gil has already logged an official request to get the BAU Team to visit for some seminars, so maybe we’ll meet again soon. Nice to meet you, Dr. Reid.”

With a smile and a wave, she was gone.

Spencer made his way to the hospital office, and the laptop with internet connection. Oddly, the widely distributed internet was the most reliable form of communication right now, and Dr. Norman had given him permission to use it at will.

He quickly logged into the FBI system, and opened a Skype window to Penelope Garcia, the BAU’s unconventional technical wizardess and research ace. No doubt the local FBI office had made his status known, and he’d already emailed them his report, so they knew that he was alive and well and would be in touch as opportunity permitted.

With a screech, Garcia’s lively face was suddenly there. “My God, Reid! Junior G-Man! You’re a full blown Companion now! Fighting evil space vampire aliens! Oh Reid, we are just so-o-o jealous!”

“Yeah, I get that. Hi, Garcia. Is everybody there okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, we’re all fine here…”

“I hope you weren’t worried about me.”

“Weren’t worried! Reid, you were at ground zero! Of course we were worried about you! And your mom. Is she okay?”

“She’s fine. Pretty happy, actually, since she’s getting a chance to help out with a make-shift first aid station we’ve got here at Bennington. And a lot of her friends here are celebrating the fact that they were right about the aliens all along. You and the team are all okay? Because I was worried about all of you, too.”

“Oh sure, we’re all fine. We were nowhere near any of the real action here on the east coast…
Didn’t even get called in for special duty. The Wraith targeted the Pentagon, and pretty much ignored everything else…”

“Look, Garcia, I expect there will be someone here to de-brief me soon, and I’m not sure what I’ll be allowed to share after that, so can you make sure everyone there got my report and have read it already? I sent copies to Hotch, Cruz and the team, and I kind of hope Cruz sent it on to anyone else he thought ought to see it… Like, right away, okay? I was involved in an official FBI operation, and I discharged my firearm… among other things… so I have to file all the relevant paperwork anyway, with the local FBI office here in Las Vegas as well as with Hotch… But make sure all copies are secured, because I’m pretty sure there’ll be people around pretty soon to confiscate anything they can and put a non-disclosure seal on everything else. When I see you in person I’ll give you what details I’m allowed. And getting home might be a little difficult… I’ll probably be off the grid for a while, but I’ll check in at regular intervals…”

Garcia stared out at him intently. She might not be an official profiler like the rest of the team, but there were certainly no flies on her, and they’d been friends for a long time. “Reid, you’re scaring me, here.”

“No, no… No need for that, just… I’m probably being overly cautious, that’s all. It… it was unsettling. You’ll see what I mean when you read the report… Just… be careful with it. Okay? And… transportation is going to be a bit iffy, so I’m not sure how long it’ll take me to thumb a ride home.”

“Sure, okay… Reid? Are you sure… Oh. Hotch is here.”

The camera view switched to the ultra-serious face of Spencer’s Unit Chief, Aaron Hotchner.

“Reid? You sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine, Hotch. A little rattled, and very very tired. Not unlike everyone in Nevada right now. But I’ll be home as soon as I can.”

“Just be careful. We’ve all got your report, and Cruz has already been by with some concerns, and has cc’ed the AD and Director… Otherwise, we’ll keep it under wraps. You think it’s going to be classified?”

“Probably within the hour. I’m actually surprised someone hasn’t been here already, although I appreciate that Nevada is a true disaster area right now… When they do get here, I’ll have to let them know I sent it on to you. Oh, hey, Garcia… when I get home we’ll have to have a movie night.”

“What, no Doctor Who?”

“Not the first night back. A little too close for comfort. I met some CSIs here who recommended Firestarter as a good one. Drew Barrymore and George C. Scott.”

“Yeah,” Garcia drawled vaguely, “It’s okay, I guess…”

His team-mates were extremely good at their jobs, and they knew him very well. Spencer knew both Garcia and Hotch had got the subtext he didn’t dare make any plainer.

The 1984 movie Firestarter, based on a Stephen King novel, was about a little girl, played by Drew Barrymore, cursed with the ability to light anything around her on fire. When clandestine government agents start to show an unhealthy and unwelcome interest in her, her father takes her on the run. They don’t get far before they are cornered and captured, and taken to a remote secret base for testing. George C. Scott played a black ops Colonel named Rainbird, who was given the
assignment to worm his way into the little girl’s trust, and, if they found they could not control her powers for their own purposes, kill her. It had been Greg Sanders who suggested that there were certain parallels between their Gitmo West, with its five-year-old ‘Destroyer of Worlds’ prisoner of unknown interest and value, and the Firestarter plot.

Hotch, looking even grimmer than usual, said, “I want you to check in nightly. Secure channel. We completely understand if you’re going to be off the grid for a time. And… stay safe.”

“I will. Thanks.”

Once the connection was closed, Spencer breathed out a sigh of relief and checked the university message boards. There was a pair of history majors heading back to Salt Lake City next day, offering a couple of back seats in exchange for gas money and someone to switch drivers. Spencer quickly set up a generic email account, signed on and sent a quick note, asking for space for he and his little brother. He didn’t actually mention any names.

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It was late afternoon before the flood of incoming patients slowed to a trickle. Spencer listed to the side with exhaustion. It had, at a rough guess, been well over thirty two hours seventeen minutes since he last slept, and the excitement and trauma of the night was wearing on him. Coffee, even the good stuff Bennington supplied its staff, wasn’t enough to keep him going at this pace.

And that was when the brass arrived, rather later than Spencer had expected, all things considered. The three men were Air Force, none of them below the rank of Lt. Colonel, to ‘invite’ him to debrief. Dr. Norman let them have his office. One full bird colonel with a briefcase handcuffed to his wrist carried non-disclosure papers for Spencer to sign after his adventures at Area 51.

Spencer blinked as he leafed rapidly though the thick document, using his speed-reading skills. “What, you don’t want me to tell anyone about the invading aliens?” he asked, frowning, his formidable mind going a bit stupid for a moment with exhausted confusion.

Someone snorted behind a hand. The brigadier general in charge of the group sighed and said, “Obviously, that cat’s out of the bag. But you entered a secure facility on a restricted and top secret base, with insufficient clearance to see what you saw. It’s a matter of national security.”

Briefly, his memory supplied a little voice in the pre-dawn gloom saying, *‘Even Jack couldn’t, and he’s a general...’* Spencer wondered if this was the little boy’s Jack... but no. The name tag on the uniform read ‘Wm. Carry’. So, not Jack.

Spencer nodded, still blinking slowly as he struggled to process. “I see. Well, I can certainly understand that you wouldn’t want anyone knowing you were running Gitmo West, a secret prison bunker and torture chamber operation, right here in the middle of Nevada. Or does it make it okay when at least some of the victims were aliens?”

The three Air Force officers exchanged glances and barely perceptible grimaces, that would have been lost on most anyone else. Spencer didn’t know which was worse... that the bunker had been officially sanctioned by someone who should have known better, or, as he now suspected... the facility hadn’t been sanctioned at all.

Hunh. Interesting.

“No, never mind,” he went on hurriedly, thinking to test his hypothesis. “I really do understand the concept of national security, and mostly agree with it.” Oh, yeah, that twisted the knife they felt in
their backs. A clandestine black ops group had run that place, off the books and without any pesky official knowledge or over-sight. “Unfortunately, I have already reported back to the local FBI office, not to mention my superiors at the FBI BAU, so my Unit Chief and Section Chief both got my official report from last night’s activities. Whenever I’m involved in official FBI business, particularly when I discharge my firearm, I’m required, by law and standard protocol, to log a full official report, and last night I was considered to be temporarily under the command of the local office. But due to our work, my team does have exceptionally high security clearance already.”

The general nodded. “We are aware of your work with Langley and Guantanamo, and that incident with USAMRID some years back, Dr. Reid. The threatened outbreak of a modified anthrax? And we truly appreciate your help last night. And, just for the record... you and the CSI team did prevent a major crisis from occurring by stopping those Wraith. If any of them had managed to escape... last night could have had even more dire consequences than it did. Now, are you ready to give us your statement?”

Okay, so this wasn’t the team he had been expecting, still expected, to come looking for one escaped prisoner mysteriously absent from their little dungeon. The Lt. Colonel offered a tablet for him to log onto his email account, and transmit to them his written report, the exact same one, he confirmed, that he had sent to the Las Vegas FBI office, Unit Chief Aaron Hotchner and Section Chief Mateo Cruz. They then insisted upon him deleting the report, and the archived send messages that included the attachment. Then he delivered his oral version... mostly verbatim from his written.

As far as Spencer could tell, they took his statement at face value. They expressed thanks for Grissom’s team intervention, most interested in that last Wraith and his... passenger. But the looks of horror and disgust on their faces told him that they had no more idea what was going on in Gitmo West than this morning’s Major had. But, they did know what that snake was, and the implications of finding it where they had. And a grim resolution formed on the general’s face to get to the bottom of that mystery, and fry anyone he found to be responsible for it.

“So you think they were keeping a Wraith prisoner there, before the attack.”

“Yes,” Spencer said. “Two, actually. One was killed in the bunker collapse, still in its cell. Dr. Grissom told me about the bodies that had been found in the past weeks, now obviously the victims of a Wraith feeding. I initially thought it might have indicated an advance scouting party by the invading hives, but after seeing the prisoners... you should consider it highly likely that the victims were used by the staff of that bunker to keep their prisoners alive.”

And yes, that was a stinging indictment of anyone who was even peripherally aware of that operation.

“As I said,” Spencer continued, ignoring the stricken looks on all three military men, “from my geographic profile of the dart landings within the Groom Lake base perimeter, it was quite obvious that the Wraith were determined to break in to that facility. They knew exactly where it was, targeted it, so I can only assume they knew what was inside, and they were hunting for something there they wanted very badly. They stopped on each level to feed on the guards and prisoners, then continued on, and stormed right down to the lowest last level, until only the second Wraith prisoner, the one they managed to release, was left. And he was trying to get into that last cell. He obviously thought there was something of value to him inside... but by the time we arrived, whoever, or rather whatever had once been there was gone. The cell was completely empty, because we did check, but no bodies were inside, living or dead.” How convenient that his statements were all exactly and precisely true.

“You’d know far better than me what they were looking for.”

Another not-so-subtle dig, and the general grimaced again. No, he clearly had no idea.
“You didn’t hear what the last Wraith was shouting? Mr. Sanders, your team-mate who went into the last section with you, said the voice was... uh, ‘weird’, too garbled, and he couldn’t make it out. Do you know what it said?”

Spencer frowned thoughtfully. “It didn’t make much sense to me, so I might have misheard. As Greg said, it was a strange bifurcated tone. I remember being shocked it was speaking English, to be frank. I thought invading aliens speaking English only happened in bad science fiction. I think I heard it say, ‘Come out of there, little mouse. It is useless to try and escape me. I will get to you eventually, you know. Come out! I know it is you, destroyer of worlds!’ If that tells you anything... I think the Wraith we found was half-mad with hunger. It wasn’t making any sense. But I did report what I thought I heard, for the record.”

Spencer turned earnest, forthright, honest brown eyes on the general, and waited him out, completely relaxed, before blinking bleary eyes and briefly hiding just the hint of a yawn behind one hand.

The general sighed and nodded. “Well. Thank you for your help and cooperation, Dr. Reid. We appreciate it.”

“General, I hope I’m not in trouble for sending my report to my superiors... it’s procedure and law... they really did have every right to know, and I am contractually obligated to inform my Unit Chief, at least, of any official actions I take. Particularly when firearms are discharged.”

The General seemed as weary as Spencer felt. “I understand and appreciate that, Dr. Reid. My guess is that very soon, there’ll be an announcement from the White House, and several other heads of state around the world, attempting to explain the whole alien invaders thing to the general public. At that point, the need for secrecy won’t be so high. As a matter of fact, Dr. Grissom pulled the same stunt you did... Read in his superiors, and his whole department, logged the full after-action reports on law enforcement databases, before we had a chance to get to him. I’ll get someone to Quantico to have your superiors and team members sign non-disclosure papers. Just... keep it out of the newspapers and off Twitter, okay?”

“Of course. By the way...” Spencer asked, in case the general was amenable to debriefing him right back, “Is there anything more you can tell me about these aliens? The Wraith or the snake-things? Are you sure we got them all? The obvious conclusion is that the last cell once held another Wraith, or something just as bad, if not worse. Should we be on the lookout for any suspicious deaths, worldwide? Because you realise, the overwhelming likelihood is that such cases will end up on my desk before yours. And it wouldn’t surprise me in the least if some unsub out there is already thinking to blame aliens for his crimes, as a forensic countermeasure.”

“Brrr. Better you than me, Doctor.” The General glanced at his aides, and grudgingly nodded. “You make good points, sadly. But I don’t know what I can tell you. Clean-up sweeps in all the affected areas are still being done, by people way above my pay grade. Other than that, I’m afraid I can’t really give you any more information than you already have about the nature and origins of our enemies. Or whether they’ll be back. I know I can rely on your discretion.”

“Yes of course,” Spencer replied.

“Are you on the list for stand-by military transport back east?”

“Well, no. I imagine that list is a mile long, all things considered. I’ve arranged my own transportation with some students needing help with gas money. It may be somewhat of a circuitous route home, but I thought I’d take the opportunity to see something of the country... maybe stop to see some old friends...”
The general’s eyes darkened momentarily with speculation, then he smiled. “Off the grid, hunh? Not a bad idea, actually. Smart move. Stay smart, Dr. Reid.” The General winked. Spencer wasn’t completely sure what the General thought he meant by that wink... but the young genius was determined to be very smart in the next few days.

“Well... just don’t go too far off the reservation, Dr. Reid. My superiors may have supplemental questions for you.”

“My Unit Chief, SSA Aaron Hotchner, has requested I check in each evening. That’s also a requirement of my job, not just the current unsettled situation... we could be called on a case at any time, anywhere in the country, and I have to be available to join them. You can let him know if you need me for anything, and I’ll do my best to be in touch.”

The general nodded. “Although, considering the current disruptions in transportation and communication lines throughout the south west, that may prove challenging, for the next week at least. The internet seems to be the safest and most reliable form of connection at the moment.”

The General signalled his aides to pack up, and gestured for them to leave. Once they were out of the office, Spencer cleared his throat. His report had been complete and factual, as far as it went and excepting only the occupant of the last cell, and that had been by deliberate choice. But where he didn’t have to underline the implications for the CSI’s or his own team, he felt he might need to for this general. It had become all too obvious to him that the general really hadn’t known about that bunker before this morning’s revelations, and probably didn’t realise the true implications of what it represented. He felt it was his responsibility, and he owed it to his conscience to protest what had been done there, at least once. Dangerous as that might be. He didn’t, he couldn’t, completely trust this man, under the circumstances, but with the other subordinates out of the room, he dared attempt at least a token warning. And perhaps his willingness to be more forthcoming might make him look... more innocent than he was.

“General, I’m sure you’ve seen my file, so you know I’ve been a profiler with the Behavioural Analysis Unit for over thirteen years. I’ve been to dozens of prisons across the country in the course of my work, to interview serial offenders of various kinds, in an effort to improve and refine our profiling techniques. And several times I’ve been called to the Guantanamo Bay facility to assist in the interrogation of inmates there. I have also, unfortunately, become all too familiar with the examination of torture chambers, constructed and operated by psychopaths, sexual sadists and severely disturbed personalities of various kinds. And I can tell you from personal professional experience that there is a definite difference. Prisons, even Gitmo, make at least some provisions for treating inmates in a humane manner, with access to sunlight, fresh air, exercise, and the like. There is also the realisation that inmates may, eventually, be released. Unlike torture chambers, where absolutely no effort has been made to offer any kind of creature comfort, every structural and design feature is geared to containment for the purposes of dealing pain and terror, and the basic assumption is that captives will never be allowed to leave alive.”

He looked General Carry in the eye. “If you’ve been to see that bunker, you know what I saw. But maybe you don’t realise what I recognised, immediately. Fifty solitary confinement cells, each floor exit supplied with canisters of lethal gas, as well as other extreme security measures. The Infirmary was stocked with pain killers, pain enhancers and various agents known to induce suggestible states. The interrogation rooms on each level, with chains, chairs, restraints, tools hung on the walls, car batteries and jumper cables... copious amounts of blood spattered on floor, walls and ceilings, as well as the chairs themselves... I was forcibly reminded of the trailer Frank Breitkopf used as his mobile work room, to rape, torture, dismember and only then murder his victims – perhaps as many as two hundred of them over a thirty-year period. My profiler experience tells me that everyone connected to your secret bunker was, at the very least, a dangerous sociopath, totally lacking in any form of
empathy for their victims, or at least so efficient at compartmentalising as to make no difference. And they were also borderline delusional, thinking some distorted notion of national security justified what they did. Since I saw no evidence of an incinerator on the premises, capable of body disposal, I can absolutely guarantee you that if you search the immediate area around the bunker with ground-penetrating radar, you will find at least one, more probably several, mass graves. The fact that the bunker was sitting in the middle of such a secure location, controlled by the government and military, staffed by military forces... disturbs me greatly, sir."

The General stared, open mouthed, then gave a visible shudder as he shut his eyes tightly. He glanced over his shoulder, to see that his subordinates were on the other side of the front lobby, leaving to return to their vehicle, and so out of hearing. He sighed and looked down at the hat in his hands. “Just so you know, Dr. Reid... I'm the military commander of the Groom Lake Base. It's my job to know everything that goes on in that place... and while not all of it is... strictly speaking, legal... I swear to you, I had no idea that bunker existed. None at all. What they were doing there... I quite agree with you. Irresponsible is the least of their crimes. I will give the orders to search for those mass graves immediately. And I intend to see that whoever is responsible for that place is identified and held accountable.”

Spencer was rather shocked by the disclosure. And at least a little mollified. But he had seen enough to be just a little cynical about how far the general's reach might extend, given the apparent money and political power behind that bunker, that had allowed for its construction and operation. Still, it was more assurance than he thought he'd get, and he had to be satisfied. He nodded acceptance.

When Dr. Norman encountered Spencer later, trying to down yet one more coffee, he told him he looked like hell and he should go get a shower and take a nap, at least eight solid hours. He offered the staff overnight dorm suite, or his mother’s room if he chose. Spencer could only nod and admit he’d had enough for one day.

He first went looking for the little boy he had left in the lobby... he didn’t dare ask after any random patient, in case someone remembered his interest... and was a little alarmed not to find the boy. He was even more alarmed when it occurred to him where the little boy might be... He loved his mother dearly, but the idea that a helpless little boy, already suffering from trauma and abuse, might be alone with her, when her unpredictable symptomology occasionally drove her to anger and violence... He went in search of his mother, and was told she had also succumbed to weariness, and retired to her room. She left word for him to join her there, that she had an extra mattress on the floor for him.

His mother’s room was darkened, the black-out drapes she sometimes required to sleep drawn across the windows to keep the bright Las Vegas afternoon sunshine at bay. On a twin-sized mattress on the floor beside her bed there lay a little figure tucked up under a blue crocheted afghan. He was small enough that the lap-sized throw completely covered him. Diana had been sitting in her favourite reading chair, just staring at the little boy.

When Spencer entered, she turned to smile at him. “He’s an angel,” Diana whispered.

He smiled back at her, sighing in relief. And now that his first fear had been allayed... He had to confess, if only to himself, he was concerned about this seemingly innocent little boy. Small as he was, helpless as he seemed, Spencer had to wonder what it was about him that rated a cell in that bunker, on the most secure level. He clearly remembered the voice of the Wraith.

*“Come out, Daniel Jackson! I know it is you, destroyer of worlds!”*

Diana caught his attention back from his memory. “No, Spencer. Really. He is an angel. He glows.
Didn’t you notice?’

Spencer blinked. No, he really hadn’t noticed any glowing, other than the eyes of an enemy alien. He glanced sideways at his mother, wondering if maybe the disruption of the invasion had caused some lapse in her meds. Not that it mattered.

“You’ll protect him?”

“To the best of my ability,” Spencer vowed.

Diana sat back, satisfied. She chatted about the treatment nurse Martha had given him, how they had washed him, found his hair to be what people referred to as tow-headed; a blonde that would inevitably darken as he aged to a light brown, but would always bleach out in the sun. He had been patient each time he had awakened to find someone poking him with a thermometer or blood-pressure cuff... although his terrified reaction to a needle had been rather worrying. Some kids did have phobias about needles, but his fear had been so extreme while half-awake, settling swiftly when he realised Diana was with him, explaining it was just antibiotics he needed when his cuts had got so dirty. Also concerning Martha had been the evidence of older bruises, needle marks and assorted injuries that could not have happened in the invasion. Diana said that the brief file Martha had started on the misplaced little boy, complete with a snapshot picture, included a warning for the authorities to investigate the possibility of child abuse before allowing any adult to claim him.

“I let Martha go ahead with logging him into the missing person database. He’s one of three-hundred seventy-four little boys who have yet to be claimed by their parents after last night’s confusion. I managed to fudge the picture we took enough that I think he won’t be too recognizable... At one point he woke screaming from a nightmare, and saying something not English... I think it might have been Arabic, Farsi, something like that... Something about a Goold, I think. That’s when I thought it might be wiser to bring him in here with me. I told him his name was Ethan, just as you suggested, and he agreed that was a good name to have. And those awful ugly scrubs he was in? There was a mysterious fire in a wastebasket in the kitchen, a grease fire probably. Ethan was in an adult size t-shirt with a Hard Rock Cafe logo on it when I found him on the front lawn, fit the poor little fellow like a dress, down to his ankles, falling off his little shoulders... He was barefoot. His plain white briefs aren’t going to cause any comment.”

Spencer nodded, admiring his mother all the more. Where had she got the t-shirt? Probably the box the CSI lady had brought in. A tiny pair of sandals, tiny tan cargo shorts and another Hard Rock cafe t-shirt in a more appropriate size, were also neatly folded on his mother’s desk, along with other necessities... like really small underwear and socks.

“He was... abused, Spencer?”

Warily checking their little guest to ensure he was asleep, Spencer reluctantly nodded. “I think he was tortured. Probably not so unlike what Tobias Hankel did to me. I don’t know why, or why they were holding him, or how long he was in their hands. I’m not sure he knows, either. I don’t know who he really is. And I don’t know if he does, either. But I believe whoever held him will want him back again, and I won’t let that happen.”

Diana smiled fondly. “There’s my Parsifal.”

Diana went to her own bed to sleep very soon after, and Spencer availed himself of her private bathroom for a shower and brushing his teeth. Then he curled himself up in her chair to sleep, running scenarios and plans in his mind, trying to figure out the safest way to get his young charge out of Nevada with all due speed. When the next interrogation team came for him, he wanted to be back in Quantico with his team around him, and no trace of any little boys anywhere within a few
hundred miles of him.

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The office was oddly open, airy and bright, thought Major Vincent Hoskins as he entered and gave a by-the-book salute to the man in the sharp and expensive suit sitting behind the modern glass desk. At Hoskins’ side was another Marine Major. The name tag read “Escobar” today, but the name was different every time Hoskins saw this particular man. Today the hair was iron grey, but he had seen it blonde, black, red, brown, and even bald. Today the eyes were brown, but that seemed changeable, as well. The uniform and rank occasionally changed, although mostly, Escobar stuck with Marine Major, and he seemed particularly uncomfortable in civvies. What didn’t change was the battle-ready posture, intimidating physique, and aura of quiet menace. There was also the faint pucker of a scar on the left side of his chin that he never bothered to obscure when clean-shaven, as it easily could have been, worn like a badge of honour. In the privacy of his own thoughts, Hoskins tended to think of him as “Scarface”. It was probably safer than any actual name.

Behind the executive office’s occupant were panoramic floor to ceiling windows and a stunning view of the New York City skyline. Against an inside wall, a large-screen television screen was tuned to a news channel, displaying scenes of the invasion and a running tag-line of damage and casualty reports, with the sound muted. The contrast with the serene city beyond the windows was striking. Strange that not a single shot had been fired in this city, when much of Washington DC, Las Vegas and Colorado Springs lay in rubble, their transportation and communication infrastructures systematically destroyed, presumably to keep the local ‘herds’ from escaping their corrals. The attacks on Nellis and Antarctica had been in areas so remote that little property damage had been done, or at least, admitted to. Squadrons of alien darts had actually crashed into downtown Las Vegas and DC, after attempting to suck up the crowds of Wraith-food running panicked in the streets. Now, post-invasion, New Yorkers’ attitudes could mostly be summed up as, “What are we, chopped liver?” They were rather offended at being ignored.

Hoskins’ superior beckoned he and Escobar forward to visitor chairs facing the glass desk. Hoskins sat, Escobar didn’t, preferring to stand at parade rest, just behind Hoskins. It was a patently obvious intimidation tactic, but Hoskins was never sure who the other Major meant to intimidate.

Hoskins delivered the paper summary report, then remained silent while the other man read intently through the very few pages of bullet-point conclusions, each more devastating than the last. The man was in his fifties, tall, fit, well-groomed, and would not have looked out of place at the head of any board room in this financial capital of the planet. His poker-face was excellent, and only by a subtle narrowing of the steel-grey eyes and already-thin lips did Hoskins detect his annoyance at what he read.

On the big screen, men appeared on a press conference podium, identified with a label below as the Mayor of Las Vegas, the Governor of Nevada, and various FEMA officials. The announcement of a state of emergency was a foregone conclusion, surely. For sheer numbers of people affected, Nevada had certainly taken the brunt of the Invasion. The scrolling headline below reported the formation of temporary ‘Sanctuary Camps’ for all of those displaced by the Invasion, wounded, separated from family members, without transportation out of the city while the infrastructure was still in such disarray, or awaiting news of loved ones on missing lists. Bodies needed to be identified, and there
were only the vaguest of estimates for how many had been caught in Wraith beams, and might yet be recovered.

With a sigh, Stanley Bradshaw (according to the name plaque on the wall outside this office) finished his review of the paperwork before him, closed the folder and leaned back in his executive chair with a sigh as he brought his penetrating gaze on his subordinate.

“It’s a cluster-fuck.”

“Yes sir,” Hoskins readily agreed.

“Okay, so flesh it out for me.”

“Bottom line, sir, everyone who was in Bunker Thirteen at the time of the attack is dead. Security, Support, Interrogation and Guests alike. Oh, and the janitor, too.”

“So, the good news is there are no living witnesses on site to what we were doing. The bad news is that the self-destruct was never pulled, and there’s physical evidence left all over the damned place.”

“Yes sir.”

“And, just as a matter of interest, Hoskins… why weren’t you there at the time?”

The Major began to sweat, under the hard eye looking him up and down. “I was in Washington, sir, reporting to General Brady, congressman Klein and Assistant Director Gaffney, at the Pentagon. They wanted progress reports.”

Bradshaw blinked. “What the hell for?”

Hoskins squirmed. He resisted the temptation to look over his shoulder at Escobar. As Marine Major “Warren”, he had been present for that meeting, too. “I believe they were feeling the heat from HomeWorld, sir. They wanted to know how much longer before we could dispose of Subject X. I informed them that our progress had been… minimal so far. That’s how we were caught in the Pentagon by the Invasion, in General Brady’s office. It was a couple of hours before we were dug out of the wreckage. I used my authority from the General to get a high priority lift west, with… the Major here, but even so, we could only get out the next morning, and had to commandeer a helo from Reno. By the time we arrived in Nellis, it was far too late to get past the SGC guards on Bunker Thirteen, or secure any evidence.”

“Yeah, okay. Go on.”

“Because of the timing, early evening, both shifts were still on the grounds of the Groom Lake base. Relief Shift had just taken over the Bunker, Main Shift were logging out in the main building. When the invasion began, anyone who wasn’t actually in the Bunker, or caught in the first explosion, joined the defence, so they were pretty much trapped in Building A with everyone else.

“It’s pretty obvious to everyone now that the attack on Buildings A, B and C were intended as a diversion, keeping all of the regular military busy so they could get a smaller strike force into Bunker Thirteen. I’ve heard rumours that the JCS is considering the possibility that even attacking the other ground sites with considerable Ancient tech, at Colorado Springs, Antarctica and the Pentagon, might also have been diversions. Only one hive ship was devoted to each of those other locations, with correspondingly less damage.”

“Shit. The prisoners?”
“That has to be the obvious conclusion, sir.”

“Double shit. Go on.”

“Relief Shift defended to the best of their ability, but were ultimately ineffective against the Wraith, only managing to delay the take-over.

“Unfortunately, the first person to realise the Wraith true intentions was an FBI profiler, in Las Vegas on vacation, called in with all other off-duty military and law enforcement personnel to assist at Groom Lake. Dr. Spencer Reid. We have a file on him... genius, PhDs in math, physics... some other stuff, not important right now. I guess there was some idea of recruiting him, by the SGC or us, in spite of the possibility he might develop schizophrenia before the age of forty, history of drug abuse, and his connections in law enforcement and the FBI. Anyway, his specialty is geographic profiling. He apparently took one look at the situation map and pin-pointed Bunker Thirteen immediately. No one at the FEMA camp at the gates took him seriously, so they let him take three local CSIs with him to do a sweep.”

Bradshaw groaned and passed a hand over his eyes. “Shit. Four goddamned civilians.”

“Yes sir. And all of them experienced in criminal investigations. Relief Shift followed protocols to do a scorched earth on the control room before they were overrun there, so the database and physical files should be unrecoverable. Dr. Reid and his team reported no survivors on any level by the time they arrived, until they reached five. They were keeping track of the exact number of Wraith they expected to find within, given the number of empty darts they counted on the surface, and the Wraith they confirmed dead once they got inside. So they were a little alarmed to come up with two extra, wearing the same prison scrubs as the dead human prisoners they found. It doesn’t take a math whiz of Dr. Reid’s calibre to add that one up. The last Wraith was still alive and moving... and they all witnessed his garbled voice and eyes flashing.”

“Oh crap.”

“Yes sir. They wouldn’t realise what that meant, of course, but there were others present later that night who certainly did. According to their verbal reports to the first SGC responders, the Wraith was trying to get at something in the last collapsed cell when they arrived, and eliminated him. That’s when the Goa’uld symbiote emerged to try and take Dr. Reid. It failed, and was killed. They checked the cell, thinking they’d find a third extra Wraith, but it was empty.”

“And the cell belonged to...?”

Major Hoskins took a deep breath. “Subject X, sir.”

“Oh hell... he wasn’t there?”

“They reported no one left alive in the entire bunker, sir, human or Wraith. But no mention has been made of a body that might correspond to Subject X... and I would have thought someone would have said if the corpse of a five-year-old boy was discovered. They didn’t find anything at all in the last cell, although it was in bad shape, the ceiling and walls having caved in, apparently, in that section of corridor. None of the other clean-up crews have reported any different. And none of those crews include any of our people. Every asset we had at Area 51 was either dead in Bunker Thirteen, or pinned down for the duration inside Building A until the military assault teams could reach them. By that time reinforcements from Cheyenne Mountain had arrived and taken command. And the very first military asset to join Dr. Reid and his team heard his story and immediately locked all of Nellis down, and started X-raying everyone they could get their hands on. They discovered Captain Downs and Lieutenant Sanford that way, and they were both killed trying to shoot their way out.”
Bradshaw swivelled his chair to stare out at the serene and sunny city-scape. “So I expect by now HomeWorld knows about the Bunker, and what we were doing there. Does anything lead back to us?”

“No way to tell, sir. Downs, Sanford and the Bunker military staff all belong to Tango Unit, so there’s that. That’ll lead to me. My chain of command is supposed to be through Area 51 to General Carry, but it’s well known that I also answer to the NID through AD Gaffney and General Brady. My trip to the Pentagon to debrief Brady, Gaffney and Congressman Klein was well-documented and part of the public record. We’ll be the low-hanging fruit. I instituted emergency protocols as soon as I arrived in Nevada this morning. As far as I’m aware, there is no evidence that connects me to you, or any members of the Board. No phone calls, emails, texts... just the anonymous chat room where we set up appointments. None of my visits to New York are officially documented, especially not this one, and in case of questions into my travel patterns, it’s well known I have friends and relatives here whom I visit regularly. After that... The SGC will no doubt have forensic teams going over every inch of Bunker Thirteen. Probably starting with Subject X’s cell. There was obviously no opportunity to sanitize and the self-destruct never went off, so even without a body, there’ll be fingerprints and DNA trace. They’ll have an ID very soon, if they don’t already.”

“And potential witnesses? You’ve recalled all of our people from Nevada?”

“Yes sir. They’re en route to Utah as we speak. Their C-150 transport should be encountering engine problems just about now. According to the un-official manifest, which will be mysteriously made available to the proper authorities, I am also on board. I saw to the mechanical adjustments myself.”

“Well, that’s something. How many ‘guests’ did we have in Bunker Thirteen?”

“Forty one, including Subject X and the two Wraith. I’ve got my office working non-stop to sanitize the trails back from each one, but... That’s a lot of paper trails and a lot of executive orders. A few of them were actually legitimate, the authorizations at least, if not the evidence we supplied to get compliance, and all are on file in multiple databases with official signatures attached. The VP, high-ranking White House advisors... and some forged that won’t stand up to scrutiny, and will lead straight to the VP’s office. We do know General Carry took charge of whatever physical evidence he found and turned it all over to HomeWorld. We don’t know, at this time, what that might include.”

“Aw shit...”

“Yes sir. We don’t know what might have been left on the Bunker computers for someone sufficiently skilled to hack. Which, all things considered, will be either Carter or McKay, once they find out who Subject X was.”

A faint sardonic smile crossed Bradshaw’s lips. “‘Was’, Major?”

“Well sir... caved in cell, Wraith attacking, no body... I assume he Ascended. It is his MO.”

“Perhaps you’re right. Ironic, isn’t it? Ascension is one of the things we were hoping to learn from him. Although... careers have been destroyed underestimating him in the past... still, that means he could re-appear at any time and... well. Screwed is the word we’re looking for. Do we need to take any action against the civilians who were there the night of the invasion? This Dr. Reid and the CSIs?”

Hoskins felt a cold shiver work down his spine. With no assets left in Nevada, any actions ordered would fall on him, personally, and... While he had been in charge of Tango unit, and therefore the Commanding Officer of Bunker Thirteen, he had managed to keep his hands relatively clean. He had overseen many of the ‘interrogations’, but hadn’t conducted any personally. And when the time had
come for the really dirty work, either Scarface arrived with his “experts” and took charge, or Hoskins held his nose and ordered others to do it. His Goa’uld minions had been only too eager to volunteer for such duty.

Bad enough that he was down to the Sierra Unit sweeper teams as far as available emergency manpower was concerned, all of whom had dealt directly with him in the past, so the risks to himself if they should be caught... and he had no illusions of just how fast Bradshaw and his superiors would be to sever all ties and links with him. He assumed that was why Scarface had been shadowing him to Nevada and back, so he could be assisted to an “accident” of his own. There would be enough official eyes on Dr. Reid and his team, all things considered... any attempt to get near them would only lead to disaster.

Assuming his best poker face, Hoskins shrugged. “I can try and make arrangements if you like... but they logged their complete reports on the incident with their respective offices as soon as they left Nellis. So the FBI and the Las Vegas Crime Lab already have them. Therefore, everything they saw is now common knowledge to Las Vegas PD, the FBI, and probably the entire intelligence community. So the cat’s out of the bag. And, really? That much was known to HWS anyway as soon as the SGC clean up crew got there. I don’t see any point in risking more assets than we’ve already lost when those four don’t know anything more than they’ve already revealed.”

“You’re certain? Is it worth while taking them for interrogation?”

No no no... Hoskins gulped back a wave of nausea. “I doubt it. Why would they hold back? The tone of the reports seemed... horrified, to me. Righteous indignation. I’ve included their reports in the complete file I emailed you this morning. If you see anything questionable, I can take further action. But, unless they start acting hinky, I really think there’s no further damage they can do. We’ve got bigger problems elsewhere, and a serious lack of manpower to deal with them.”

Bradshaw reluctantly nodded agreement, shuffling until Dr. Reid’s report came to the top and beginning to leaf through.

The television ticker tape ran below telephoto images of the hive ships. Colorado Springs, 526 confirmed dead, 5,092 injured, 3,419 missing. Las Vegas, 1,986 confirmed dead, 819 injured, 19,687 reported missing. Washington DC, 721 dead, 94 injured, 1,234 missing. Totals, 3,233 confirmed dead (if not yet identified), 6,005 injured, and 24,340 missing. And one more missing no one else knew about.

“Sir...” Hoskins ventured. “In light of the very public invasion... what plans are the White House and the IOA entertaining?”

“Full disclosure, of course. Well, what any politician or diplomat would consider full disclosure while covering their asses, which likely means they’ll do everything in their power to sweep all evidence of Bunker Thirteen under the rug. It’s a very small side-bar issue in the big picture of SGC disclosure. In fact, the Powers That Be may be a lot more threatened by Dr. Reid and the CSIs than we are, and take care of them themselves. They’re going to make the SGC and Atlantis crews into heroes, just to reassure the world that their security is in hand. I doubt any hint of Bunker Thirteen will ever get out. Absolutely no one will want to admit we could be running such an extensive illegal and unsanctioned operation right under the noses of the legitimate NID at Area 51.”

“And General O’Neill, sir?” The Director of HomeWorld Security had been the single greatest danger to the entire clandestine operation since inception. Although efforts had been made in the past to ‘neutralise’ him, one way or another, none had been effective. Keeping well out of his way had seemed to work best.
Bradshaw chuckled. “Jack O’Neill is a vindictive bastard on a good day, especially where his pet archaeologist is concerned. He’ll nail the Vice President and at least three members of the Cabinet, for sure. What they’ll eventually end up charged with, who knows.”

“But sir, the VP and the Cabinet... are they members?” Jesus! Did this organization really extend that high? Hoskins had thought them mere dupes...

“Not part of The Trust. Not officially, anyway, but they certainly were eager to align themselves with our interests. The VP in particular was so anxious to ‘contain’ Subject X, he was blind to everything else we asked of him. We didn’t even have to blackmail or threaten any of them to secure their cooperation. Ambitious power-hungry bastards. Just like us. And they’ll provide a useful blind for the rest of us, while we do our best to salvage what we can of the organization.”

The man stood from his chair and went to a window, staring at the streets below, bustling with oblivious people, going about their lives. Unlike the citizens of Colorado Springs, Las Vegas, and Washington DC.

“I’ll need to make a report of my own. Certain protocols are in place and need to be initiated to limit fall-out. I would advise you to look to your own contingency plans. HomeWorld will consider you KIA soon, correct? And your new identity?”

“Major William Matthews, sir, USMC.”

“Good. You’ll be attached to the JCS for the time being, until we can re-group and do a full risk assessment, then you’ll probably take over Utah. But that’s a best-case scenario, and we should also plan for the worst. Are your affairs in order, Major?”

Hoskins took a deep breath. “Yes, sir. They are.”

“Then I’ll let you go. You know the drill for emergencies. You may be contacted to make some sort of report in person. Don’t be late. Major... Escobar, is it? Please remain.”

Hoskins swallowed heavily. Maybe that didn’t mean a quick shot to the back of the head... then again, it might. It was standard operating procedure for those whose usefulness to the organization was at an end, like those poor bastards on board the C-150 bound for Utah.

He didn’t salute this time, Bradshaw had never worn any uniform so far as he knew, and he didn’t give the traditional farewell... he wasn’t at all sure it had been either an honour or a privilege being anywhere near this fucked-up mess, considering he had been black-mailed into participating in the first place. Knowing what he knew, he wasn’t one hundred percent sure the man behind the desk, Major Scarface, or any one of his other co-conspirators, were even human. The deeper in he had been dragged, the worse it had got. A Goa’uld? What the fuck! How could anyone have thought that was a good idea? And no matter who Subject X had once been, how old he really was, or what powers, skills or knowledge he possessed... condoning what had been done to a five-year-old boy...

If he was going to be dead soon anyway, maybe it wouldn’t be out of line to drop a few breadcrumbs in the way of General Jack O’Neill’s legendary nose.

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Bradshaw heard the scarred Major’s brief summary, gave him his orders, and sent him on his way. Then he rose from his desk and stood at the window, contemplating the view from his ultra-elegant high-rise office, and sighed.
Cluster-fuck didn’t begin to touch this situation. He had known all along that they were playing with fire, holding captured Wraith, apprehending higher and higher profile individuals of varying degrees of usefulness, either as hosts or for the Bunker Thirteen cells, operating more and more brazenly under the noses of the White House, Capitol, Pentagon, IOA, HomeWorld and Area 51... The whole house of cards was bound to fall sooner or later. The less wise of their cohorts, both in and outside the organization, wanting more hands-on involvement in Bunker Thirteen, and eager to take advantage of its unique... facilities, would certainly pay the price, and might drag them all down.

Bradshaw wasn’t in charge of the current version of The Trust, because no one really was. They had a Board and a Board Chairman, certainly, most of them Goa’ulds infesting prominent hosts, in business, government, and the military. The Trust also had an executive office, mostly un-Goa’ulded humans, of which he was a part, the purpose of which was to provide a liaison, and a secrecy barrier, between the supposed bosses, and the various rank-and-file science, technical and strong-arm minions. There were a lot of high-echelon members of the cabal who certainly thought they were in charge, but since they delegated so much of the operational details to him, they probably hadn’t realized how removed they were from the true power.

After the founding leaders of The Trust, the Goa’uld Athena and the Baal clones in their clone hosts, were eliminated several years ago, only young symbiotes were left on Earth to inherit the business, those who had matured in tanks or Jaffa the rogue NID brought back. Those Goa’uld, although they did possess the race memory of their sires, were young, inexperienced, ignorant and arrogant, even when paired with influential hosts. Not exactly leadership material – not successful leaders, at least.

The loss of Bunker Thirteen could prove to be a devastating blow to The Trust organization. It was by no means the only Earth-side facility they ran. They had four labs scattered around the world, in Utah, Siberia, Somalia and Columbia, and one more ‘detention’ center on an un-named private island in the Pacific. Bunker Thirteen, because of its handy location and ease of access, had held their most important and highest profile prisoners, and had been the one facility they had made available to ‘allies’ not directly a part of the organization, in a blatant display of their influence with the government and military. Which, truth be known, was far less than any of those ‘allies’ could guess. In fact, invitations to inspect the Bunker had been used as a means of gathering incriminating evidence with which to black-mail cooperation and concessions, building a vast network of dupes to serve the organization. All of whom were now at risk of exposure, and would no doubt race to spill what little they knew to save their own asses. Hoskins’ optimistic estimate, that digital and paper evidence had been destroyed, may yet limit the damage, but Bradshaw was unwilling to depend on such a best-case scenario. That’s why “Escobar” had been ordered to make an immediate determination of what evidence might have found its way into HomeWorld hands. Worst case, everyone who could be connected to Bunker Thirteen, however remotely, was now a security risk.

At Bradshaw’s conservative guess, every single member of the Board, and most of the executive office, were potentially vulnerable, and could soon find themselves victim to the coming purge. The only question would be who would get to them first: HomeWorld or the Trust sweepers commanded by “Escobar”. Depending upon what evidence had been turned up at Bunker Thirteen, it would be pathetically easy to get proof of treason against any of them, and he could bet O’Neill would make the most of any info he got hold of.

So that meant all of the Goa’uld, so very vulnerable to detection with a simple X-ray or naquadah scanner, and who had used Bunker Thirteen as a sort of rumpus room. Truthfully, they would be no great loss. That would include Congressman Klein, who carried a symbiote calling itself Ithm, a Mesopotamian sheep-god, of all stupid things. It also would include everyone they had at the White House and on the Hill who had unwisely signed certain paperwork, publicly and personally endorsed certain falsified and fraudulent evidence, and insisted on frequent reports. That would take care of the NID Assistant Director, Phillip Gaffney. Then there were their JCS members, who could
never resist an on-site inspection. And so General Brady would be one of the first to get hauled up in the net. They could all be added to the casualties in the wake of the invasion.

As to the three people Bradshaw reported to on the sly, without the knowledge of the Board or anyone else at the executive level, he was fairly sure they had remained aloof enough to escape detection. Senator Ulysses Stahl, General Aubrey Evans of the JCS, and Ms. Charlotte Gant, CEO of GlobalTech, one of the top ten multi-national technology corporations on the planet, were largely unknown, even to the Board. And Gant was the only host of the three, carrying one of the last Baal symbiote clones, who had escaped the purge of its brothers only because it had abandoned the too-recognizable clone host, in its own brand of hostile take-over.

Bradshaw considered the more wily of his fellow conspirators, and figured, if they could just avoid getting caught in the mire with their more foolish associates, hold onto certain hidden assets, and were successful in flying under the radar, this might yet turn out to be a good thing. Culling the herd of its weakest members, if the recent threat of the Wraith didn’t make that too politically incorrect a thought.

Luckily, they hadn’t held all their eggs in the Bunker Thirteen basket. True, most of their minion-level staff had been working the Bunker, assignment there constituting a kind of combination orientation, training and loyalty-test for further involvement with the organization. The remaining Trust employees were either personal staff of the various Board members and executives, or stationed at the secret labs and bases they had hidden and scattered world-wide. Operations would be severely understaffed for a time, but since they were being forced to lay low anyway, they could take the opportunity to recruit new staff.

Which posed its own sort of difficulties.

It used to be, the NID and other fringe government intelligence agencies, both foreign and domestic, were rife with black-ops trained personnel just itching to go rogue, for any reason, but mostly in a bid to grab more power for themselves. Double-edged swords, those, as proved by Maybourne (unreliable because he wouldn’t stay bent) and Simmons (who ran far too many risks, approved some very ill-advised ops, and very nearly took over the whole show for himself, before he took that one step too far).

They could once also take a chance and maybe turn someone inside the SGC itself, appealing to those, like Colonel Makepeace, with a mis-placed sense of duty, by arguing the SGC, the IOA or HomeWorld Security were not being militant enough, that the only reasonable intergalactic policy to defend the planet was a pro-Earth, scorched-Universe mind-set. But fifteen years experience had proved Dr. Jackson and his soft-science diplomats were right, making alien allies was a significant strength. So it was no good trying to draw new personnel from there, people with valuable off-world experience. Those people were the best of the best, and had worked too hard to get that prestige posting, had too much ambition, drive, dedication to turn.

So that forced them to rely on the SGC rejects and mal-contents, as well as wannabes from the Pentagon and Area 51, for their hiring pool. Which meant they were automatically looking at the failures, the also-rans, the disaffected, dumb or apathetic. And, yes, those with weaknesses to exploit, like Major Hoskins – sorry, that would now be Major Matthews – was all to the good, but it was undeniably true that good help was hard to find.

It was fortunate, therefore, that there remained two units of military minions available to him. Their primary sweeper teams, Sierra Unit, were commanded by Matthews. Foxtrot Unit, their more covert teams for more extreme, delicate or sensitive assignments, was under the direct supervision of Major “Escobar”, or, as he was referred to in any communications, Major Smith. Both units had extreme
talents in black ops. Then there was Zebra Unit… their sole remaining off-world Unit. Commanded by Colonel Makepeace, they had been cut off for the past year, after losing the one tel’kak and crew the Trust had to Tok’ra agents. But Makepeace and his lieutenant, Neumann, were still at large, reporting in at regular intervals via Goa’uld vo’cume. Smith and Makepeace both reported, and took their orders, directly from him. Now, so would Matthews, officially as well as unofficially. Bradshaw himself was under the personal direction of the triad of Stahl, Evans and Gant, but they preferred a very hands-off management style, when not in crisis mode. Foxtrot was currently on standby, awaiting Bradshaw’s orders, to begin cleaning up the Bunker Thirteen mess, needing only a list of names to begin work. Smith would supply that list.

And wouldn’t that be as much fun as a train wreck, once it began to hit the news waves. It might even over-shadow the Earth’s first (public) Alien Invasion. Might be time to move their operation off-world, what was left of it, and if Zebra Unit could convince their Lucian friends to send transport.

The Trust had only managed three times to successfully get a mole within the SGC ranks, tapping into their databases and communication networks, but none of those operatives had lasted more than a month before being exposed and arrested. None had ever had access to the twenty-eighth floor, or the Stargate itself. And, the one Goa’uld symbiote they had managed to get into Colonel Steven Caldwell was the only one of their people ever to manage to infiltrate Atlantis, the Ancient Outpost, the F-302 squadrons, or the BC-304 ships. With every space-capable vessel the organization once possessed destroyed or confiscated in the purge of the Baals, the Trust currently had no other escape route off the planet… unless Zebra could score them one.

Of course, the Lucians hadn’t been all that pleased with them, recently, with the lack of support from their Trust allies, in preventing the Tau’ri blitz that was decimating Lucian activities everywhere in the Milky Way. When the smoke cleared over this Invasion disaster, the survivors of The Trust would have to offer up significant assistance or assets in return for a lift off the planet.

In the meantime, Bradshaw had his own contingency plans ready to go at a moment’s notice. Including a very well-hidden tel’kak at his secret beach cottage in the Hamptons, its existence unknown to the Trust, his children, current or ex-wives. The space-craft was already loaded with enough convertible currencies (information, gold, jewels and weapons) to make the rest of his life comfortable, anywhere he chose to go. It only remained to decide which of his flunkies and/or mistresses he would take with him…

A bright light was all the warning Major General Jack O’Neill got that Colonel Samantha Carter had arrived in his living room. The modest ranch-style house in an Arlington suburb was the temporary home of his agency, HomeWorld Security, until Washington DC was made a bit more presentable, although Colonel Sheppard, military CO of Atlantis, had offered him a whole tower on the city, if he wanted it. He was seriously considering it.

Just one glance and he knew he had never seen Carter so out-and-out furious as she was now. Considering the last time she had reported, from the bridge of the *Hammond* over Antarctica, and she was giddy over successfully shooting down two (count ‘em, two) hive ships (that’s his girl, over achiever that she was), he was a bit alarmed.

She slammed a paper report on the coffee table in front of him, completely ignoring all the startled HWS staff stuffed into odd spaces in front of the TV, around the dining room table and in the kitchen, shoving paper and tablets over the breakfast bar. Then she announced, in a cold, pinched voice, “Those bastards had Daniel, sir!”

Of all the worse-case scenarios they had run, that wasn’t even on the board. No one had known the Wraith were even in the galaxy, let alone drawing a bead on Earth, until that first body had appeared outside Las Vegas city limits a few weeks ago. Sheppard was displaying superhuman tact not to blurt out a few well-earned ‘I told you so’s, since he’d been agitating to fly the Ancient city back to the Pegasus Galaxy the entire time they’d been stuck on Earth. He had argued they needed to take care of the Wraith at the source, for once and for all. Dr. Rodney McKay, the Atlantis expedition chief science officer, had not been so reticent, practically crowing over being right in his doom-and-gloom predictions. Surprisingly, Richard Woolsey, the current Atlantis civilian Administrator and a politician to his very marrow, had joined the annoying scientist.

“No, sir. That damned bunker outside Area 51. Gitmo West. That last cell, the one the Goa’uld Wraith was trying to break into. Daniel was in there.”

Jack didn’t dare try and pick up the file. His hands were shaking too badly. He could only sit there and battle his way to process.

It had been a long two months, since a five-year-old Daniel Jackson Junior (according to the creative paperwork) had disappeared off the face of the planet. Hell, it had been a long six months since Dr. Daniel Jackson, archeologist, linguist, peaceful explorer, intergalactic diplomat, former adult and certified trouble magnet, had returned from a routine mission with SG-5, in a somewhat... abbreviated form. His SG-1 team-mate Vala Mal Doran had been absolutely livid. Still was. Colonel Cameron Mitchell, SG-1 CO, still had the four members of SG-5 doing KP and desk duty at the Mountain.

It hadn’t even been Daniel’s fault, this time. He had told the other members of the team to keep out of the alien lab until he finished translating the big red flashing symbols over the entrance. They had waited until his back was turned to step inside... He had been trying to save their 2IC, knocking him out of the way of the beam, only to get caught himself. No one was sure if it was the trauma of the event, or a side effect of the beam, but that brilliant brain had come out the other end in a state similar to Swiss cheese. Lots of holes. Language skills seemed to be fully intact, along with encyclopedic knowledge of cultures and societies both terrestrial and off-world, but personal memories were shredded. Inside the body of a five year old child. SGC scientists and linguists still had hopes of figuring out how to reverse the effect, but all testing with the alien machinery was still killing the white mice.

Jack hadn’t been about to let them stick Daniel in that thing again, no matter how many times the egg-heads claimed mice were too fragile to survive anyway. Let them try guinea pigs or rabbits first, they thought mice were so vulnerable. But until they managed to get something in and out alive, he wasn’t letting them experiment with Daniel.

He had taken the little boy to live with him. Daniel still remembered his Jack. After over ten years exploring the universe on SG-1 together, with Jack as his team leader, he should damn well *hope* so. And Jack had enjoyed feeling like a father again... and annoyed... no, enraged, when the requests started coming across his desk for interrogations with a ‘subject’ who had been Ascended (at least twice), Merlin-ed, Prior-ized, and now re-sized. As if Daniel wasn’t real to them.

Daniel was no longer on a gate team, obviously. Requests from aliens for his negotiation skills were turned down, and there was no way Jack was letting a five year old pull eighteen-hour a day translation stints... and those few translations he did churn out were checked by others who did their best to find fault that wasn’t there. Jack could understand how, in some quarters, Daniel’s value as an asset might be perceived as... lacking. So even though those requests for ‘interviews’ were summarily filed in Jack’s waste basket, they kept bouncing back, authorized by people in higher and higher pay brackets... so Jack had gone himself, storming up to the White House to explain, in great
detail, why it just wasn’t ever going to happen.

He thought he’d made his position quite clear. And maybe that was exactly the problem. Because a week later, four black SUVs with government plates had forced him off a lightly-travelled side road, a gas grenade had been fired into his truck, and when he woke up, Daniel was gone. And none of the doors he had kicked down had yielded any clue to Daniel’s whereabouts. The President wouldn’t even authorise an amber alert... his advisors were claiming that because of Daniel’s background, the national security nightmare was something they didn’t dare risk. And having that very national security nightmare in hostile hands was an *acceptable* risk? But Jack knew in his water that the stonewall was because at least one of those ‘advisors’ knew exactly where his boy was, and wasn’t ready to give him up.

His boy. God, his boy. After two solid months without a clue, now, at least, they knew. A guest of Gitmo West, for crying out loud.

“But he’s not there now.”

“He’s not anywhere in the facility. No body, living or dead. We’d have found him. We checked three times, and I’ve got my best team going over it again. He might have managed to crawl out after the walls started to cave in on his level, but... from what we’ve been able to piece together, it was chaos down there, human guards and Wraith soldiers firing non-stop until everyone but the last Wraith prisoner was dead... no way Daniel could have made it past the fighting in the stairwell... he might have Ascended.”

“Oh hell, no...”

“I can’t think of another explanation, off-hand, sir. But they... sir, they... they had him this whole time. And considering what other experiments they were running in that hole, I can only guess what... what they might have been...”

Jack shook his head abruptly. His imagination was pretty damned good, and he didn’t dare speculate, either. “Don’t, Carter. Just don’t. As long as there’s no body, we follow Oma Protocols. He’s alive, somewhere, in some state, and we just have to find him. With any luck, he’ll be back to his right size, and we won’t need to keep messing with that damned alien shrink ray.”

Carter drew back, her eyes too bright, and nodded, her mouth a grim line. For almost a decade it had been him, Carter, Daniel and Master Teal’c of Chulak, SG-1, the flag ship team of Stargate Command, getting in and out of one hair-raising escapade after another, saving each other and planets with equal parts guile, skill and dumb luck. The four of them had a lot of history together.

Then, daring greatly, Carter suggested, “Maybe... we shouldn’t try to find him, sir.”

“What?”

“Well sir... Even if we do find him... won’t they just take him again?”

Jack’s own eyes glittered dangerously. “Not if I run down every last person responsible, and everyone who even suspected where he was and who took him, and make them pay in ways my Iraqi prison guards wouldn’t have dared contemplate. Oh, and if all else fails, I still have the Stargate address for Hadante in my back pocket. A one-way ticket to a prison planet seems like just the place for these ass-holes. And I’m going to do all this in full view of the world, and I’m going to have the backing of every politician in Washington and the IOA, because they won’t dare get in my way. We’re well and trulyouted now, Carter, and that changes the ballgame. And after the Invasion rained on their parade, we should have all the evidence we need to nail them all. Now, do we know who
was running... what did you call it, Gitmo West?"

"Yes sir. I’m not sure who came up with the name, I think one of the civilians on the first sweep team who went in, but it caught on fast. The official designation was apparently Bunker Thirteen."

"Yeah, no. Not the same ring to it. Go on."

"They had two Wraith prisoners, one with a symbiote..."

"Sheesh. A Goa'ulded Wraith? Who the hell thought that would be a good idea?"

"Another Goa’uld, apparently, sir. After the first sweep team reported finding a symbiote, the SGC clean-up crew instituted immediate protocols to check for others. They came up with two Marine officers who were still at Building A, a captain and a lieutenant, being debriefed in the invasion aftermath. They tried to shoot their way out, and were shot trying to escape. Both were part of a special detachment of SFs, designation Tango Unit, doing what was euphemistically called ‘miscellaneous perimeter sweeps’. But there were eighty military assets assigned to that particular unit, and no one ever thought to question what they were really doing."

"Staffing Gitmo West."

"Yes sir. A night shift of thirty military personnel were deployed to the bunker just before the invasion began, along with a skeleton crew of fifteen civilian support assets of various kinds, including techs and a night janitor. All dead now. We checked, and one guard had a symbiote. So did three of the dead prisoners, in human hosts. Of the fifty military and twenty five tech, medical, science and support staff assigned to the day shift, all were in Building A, signing out, grabbing a meal in the mess or changing into civvies. Seventeen survived the invasion. We sent our people to bring them in for questioning... oddly enough, they’re all AWOL. We’re tracking now. On paper, that detachment falls under NID orders, under command of a Major Hoskins, USMC, who is also AWOL. So they’re either rogue NID, or Trust."

"Terrific. I thought we’d nailed them all."

"Obviously not. But the good news is that the night crew didn’t get a chance to destroy any of their files, either hard-copy or computer databases, so we’ve got it all. The idiots shot out the camera screens, and laptops, and apparently didn’t even know all the actual data records were polled hourly to the back room server hard drives. We’ve got all of the hard-copy files from the bunker, including their paper sign-in sheets and visitor logs, autographs of everyone in and out of that place in the past year. We’ve got the complete set of surveillance records, lab notes, transfer orders, interrogation transcripts, you name it. We even have their financials and budgets, with authorising signatures. We’re tracking contacts up and down the line to identify any more possible connections. We’ll get them, sir. This time, we’ll get them all."

Jack O’Neill nodded, swallowing heavily. “Anything you need, anyone you need, just let me know. Keeping Wraith prisoners on Earth, when we know they have telepathic connections to their Queens, and staffing with Goa’ulds... that’s more than enough to label them traitors to the human race. Their asses belong to me. Number one priority, Carter.”

“Yes sir!”

O’Neill had known The Trust was still operating on Earth as soon as he woke up from that gas grenade to find Daniel gone. He was sure they were behind the kidnapping, in spite of what the President and his advisors claimed. And with the resources they evidently still had, and the ability to hog-tie even the Oval Office… Who was he supposed to trust, himself? On any given day it seemed
to Jack like Washington was positively crawling with Trust flunkies. And with Goa’uld symbiotes and Wraith prisoners to play with to their black hearts’ content… He suspected that the bastards had to have off-world connections with the Lucian Alliance, as well. Although the Lucians had probably discovered what Jack could have told them for free – never trust a Goa’uld.

In the past year, O’Neill had made neutralizing the Lucian Alliance his number one priority, with the blessings of pretty much everyone, on planet and off. Unlike other threats to the Earth, the Lucian thugs were only too willing and able to take the fight to their tiny blue world. So Jack had drafted DEA, ATF, Interpol, Mossad and any other CI/CT groups he could reach, to help infiltrate deep undercover into the interstellar gangsters known as the Lucian Alliance. The strategy had been amazingly effective. Earth-bound criminals might have evolved alongside and become wise to the methods and tricks of undercover law enforcement, but the Lucians were suckers for it all. And without having to worry overly much about warrants, entrapment, or legal technicalities, Jack’s Narc enjoyed their broader scope. As a result, many Lucian clans were brought down. Slavery rings, drug trafficking and piracy were almost eradicated. Ha’taks and al’kesh had either been shot down or confiscated and handed over to the Free Jaffa. Teal’c and his mentor Bra’tac, the leaders of the Free Jaffa, had been properly grateful.

As far as Jack could tell, there were less than a half dozen clans left with any form of interstellar transport, a few rogue ha’taks and tel’taks still flying under the radar, but the clans running them were mostly disbanded, arrested or scattered (with some of his deep undercover agents taken along with, still trusted and still on the job). With nothing but a couple guys in a tel’tak to run the extortion & protection rackets, most planets had turned on the Lucians rather than pay their percentages. He’d lately heard reports of one guy, Olokun’s First Prime, operating in that dead false god’s old stomping grounds, his ranks filled with jaffa, so difficult for his narcs to get a foothold. Also, there were still three Ori battle cruisers unaccounted for when the rest of the Fleet returned to their own galaxy with Tomin, and were rumored to have made contact with the Lucians. Cleaning up those last renegades would have to wait, though.

The Wraith had unwittingly handed him the ammunition he needed to finish The Trust off, for good and all. And he was going to take full advantage.

But he couldn’t help but think… what good did any of it do, if he couldn’t save his friend?

Daniel, buddy, where the hell are you?

Å

Spencer fully expected nightmares, and he certainly got them. And not just his own. The third time the little boy woke up screaming in a foreign language, a Semitic variant he couldn’t identify, and he thought he knew at least a smattering of all of them, Spencer sighed, picked him up and carried him to the reading chair, just cradling him on his lap.

“I can’t sleep,” the little one sobbed, exhausted. “I’m so sleepy, but I can’t sleep. I have bad dreams.”

“I know. I do too,” Spencer told him. “Would it help if I got you some milk? Maybe told you a story? When I was small and had nightmares, my mother read to me.”

The little heart-rate slowed, and sobbing calmed, and big blue eyes looked up hopefully. “What kind of stories?”

Spencer smiled at his mom, blinking sleepily from her bed. “Mostly the tales of King Arthur, and the Knights of the Round Table. Those were my favorite.”
“Oh. I used to like those too… until I found out they were real.”

That made both of the Reid doctors pause and exchange alarmed glances. “Oh. Uh…”

“Well, the myths maybe weren’t so real, because stories change every time a new storyteller tells it, but… they were real people, once. Arthur and Lancelot and Perceval and Gawain, and even Morgan le Fey. And especially Merlin. He was really real. We found him, my team and me, in a cave guarded by a dragon. A real, honest to goodness dragon! That was way cool.

“There’s lots of things out there that are real that we think are just myths or stories… most of them aren’t very nice. Ra and Apophis and Osiris and Anubis and Hathor, they were Goa’ulds, really, and they were all really really bad, before Jack and me and the team killed them. Thor was good, though, before he went away. The Asgard got too old and couldn’t switch clone bodies any more. And Morgan Le Fey was okay, in the end. She helped us. So did Merlin.

“Atlantis is real, too. I found that, too. That was back when I was big.”

“The Lost City of Atlantis?” Spencer asked quietly, trying to rein in the shudder up his spine. “You mean the city in Plato’s *Timaeus* and *Critias*, beyond the Pillars of Hercules, sunk beneath the sea?”

“Uh-hunh. It was supposed to be a myth, but it wasn’t. The lost city of the Ancients, sunk to the bottom of an ocean beyond the Gates. It was just a lot farther away than Plato thought. Different Gates, different ocean. Well, I didn’t actually go there myself, I just told them where to go look. John Sheppard and Doctor McKay and Doctor Weir went. And they raised her up off the bottom of the ocean. She flies, too, you know? Through space and everything. I saw pictures of her on the television in the front lobby. Did you see her flying? Last night?”

“You mean the city like a snow-flake? That’s Atlantis… Yes, I did see her.”

“She’s so pretty, isn’t she? Like fairy tale castles. All stained glass and marble inside… Jack wouldn’t let me go on the first expedition. Even though I really, really wanted to. But we all knew it might be a one-way trip… The Pegasus Galaxy is a long way away. But we found a way to make contact again. We have ships that go there all the time, now. I only got to visit Atlantis a couple of times… that’s so-o-o not fair… I’m the expert on the Ancients, I’m the one knows their language the best, and they wouldn’t let me go. Even when they brought her back to Earth and she was anchored off San Francisco under a cloak, they only let me visit a few times. Never as long as I wanted to. And then when I got small like this, Jack was afraid to let me do *anything*, and he even made rules about how long I could do translations and made me go play outside instead.”

Spencer wasn’t sure how aware the little boy was of his audience as he prattled on, but at least it seemed to calm him, his eyes heavy-lidded.

“Oh. I shouldn’t tell you this stuff. You don’t have clearance. I never told those other guys anything… the ones in the bunker. No matter how often they asked, or what they did to me.”

“I’m sure you didn’t.”

“I don’t want to get you in trouble. You’ve been very kind. You and your mom, and those guys with you last night… I like Greg. He’s funny.”

“Yes, he is.”

“And I don’t want to be a pain in the mikta… Jack says I’m a terrible trouble magnet and pain in the mikta. Maybe that’s why…”
“Why what, sweetheart?” Diana asked gently.

“Maybe that’s why he didn’t come for me. I was in that bunker dungeon for such a long time... lots and lots of sleeps... he never came. They... the bad men... they told me... they told me he signed off on it. That he let them have me, and that I should co-op-er-ate and tell them everything I knew. But I didn’t believe them! Jack wouldn’t do that... he just wouldn’t!”

“No, he wouldn’t,” Spencer assured the little boy with certainty as he grew more distraught. And that successfully derailed another bout of tears.

“How... how do you know that?”

“Well, I’m a profiler for the FBI. We hunt serial killers. Remember I told you that? Well, I know about interrogations. For witnesses, you need to build rapport, gain their trust. The people who took you couldn’t do that. But for suspects, potentially hostile witnesses, the rules are different. First, you study the subject, find the subject’s weak points, so you can use that as leverage. You have to surprise them, get them off-base, put the subject off their game, then take control, apply pressure, bring all the pressure to bear you can, until they reveal the truth you’re looking for. Right?”

The little boy shuddered, but nodded.

“Well, I knew almost right away that your weak spot is Jack. I bet the men who held you knew that too, right?”

“Right... how did you know? About Jack and me?” There was curiosity in that question, and a certain easing of tense little muscles.

“Well, you told me. The very first thing I heard you say was down in your cell, you shouted ‘No!’ when you saved me from that eel thing. Remember?”

“Goa’uld symbiote. Yeah. It would have burrowed into you and taken you over. That would have been bad.”

“Well, thanks for stopping it, then. After that, you didn’t say anything until we got back to Dr. Grissom’s car. Then he suggested taking you to hospital, you said, ‘No! No, they’ll find me, and lock me up again!’ Then he said we’d protect you, and you said, ‘You can’t. No one can. Even Jack couldn’t, and he’s a general!’ So Jack’s name was practically the first thing you told us after we rescued you. Obviously, then, he means a lot to you. And the bad men tried to use that against you, make you believe he sent you to that prison. But you know, if he really had been involved in any way, and they really wanted you to talk, it would have been Jack asking you the questions. You would have told him for sure, right?”

“Yes. Yes, I would.”

“So if you didn’t see him in person, then he couldn’t be there. And that bunker was very well hidden. Even the General in charge of Area 51 didn’t know it was there. So it would have been nearly impossible for anyone to find you. We wouldn’t have found you, except the Wraith were obviously trying to break into something, and Dr. Grissom, Nick, Greg and I went to check it out.”

“So Jack didn’t know I was there.”

“He didn’t know. Are you sure you don’t want me to try and contact Jack for you, though?”

“No! No... No, I don’t want to go back. The bad people will come for me if they know... Jack can’t help. And if I go back... I’ll have to be *him* again...”
Spencer suppressed a shiver. “Back when I was big...” the little boy had said... describing a life and experiences that, surely, couldn’t belong to a child... could even the most inventive and active child’s imagination come up with all this? On the other hand, someone involved in fighting alien invaders, discovering flying mythic cities, space vampire aliens and eel-like puppet masters... was it such a stretch to imagine some accident turning an adult into a child? And shadowy quasi-governmental black ops taking advantage of this vulnerability? Not all of the memories in that little head were good, obviously, and that seemed so very wrong. Spencer could understand wanting to deny them, and the identity that went with them, if possible.

“You mean... you’d have to be Daniel Jackson again.”

The little boy shuddered in revulsion. “I’m Ethan now,” he insisted.

“You’re Ethan now. That’s fine. And I know some people I think will be happy to have you stay with them.”

“Even if I’m a pain in the mikta?”

“Well, I’m not sure, but I think they’ll like that *especially* if you’re a pain in the mikta.”

Little Ethan laughed, and Diana chuckled, and Spencer smiled. And in a few more moments, the small body in his arms stilled, the breathing evened out, heart rate slowed, and Diana calmly draped the blue afghan over them both.

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~ *Evolution is a constant state. You evolve and become comfortable in situations in which you might have felt alien in the past.* ~ Arjun Kapoor ~

Early the next morning, Diana helped the little boy take his bath and then dry off, the soft towel covering him like a blanket. He giggled as she tickled behind his ears and rubbed at his damp spiky hair.

“Ah, this takes me back,” she said somewhat wistfully. “I used to do this for Spencer. Before I got sick. And then he had to take care of me.”

Little Ethan stared up at the woman with huge solemn blue eyes. “I’m sorry you’re sick, Diana. Maybe you’ll get better.”

“Maybe,” Diana agreed doubtfully. “At the moment, I seem to be getting worse. Now it’s Alzheimer’s, and you don’t get better from that.” She glanced at the door. Spencer had gone to scrounge a bag or backpack for Ethan’s borrowed clothes, and maybe some lunch to take on their journey. “He worries about me. He always has. That’s not right. It should be me… that’s what parents are supposed to do... but it’s been a very long time since I’ve been able to be a proper parent. I just wish he wouldn’t worry so much.”

Ethan reached to hug the woman and with a bright smile and a giggle, gave her a big kiss on the cheek that had her smiling, feeling the warmth go right through her. It was more than just warmth of the heart… it seemed to go straight through to her soul, leaving her feeling just a little light-headed. And for just a moment, the little boy in her arms seemed to glow again, his big blue eyes sparkling with an inner light that made her catch her breath with the beauty of it.

“There, Diana. All better now. And I’ll take good care of Spencer. You’ll see.”

Diana smiled. “Thank you, angel. Just take care of yourself, and I’ll be happy. Now come on, let’s get you dressed.”

She enjoyed fussing over a little one again. Although she realized she would never have been able to care for any other children, she couldn’t help but wish she had had more sane time with her own. And this one reminded her so much of her little Spencer… older than he should be, wise beyond his years… she got the sense sometimes that he carried the weight of the world on his little shoulders. Just like her Spencer.

By the time they were ready, her beloved son was back and finishing the packing up. Diana picked up the blue crocheted afghan she had made. “Here, Ethan. Everyone needs a safety blanket, and I’d like you to have this one. To keep the nightmares away.”

The little boy gasped as he clutched at the soft blue blanket gratefully against his chin. “Thank you, Diana. I’ll treasure it.”

Dr. Grissom picked them up at the gates of Bennington, to give them a lift to the rest stop east of the
city limits, where they would meet their ride.

“I had Greg run trace on our samples,” Grissom reported, glancing at the back seat and the booster seat he had got from his co-worker, Catherine Bellows. She had dug it out of her garage to donate to the cause. The little boy had been buckled securely in, and currently had his nose in a large reference book on insects that Gil had thoughtfully provided. He was pretty confident that nothing else penetrated that earnest little head. “Nothing at all unusual. One hundred percent human.”

“Well, that’s a relief, anyway,” Spencer said. “But… I seriously doubt he’s what he seems. Some things he’s said… You’d think he was an adult in a child’s body. Not just bright, but… rather… experienced.”

“At least we haven’t attracted any undue suspicion. You got a visit from General Carry? Yeah, us too. I don’t think he had anything to do with that place. And he seemed to accept our story at face value.”

“We can only hope so… You know, it’s strange. I would have expected *someone* to notice that they’re missing a body by now, and come looking to us for answers.”

“They probably think I Ascended,” piped up the high-pitched voice from the back seat, startling the adults in the front. “I kinda do that a lot.”

“Ascended?” Spencer asked.

“Yeah. It’s when you die, sorta, and ascend to a higher level of being.” The little nose crinkled. “Not heaven or anything, but kinda in between. You become a squidy cloud of light, made of pure energy. But it’s kinda boring after a while. They won’t let you do anything important. They’ve got rules and stuff about not interfering with the lower planes. I wasn’t very good about the rules when I was there. I’m not sure they’ll let me back any more… but that’s probably where the bad guys think I went.” With that piece of information delivered, the little boy dived back into his book.

“Ascended,” Grissom echoed wryly.


“Did Sara mention I’m making a formal request to have your team come visit and give us a few seminars on profiling and victimology?”

“Yes, she did, and I’m sure we’d love to come. My team likes to give me any opportunity they can to visit my mom. Once the dust has settled around this alien invasion thing, anyway. And I’m sure you’re already expecting a certain amount of fall-out in our jobs… possibility of more mummified bodies, if any of the Wraith escaped the net… check the necks of bodies and suspects for… um… hitchhikers. And watch out for criminals trying to be sneaky and using forensic countermeasures to blame aliens for their crimes.”

“Right, like that hasn’t happened before now… We actually did get a case out by Groom Lake that initially presented as aliens. For about three seconds, until we pulled the rubber mask off him. But what I’ve been thinking about those mummified bodies we found on the desert the past few weeks, and our last John Doe… if our Gitmo West wanted to keep their guests alive, they would have had to find some way to feed them. Homeless people, derelicts, transients, people who wouldn’t be missed… Las Vegas has all too many of those. And somewhere along the line, a body disposal wasn’t quite as efficient as it should have been… I passed that suspicion along to Carry. I only hope he can string those… hmm… felons… by their privates.”
Grissom waved them goodbye at the rest stop where they waited for their lift.

As far as Spencer could tell, there was no one following him, no one interested in either of them. The rest stop was bustling, crowded with people fed up with the slow traffic crawl, or needing a bit of a break, particularly with cranky kids and/or pets needing to run around. Although there was heavy traffic on highway 15, it all moved relentlessly forward at a slow inching pace, none of it changing speed to pick them out of the crowd.

Spencer sat at an isolated picnic table out of view of the road, and drew little Ethan before him.

“Okay. So remember, we’re undercover, off the grid. We don’t use credit cards or bank cards, we always pay in cash. We don’t make phone calls, even on land-lines or pay phones, because it’s not just on our end that someone might be trying to make a trace, and cell phone transmissions can be hacked, and are really easy to pin-point geographically. My friend Garcia can do that with her eyes shut. We don’t use our true names, and we try to avoid situations where we have to produce any kind of ID. But the best lies are wrapped up in the truth, so it’s easy for us to remember and respond automatically in the right way, even if we’re distracted or forget, or are half asleep. Right?”

Ethan nodded enthusiastically. “Right. Hiding in plain sight. That’s what Jack calls it. So I’m Ethan, and you’re my big brother Spencer, and you’re my guardian. Our mom is sick and in a sanitarium, and our dad ran away. But I live with you, and you’re a graduate student working on a PhD in… in…”

Spencer grinned. “Go on.”

“Astronomy?”

“Astronomy. Which, I might add, I actually am working on right now. And our last name is Hutchison. Why did you pick that name, Ethan?”

Ethan giggled. “It’s Jack’s favourite show. Well, the Simpsons is his favourite, but he really liked Starsky and Hutch, too. Can you call me Hutch, and I’ll call you Starsky?”

Spencer chuckled. “Okay. That’ll be our own little joke. Now we’re going to Utah first, but after that we’re just going to meander around, wherever we can hitch a lift. But our eventual home is…?”

“Um… Chicago.”

“Good. You said you can answer questions about Chicago.”

“Yup. I lived there when I went to school at the Oriental Institute.”

“Ah, yes, but we won’t mention that. You can mention the museum and the UC campus grounds, any of the Chicago sights. My friend Morgan is from Chicago, and he shows me around quite a bit when we visit his mom and sisters, so we’ll sound like we know what we’re talking about, at least. So. We ready?”

“Ready!” Ethan agreed happily.

Stacey Goodyear and Violet Branch were bubbly history majors attending the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. Their vehicle was a ten-year-old Jeep Grand Cherokee… Stacey’s father’s idea of an unsexy dependable ride for his daughter, and enough of a gas guzzler to keep her severely budgeted wings clipped. But at least it had space for two extra passengers and their small amount of luggage. All of the clothing and supplies Spencer and Diana had scrounged for Ethan fit in a back-pack, and
Spencer had only brought his wheeled carry-on go-bag to Nevada with him this time. Travelling light was a good thing, and he had been trained for it over his years with the BAU. Anything that might remotely give away his true identity as an FBI agent (weapons, flak-vest and ID, not to mention luggage tags) had been carefully hidden in the locked carry-on, while overnight gear was in the zipped side-pockets.

The first topic to come up, of course, was, “Where were you during the invasion?”

Spencer told the students how they had been visiting Diana, and Spencer and his mom were on the patio waiting for the meteor shower…

“Where was I?” Ethan asked, puzzled, his little face scrunched in confusion.

Spencer had noticed this, that sometimes Ethan’s memories simply fled from him. No doubt it was a self-protection mechanism. He certainly had a lot that needed forgetting.

Spencer smiled softly. “You were in bed asleep, remember? We promised to come and get you when the meteors started to come. But the aliens came first. Then we were all rushing to get underground… and I didn’t get back to you fast enough. Some debris crashed into the hospital. Landed right on the guest house, where you were. I’m not sure if you were really awake for any of that, and you slept through them giving you first aid.”

“Oh…” the little boy said, thinking hard. “But… I think I mumember some of the meteors.”

“Yes, you woke up a little later that night. Well, early this morning, an hour or so before dawn, and we saw some then.”

“Oh yeah, I ‘member now.”

Spencer wondered if the little boy was actually re-writing his past, or if he was just that good an actor. A traumatic event like last night, and the horrors of his captivity before that, could well be triggers that might lead to a fractured personality, the beginning of the dissociative process that lead to multiple personality disorders. He would have to keep an eye on that. But when he looked down intently at the little boy, Ethan grinned and gave him a hidden wink. Hmm.

As for Stacey and Violet, they had been visiting friends in the satellite community of Henderson, and using that as their base to take transit in to the Strip for a little partying. They’d been in one of the big casinos, and herded to a bomb shelter in the basement with thousands of others. The hotel above them had taken a few direct hits, but the builders had been good at their jobs… apart from some flickering lights and copious amounts of dust falling from the ceilings, they’d been okay. It had taken a while for relief workers to dig them out, but they’d had cable and wi-fi the whole time, so were able to log onto the U of N website to arrange for someone to help them get home. But this whole trip had been kept secret from their parents, who didn’t know they’d left Utah. And wasn’t that a whole other disaster waiting to happen, when their parents found out where they’d really been the past few days.

Spencer was more than happy to discuss college courses with the two young women. What surprised them all was that young Ethan joined in, too. He was surprisingly well-versed in ancient history and cultures. And although Spencer worried about the long hours of keeping a lively five-year-old occupied in a car, it turned out that the little boy was quite content to alternate between studying the entomology text book Gil had given them, and playing chess with Spencer on the small magnetic travel set he had with him. Perhaps Ethan’s long stay in a glass coffin of a cell deep under the desert in Nevada had somewhat trained him to cramped quarters. That was an unpleasant thought. Or maybe, Ethan was, by nature, a sedentary child, interested in intellectual pursuits… not unlike
Spencer himself.

As it turned out, Ethan was a shark at chess. Spencer hadn’t been so challenged since he had last played his mentor, Jason Gideon. And that made the hours fly by.

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When Jack O’Neill arrived in the Oval Office at eight a.m. sharp, he arrived in style, in the white flare of an Asgard beam, with Col. Samantha Carter at one side, and Master Teal’c of Chulak, Ambassador of the Free Jaffa Nation to Earth, at the other. Bringing Vala (and Mitchell) to this meeting, while it would have definitely been amusing, would have been counter-productive, so he left the last two members of SG-1 at home in Cheyenne Mountain.

Jack gave the President his due with a textbook salute. “Mr. President.” As for the other men gathered in the room, standing or seated on the sofas in the center, he gave every indication of ignoring their existence entirely. Not true, however. He made very sure that the few key people he wanted were present. And although the President’s circle of trusted advisors had dwindled significantly over the past two days, there was still quite a crowd gathered to hear his accounting of his investigations into the Wraith Invasion and the fall-out.

“Jack. You’ve been busy.” The President indicated a newspaper headline of a general from the Pentagon Joint Chiefs, two congressmen, and several prominent lobbyists, having met untimely ends in ways that might have been suicide, if you squinted real hard.

Jack shook his head. “Not my work, sir. I’m the guy getting them to the hospital for a quick MRI, then either surgery, or the bum’s rush to a little facility under Langley. It’s their own people doing the sloppy and rather extreme personal grooming accidents.”

“And?”

“And, you wanted Carter here to help out with the science interviews before the press today, since neither one of us would trust Rodney McKay not to insult and threaten the bunch of them for being the ignorant vultures they are. Well, here she is. Please don’t keep her long, she’s got a job to get back to. And so does McKay, because we both know Atlantis needs him, and we need Atlantis. Those six Wraith hives were just the beginning, and I think we all know it.”

The President winced. “Is this ‘I told you so’, Jack? You told us two years ago that leaving Atlantis moored here was a waste of resources, and we’d regret not sending her back to Pegasus.”

“No, sir, I’ll leave it to Sheppard, McKay and Woolsey to do that. My ‘I told you so’ is on another matter entirely. Do you recall, a little over two months ago, when I stood in this very room, with most of the same people in attendance, and begged you. *begged you*, to issue an amber alert on Daniel, to get the whole damned country looking for him? I wanted his five-year-old face plastered on every police station wall, every milk carton, every FBI database. I wanted my little boy back. You assured me that you had the very best looking for him, that national security aside, there wasn’t any more that could be done openly than was already being done. You said you trusted the people you had looking. Well sir, we both placed our trust in a lot of people who, as it turns out, were not to be trusted, so much as actually part of The Trust.”

There was a bit of hubbub over that from the crowd, but Jack didn’t bother with that. He looked the President right in the eye, and let Teal’c’s impressive way with an eyebrow quell the protests at his back.

“You have the proof, Jack?”
He didn’t know where she came up with this stuff… in this case, she must have been playing with a Goa’uld vo’cume in her spare time, to get a projection to show up in mid air like that, running a PowerPoint presentation Daniel himself would be the first to appreciate… in 3D! Cool or what.

Carter reported, “These are the entry sign-in sheets for the facility known as Bunker Thirteen… or Gitmo West, as our people are calling it, on the grounds of Area 51. We have definitive proof, including time-stamped surveillance tapes, that Daniel was being held in a cell on level five, for the past two months.”

Slides showed scanned pages from a hand-written visitor’s log, with dates, times, signatures. Some of those people were in the room. Strange that they weren’t running for the exits, yet. Too stunned, too stupid, or too arrogant? Jack didn’t much care.

He did the voice-over commentary himself as the pages leafed through. “I believe you know those names, sir. And recognize those signatures. We actually do have video confirmation that they’re the real deal. And more video of who they were visiting, and what they were doing there. Oddly enough, our recent spate of shaving accidents all appear on this list. General Brady among them. Got a strong stomach, sir? This particular day, two weeks after I stood here and asked for an amber alert on Daniel Jackson Junior, this was the video from the fifth level of Gitmo West.”

Jack didn’t need to turn around to know Teal’c had moved to block one door, while General Landry had moved to block another. Already on high-alert, the Secret Service agents also closed in. He didn’t need to turn to watch the video excerpt of an interrogation, either. And it was running silent.

“I’d turn up the sound, Mr. President, the logs do come with sound, but all you’d hear is a five-year-old screaming, crying, begging for help, begging for me to come and save him, begging for mercy. Which, in the next six hours solid, he never got. I doubt he got any the two months he was held in that hole. Several men in the uniform of the United States military took turns torturing him this day, including General Brady, while the Assistant Director of the NID, and the Vice President of the United States, watched from a comfortable observation room. It was AD Gaffney that you personally ordered to head up the search for Daniel, right sir? Should have been a piece of cake for him, since he knew right where Daniel was the whole time. Gaffney and the VP also got a few look-ins on the Wraith guests while they were there. There’s actually a written directive from the Vice President to ensure the Wraith prisoners remain alive and healthy… that their nutritional requirements be met. Which means, as I’m sure you are all aware, that they be fed a human or two on a regular basis. The Las Vegas police have been finding desiccated bodies around town, the past few weeks. The Gitmo West boys were getting sloppy there at the end. Before the Wraith arrived, looking for their people. Being held just a few doors down from Dr. Daniel Jackson.”

There was a little bit of a whizzing sound as Carter turned off her doohickey.

There was silence in the Oval Office.

“There were the Wraith found us because the Vice President of the United States brought those two creatures here to Earth. Those hive ships invaded our planet because they were trying to get their people back. Cheyenne Mountain, the Pentagon, the Ancient Outpost, they attacked to divert us, to delay our being able to mount an effective counter-attack or defense. Las Vegas, Groom Lake, they attacked as another diversion. And, you know, as a stop for quick snacks. Their one true goal was Bunker Thirteen, Gitmo West. It’s purest luck that they failed. One FBI profiler who recognized the marks on a map, and three CSIs with the guts to back him up. Just imagine the damage it could have caused, a Goa’uld Wraith wandering loose. When they caught up to him, he was trying to get into the last cell on the bottom level of that place. Oddly enough, that was Daniel’s cell. Even more
oddly, Daniel wasn’t there at the time.

“I still want my boy back, Mr. President. My boy is still out there, missing. And as far as I can see, nothing has changed in the two months since you promised me everything was being done. Wasn’t that what the Vice President told you?”

Carter had meanwhile pulled another whirring thing from her pockets. Jack knew she was aiming at the NID Assistant Director, and at the Vice President. And, incidentally, at the President himself.

“The Vice President, no,” Carter reported. “Mr. Gaffney, no. Just two more power-mad assholes. Congressman Klein… yes. Confirmed. He has a Goa’uld symbiote. And… the rest of the room is clean.”

Secret Service rushed immediately to arrest five men pointed out by Colonel Carter, to take them out of the President’s presence. One would be intercepted by SGC doctors, while the rest were shipped to a holding cell somewhere.

The President stood from his desk, in shock, almost trembling.

“Well now, Mr. President. I believe we have a press conference to attend.”

After lunch, Ethan began to get fretful, rubbing his eyes. Stacey, who had a little brother of her own, recognized the signs, and recommended a nap. After a bit of whining and fussing, they finally talked Ethan into spreading out under his blue afghan and closing his eyes for a moment. Sleep quickly followed.

But an hour later, restless movements alerted Spencer to another impending nightmare.

Sure enough, the little boy began muttering in some strange Semitic language, until he cried out, “Sha’re!” and began crying.

Spencer pulled him into his lap and rocked him. “There there, sweetheart. It’s okay. You’re safe, Ethan. Remember? We’re both safe and well. We’re driving to Salt Lake with Stacey and Violet, remember? Ethan? You’re safe. Wake up, baby. You’re safe.”

By crooning non-stop in the little boy’s ear, he hoped to bring Ethan out of his sleeping confusion, enough not to blurt out something that would give them both away.

“Spencer?”

“Yes. I’m here, Ethan. You’re safe.”

“I dreamed about Sha’re.”

“Was it a good dream?”

“Uh-hunh… until she died. Why did she have to die?”

This seemed like a dangerous subject, so Spencer tried a re-direct, only too aware of the listening ears in the front seat.

“Sometimes cats just do, sweetie. I’m sorry. Cats and people… they don’t live forever. We just have to try and make sure they have a good life while they’re with us. We’ll talk more about Sha’re tonight, okay?”
Ethan gave a deep sigh and nodded. “Okay.”

The plan was to try and drive straight through to Salt Lake, a seven or eight hour drive normally. But with all the traffic headed out of Las Vegas and clogging all the highways heading even vaguely east, and with the frequent rest stops required by a five-year-old, by sunset of the second day, they had only made it as far as St George, just inside the Utah border. The night before, all they could do was pull over to the side of the road, like many others, and try to sleep in the jeep. But only now was the traffic beginning to thin out and move at more than a crawl. Stopping in St. George for the night was a popular decision, and they found a small motel with rooms available, cheap and clean, and, bonus, with a bar and grill attached.

The four shared a booth, ordered burgers and milk shakes all around, and watched the big screen TV, which was still full of the invasion highlights, the odd spate of suicides and accidental deaths in Washington that did not seem to be Invasion-related, interspersed with the latest local news. Specifically, the feature local story was a military C-150 crashing not too far away, killing over twenty soldiers on board. Although, just from the aerial pictures Spencer saw, there were a lot more than twenty bodies at the crash site. Spencer was careful to distract Ethan and turn his head away for some of the grisly coverage of these events. Intellectually, he knew the boy had probably seen worse, in one form or another, but he still felt the need to protect his ward as much as possible. And they had already explained to Stacey and Violet how Ethan and he had become separated, and the little boy had come far too close to having a downed alien Dart land on top of him. Hence his still-visible injuries.

But then the White House Seal appeared, and an emergency update from the Oval Office was announced. The background music was abruptly turned off, the chatter in the bar grew quiet, and the sound on the televisions was turned up.

And after a brief speech from the President, commiserating with the victims, congratulating and thanking the defenders, and offering an explanation (if not an excuse) for the Invasion of the Wraith… the President introduced a documentary that first had been filmed years ago, updated yearly since, by the noted film-maker Emmett Bregman.

The De-Classification of the Stargate Project had begun…

Ethan had one nightmare, just after dawn. With the pair sharing a double bed, Spencer quickly swept him up in his arms and held him tight. The boy cried out for Janet… begged her not to die, to forgive him, he was sorry, he didn’t know that jaffa was there…

Spencer knew just where that nightmare had come from. The Bregman documentary may have been added to, re-edited and changed over the years, but the memorial to Dr. Janet Fraiser always remained as the lynch-pin, the emotional center of the epic. Her tragic death on the battlefield of an alien planet, saving the life of a downed soldier, with one Dr. Daniel Jackson at her side… Yes. Spencer knew about that one.

“It’s my fault,” wept the little boy, inconsolable.

“No, it’s not. You didn’t hold the weapon. You didn’t pull the trigger. You tried to help someone, just like Dr. Fraiser. It wasn’t your fault.”

“Kinsey said it was, that all of it was. That I opened Pandora’s Box, and let all the evil out. He said I
was responsible, because I opened the Stargate.”

Spencer blinked. “Kinsey? You mean… ex-Vice President Robert Kinsey? Well, he’s wrong. The man who discovered how to make and control fire isn’t responsible for all the arsonists. Henry Ford isn’t responsible for all the traffic fatalities. You opened a door and made something wonderful available to the whole human race. Yes, there are risks and hazards, and not everyone uses it responsibly or safely, but how we use this gift is up to us. It’s a choice we all have to make, as individuals and as a species.”

“But… you don’t know. I’ve done… terrible things. Terrible things.”

“To save your team. To save your planet. To save others.”

The little boy with the dark, too-old eyes nodded, looking desperately at Spencer, hoping against hope for some wisdom that would ease his pain.

Luckily, Spencer had those words for him. “I’m an FBI agent. I told you so, remember. I work for the BAU, hunting and catching serial killers, kidnappers and rapists. Monsters. Well, people call them monsters, and sometimes they are, there’s no other word for it, sometimes. But they’re also human beings. And they all have their reasons, all have their strengths and weaknesses, are driven by their passions and obsessions. Most of the ones we hunt… well, they were built wrong. The things that make normal people, people like you and me, feel the pain of others, care about others, most serial killers don’t have that. Other people, or even animals, aren’t… real to them. They’re just things, like pieces of wood or toys. Others we find were so terribly abused as children, they can’t relate to anyone any more, unless it’s with pain. They all have their reasons, their histories, and some… I can even feel sorry for them. But when we catch up to them, when we have them cornered, and they know it… They almost always fight to get away. Often they take hostages, or just pick up a weapon and start firing… we call it ‘suicide by cop’, making us kill them to save others. I… I’ve had to use my weapon. I’ve had to kill. Always in self defense, or to save someone, but… I feel it, every single time. I regret it, every single time. If I could save them all, even the worst monsters, well, maybe all but one or two guys… George Foyet, Mr. Scratch… but if I had the choice and could put them in jail instead, I would. And when I get a chance to talk them down, talk them into giving up instead, and I have to lie to do it, I regret that too. I feel it’s a betrayal, of them, of me. But I do it, because there’s a greater good to think of. I may wish there’s another way, but if I can’t find it, I have to do what has to be done. And I do it, and live with the consequences. And one of those consequences is guilt. And bad dreams.”

“But… you still do it. You’ve been doing this for thirteen years, you said.”

“Yes. Because I’m good at it, and it needs to be done. It isn’t easy, but there are benefits.”

“Like what?”

Spencer smiled. “My first mentor, a man named Jason Gideon, he was one of the founders of the BAU. He kept a notebook with him, all the time. In it, he kept a list of every life he saved, and a picture of everyone he rescued. Some of them sent him Christmas and birthday cards every year, as a thank you. He used to smile, just taking out that notebook and opening it up to read the various pages. It was filled, Ethan. He kept pictures they sent him, of themselves, of their spouses and their own children, framed, all over his office. Like they were his family. And in a way, they were.”

“Do you do that?”

Spencer chuckled. “I don’t need to. I have an eidetic memory. I remember all their faces, and all their names. Even the ones we have to arrest. And you know the last name and face in my list?”
“No, who?”

“You. And the one thing I do not regret, ever, is even one single one of those faces and names in my list. I’m sure, that in all the time you explored the universe, there were a lot of things you had to do, to protect your team, or all of us back here at home. And you can regret having to do them, and they will haunt your sleep sometimes. But the one thing you don’t have to regret, ever, is that we’re all still here. And that’s because of you. So thank you, Ethan. For my life, and my mom, and my team, and everyone I have ever known. Including everyone on my own list, and Jason’s. Because we’re *all* alive because of you.”

Spencer gave him a tight hug, hoping that alone would squeeze out the nightmares.

An hour later, both up and dressed, the pair hiked to the internet café across the street from the motel, bought one large coffee, extra cream, extra sugar, and one small de-caf (at which Spencer got the stink eye from his young companion) and they parked at a free laptop on a table at the front window with their drinks and a couple of toasted bagels for breakfast. Spencer and Ethan had been here the night before, and went through the same routine. Spencer built himself a new account, yahoo last night, gmail this morning, and checked a couple of popular facebook pages.

Last night it had been ‘Henry2008’ checking in on Penelope Garcia’s site to join a forum on cupcake recipes, to say he appreciated the cinnamon ones best. Garcia knew they were his favorites, and Hotch’s, too. Check in complete.

This morning he had another goal.

Greg Sanders had a wide following, hooked into a lot of Dr. Who, Star Wars, Star Trek, Sherlock Holmes and Wormhole X-treme fan bases (Wormhole X-treme? Really, Greg?). Under the heading ‘Guess what I did during the invasion! Can’t tell, it’s classified! Cool or what?’, he had cheerfully announced on his page that he had participated in the Defense of the Planet, as a true blue Whovian should, and how totally cool was that? But the Men in Black had already been around to have him sign in blood not to reveal any of it, and was that not *even more cool*? He had gossip chains where he taunted all those trying to get him to tell all, and others on various topics, left hanging for now…and a whole new one where all too many people were pointing out how very close Wormhole X-treme seemed to come to the truth of the Stargate Project, as revealed to the world last night.

“Plausible deniability, hello?” was the general consensus on that one.

But ‘Nicky’ had started a new chain on the Stephen King movie *Firestarter*, which Greg had mentioned liking a few weeks ago, in connection with the subject: novel adaptations, good or appalling? ‘Nicky’ had commented, “Didn’t Drew seem awfully YOUNG to you?”

Spencer could only nod in sympathy for Nick Stokes’ obvious surprise. Bregman’s documentary had introduced the world to an archeologist, linguist and intergalactic explorer named Dr. Daniel Jackson… who had to be at least forty by now. There was no mention of any accident that might cause an age regression, of any disappearance or death… But there was a Jack in his life… once Colonel and the leader of Dr. Jackson’s exploration team, now Major General and the Director of HomeWorld Security, the agency with oversight on the Stargate Project and several… um… related branches. Like sections of Area 51, and the flying city of Atlantis.

*“No, they’ll find me, and lock me up again!”*

“We’ll protect you...” Grissom began, only to be interrupted again.
“You can’t. No one can. Even Jack couldn’t, and he’s a general!”*

Spencer, under the nom de plume McGee (the last name of the title’s character, Charlie), added to the chain, “Considering the stranger things going on in Firestarter’s life, maybe age is not so odd.”

Yes, Spencer certainly did believe their rescued imp was the same man. A lot of Ethan’s odd statements and nightmares made perfect sense, in that context. How he had got to be locked up in a five-year-old body, with his memories evidently patchy… well, when you’re an intergalactic explorer, he supposed there were probably even weirder things come out of the bottom of your cereal box. It might even have been something they had done to him in that bunker. Experiments, he had said… If the Wraith could drain you of years, leaving you old before your time, might they not also be able to make someone young? Although, from things Ethan had said, Spencer was pretty sure the boy had been five years old for a while, and in the guardianship of Jack O’Neill.

The pair finished up their breakfast, checked out of the motel, and were well on time to meet Stacey and Violet to continue their journey.

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They were in Salt Lake City by lunch, having finally made good time, now that they were in Utah. Spencer and his charge were dropped off at the student union building, saying warm farewells to the two history majors.

Wandering into the cafeteria to get lunch, they perched themselves at a table sufficiently near the big TV to hear the latest.

“Oh look, it’s Jack!” Ethan piped up. Luckily, the cafeteria was big enough, and busy enough, that no one took notice, beyond a few young girls giggling at how cute the little boy was, and eyeing his equally cute guardian with some speculation.

Spencer quickly reminded Ethan to hush, making it look like he only wished to hear the news.

One by one, various important figures in the Stargate Project stood before cameras and press corps and gave interviews on various aspects of their adventures, offering more comprehensive briefings at a later date.

Colonel Doctor Samantha Carter and Dr. M. Rodney McKay both talked about the science. Where the ships had come from that had defeated the Wraith invasion. And yes, the floating city was Atlantis – yes, *the* Atlantis, lost city of the ancients, sunk beneath the ocean beyond the Gate, only it was an ocean in another *galaxy* – raised and brought home by the Atlantis Expedition.

Lt. Colonel Paul Davis gave a presentation on the various alien races they had encountered, including the Goa’uld (now mostly conquered), the Replicators (shattered and gone), the Ori (also destroyed utterly, although Ethan cringed at their mention), and the Wraith, just one more alien race with hostile intentions and no idea what they were messing with.

And then one question was asked, “Where is Dr. Jackson, the man who opened the Stargate?”

Major General Jack O’Neill stepped up for that one, looking very grim. “Dr. Jackson is listed as MIA at this present time. He had an accident with an alien piece of technology six months ago, and although we were able to bring him home, he disappeared four months later. We’ve been conducting an intensive search… so far without luck.”

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For the next leg of the journey, Spencer decided to risk a bus trip. No ID was required, it was fairly cheap, and the risk of being noticed by anyone enough to be identified later was minimal. Anyone following their trail would also stand out.

So Spencer bought two one-way tickets to Sacramento, California. It would take at least a full day with the milk-run route they were taking and the number of stops, but there was an overnight in Reno (back in Nevada again) where they would have to get out and book a motel room, or else sit up at the bus station all night. Once at their destination, they would look for another shared ride on the message board at the University of California.

All along the way, in bars, bus stations, stopping for quick meals or rest-room breaks, there always seemed to be a TV on, and the news was always some new revelation about the Stargate and its heroes. Friends made, technology gathered, enemies defeated, and always, mention made of Dr. Daniel Jackson, and his incredible achievements, and many personal sacrifices.

It always seemed to happen at dawn. Spencer, hyper-aware of the little boy sleeping next to him, was awakened just moments before by the restless squirming. Then there was a jumble of foreign words, and Spencer ached to record them, thinking how Dr. Alex Blake, linguist of some renown, might enjoy having a taste of something so… strange to unravel. It occurred to him, then, that Alex probably knew of Dr. Jackson.

Then the heart-rending cry, “Sha’re!”

Spencer clutched the crying child close, petting and rocking until the sobbing was soothed.

“So… who is Sha’re?” Spencer asked quietly.

Ethan stilled. “She was my wife. A long time ago. When I was big. She was a chieftain’s daughter, on another planet, Abydos. It was the first place we went, Jack and me. She was so beautiful… so brave… she led a whole revolt against a god. That’s really brave, isn’t it? Her father Kasuf gave her to me as a bride… because he thought I was an emissary from the gods. I tried to give her back… but it was too late. I didn’t realize we were married for, like, days… Ferretti still jokes about that. I stayed with her after we sent the others home through the Stargate… we had a year… a perfect year…” he sighed heavily and looked up into Spencer’s eyes. “Then Apophis came and took her away. I tried to find her… I tried for years. I came close, twice. But she had a Goa’uld in her, Ammonet. The first time, Ammonet was sleeping… then she woke up, and I lost her again. The second time… Ammonet was trying to kill me. Teal’c had to shoot her. There was nothing… she was dead. I got to say goodbye… That’s all.”

Spencer nodded solemnly. “I was in love once. Her name was Maeve. She was a brilliant geneticist… we met online. She was helping me with my migraines. But she was being stalked by someone… she was afraid to come out of hiding. We never actually got a chance to meet in person… I only ever saw her alive once… Her stalker killed both herself and Maeve… right in front of me. I just… I never got to touch her. Or dance with her. Except in my dreams.”

Ethan fiddled with a corner of the blue afghan he couldn’t sleep without. “The dreams… they don’t turn… bad?”

“They did for a little while… I was afraid to sleep, afraid to see her shot again… But then… then I finally let one dream play out. We danced. In a library. It was like… we finally got our happy ending. All my dreams of Maeve are good now.” Spencer reached into his ever-present messenger bag, and pulled out the book Maeve had given him. He stroked it reverently before putting it back.
“Maybe… your dreams of Sha’re will be too, one day?”

“That would be nice,” Ethan said wistfully, and he settled back to fall asleep for a little longer.

After a few more random journeys, back and forth across the country, but progressively more northern, Spencer felt confident enough to aim toward what, he hoped, would be Ethan’s final destination, if not his own.

A sullen frat boy with a recent DUI and a confiscated driver’s license needed someone to drive him – and his slightly banged-up Beemer – home to Portland, Oregon. It was going to be a long trip, over ten hours. The college boy was still brutally hung over from his last frat bash and wasn’t inclined to talk, nor did he show any interest in making friends with a nerd and a rug-rat, which suited Spencer and Ethan just fine. The guy never even asked for their names. Since Spencer had bought Ethan a few second hand books at the California State University book store, the boy was quite content to read, and never even noticed the silent treatment they were getting from the Beemer’s owner. In fact, the guy slept in the back for most of the way, while Spencer drove and Ethan sat up front in his car seat.

They pulled into the youth’s parents’ driveway, and abandoned him there to his fate, and a furious father, threatening to let him finish paying for his college education on his own, while his mother stood and sobbed. Spencer was pretty sure none of the family even noticed them as he and Ethan left. They walked a few blocks before they caught a taxi, and asked for a motel anywhere close to the University of Portland.

The next morning, after the two Invasion refugees both got in a good night sleep, for a change, Spencer checked the University message board at the students’ union, and found that the school skeet-shooting team had chartered a bus so they could attend a competition at Rainier University in Cascade, Washington. The bus was leaving that afternoon, with a few seats still left. Spencer made the call, and booked two seats, for Spencer and Ethan Hutchison.

They would finally be at their destination by dinner time.
Spirit Walk

Chapter Notes

DISCLAIMER: The Sentinel, owned by Visual Entertainment. No copyright infringement is intended. I have absolutely no right to be playing with them or their universes. I just gotta. I promise to get nothing out of it but personal satisfaction. Spoilers: The Sentinel (post series, no one dead).

~ *When living with the Indians in their homes and pursuing my ethnological studies: One day I suddenly realized with a rude shock that, unlike my Indian friends, I was an alien, a stranger in my native land; its fauna and flora had no fond, familiar place amid my mental imagery, nor did any thoughts of human aspiration or love give to its hills and valleys the charm of personal companionship. I was alone, even in my loneliness.* ~ Alice Cunningham Fletcher, Opening of Preface, ‘Indian Games and Dances with Native Songs’ (1915) ~

~ The Cascade Police Department offices of the Major Crimes team was a virtual haven of calm and serenity, compared with their brethren in other cities, in Nevada, Colorado or the Washington-Baltimore complex on the East Coast. The Pacific North-West had escaped all of it.

The devastation, hourly-fluctuating dead-and-missing numbers, and infrastructure disruptions were bad around all three targets, but complicated in Nevada by the sheer numbers of transients and visitors in Las Vegas, making even estimates of missing numbers a crap-shoot, so to speak. Even two weeks after the Alien Invasion, Nevada was still swamped with refugees, some injured, some made homeless in the destruction, many waiting to be re-united with loved ones still missing, or those lost somewhere in the epically long priority lists, awaiting transport back to their homes elsewhere. With quick-and-dirty repairs to major highways, buses were finally becoming available to shuttle people to major city centers in neighboring states, where alternate transportation options were more readily available.

In the nation’s capitol, and along the eastern seaboard, supposedly unrelated but still high incidents of accidental deaths, supposed suicides, arrests and mental breakdowns among the country’s powerful elite, barely got a mention in the press, except as side-bars. In the grand scheme of things, the rash of prominent figures in government, military and business circles disappearing from the public eye, some to hospitals, some to prison cells, many turning up dead from less and less likely accidents, was a minor footnote to more devastating events.

Dr. Blair Sandburg, anthropologist and consultant for the CPD, finished up his detective-partner’s paperwork on their latest case, while keeping an eye on the large-screen TV set up for the team, to keep abreast of the latest revelations. The young man looked out of place in a police squad room, with long curly dark hair, bright blue eyes, a college professor’s wardrobe of tweed jacket with leather elbow patches over jeans, and sporting a dream-catcher earring. He was also towered over by the cops in his department, although he kept insisting he was of average height, and they were the freaks. Even Megan Connor, their Australian exchange officer, had him by a few inches. At least sitting at his partner’s desk equalized that a bit.
Detective Jim Ellison, former Army Ranger, was taller than most, and most meeting him for the first time, immediately guessed at the military background. It was in his short cut dark hair, ram-rod straight posture, dour expression and imposing no-nonsense demeanor. At present, he was reporting to their Major Crimes captain, Simon Banks, one of the few even taller than Jim, in Banks’ office. Blair glanced over to see if he could guess what they were talking about. It was hard to tell with Simon because of his coal-black complexion, hiding if he were going red from apoplexy at something Jim and his unconventional partner had done that might need… creative explanations. As far as Blair knew, they hadn’t done anything recently to annoy their captain, so they should be golden there. And usually, the more riled Simon got, the higher his blood pressure rose, the louder he got, too. No volume issues as far as Blair could tell.

Blair’s attention drifted back to the TV. Weirdness abounded. Jim had commented only last night that, with the Alien Invasion, and the following announcements of the Stargate Project, Atlantis and the other divisions of HomeWorld Security, his own secret identity as a Sentinel, inheriting the extreme heightened senses of humanity’s tribal past, suddenly seemed like small potatoes, and pretty damn hum-drum. Most of the headaches Simon dealt with on a daily basis, was how to explain to their superiors some of Jim’s ‘leaps of logic’ when on a case, without blowing Jim’s cover. Although, the past few years, those superiors had just stopped asking. No one thought the improbable existence of a cop with super-senses would be explainable in a court of law.

As the pictures from the Las Vegas ‘Sanctuaries’ kept coming, Blair wondered about the few people he knew in the city. He kept an eye out, and had actually spotted the name of the Bennington Sanitarium coming up a number of times, as one of the facilities taking in refugees. Blair hoped that meant the institution had escaped any damage, meaning Aunt Diana was safe and well. He’d have to send her a letter, just to check in. Although it might be a better idea to try and get through to Spencer as well, as soon as the dust settled in the DC area.

But then, think of the devil, and up he pops. Even as he considered how soon was too soon, the text alert sounded on his phone.

‘Hey Blair. You still play touch on your days off? – Diana’s Kid’

“Shit!” Blair exclaimed, probably louder than he should have, out of shock. It had been years since he had last seen Spencer, months since they’d exchanged emails, and a carefully coded message like this couldn’t be good. He reviewed recent cases around Cascade and Seattle, and couldn’t bring any to mind that might attract the notice of the FBI’s elite BAU team. And using the name Diana probably indicated a personal matter. Not good. So not good.

His partner angled close, having heard him, even if the rest of the Major Crimes bullpen ignored his minor outburst.

“Trouble, Chief?” asked Detective Jim Ellison.

“I… I’m not sure, to tell the truth.” Blair fired off a reply. ‘You bet, man. Give me an hour, K?’

‘See you soon.’

“I just need a few more minutes to finish our reports, then… You got some time for a quick errand this morning, Jim?”

“Sure thing. I’ll get the truck.”

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Cascade was experiencing a rare sunny spring day, the Pacific North-West known for its cold and rainy weather. The anomalous and glorious conditions had brought out quite a few people to the park this Saturday morning, mothers and nannies with kids in the playground, a few students from near-by Rainier College playing touch football in the wide-open flat meadow. It was a little too late for breakfast and too early for lunch, so the picnic tables were deserted in the secluded copse of trees near the edge of the park, backing on the pond. Blair quickly spotted the long, lanky form of his old friend at one of the tables, with a very small figure across from him, playing chess. Blair grinned.

“So you’ve known this guy a while?” Jim asked idly, holding Blair back from charging straight over, checking out the park with a practiced eye, by nature unable to stop his Sentinel instincts from scanning for any potential threats.

“His mom is one of Naomi’s sorority sisters from way back. Diana’s had her issues… but she’s one of the people I stayed with when Naomi was on her… retreats.”

Jim raised a skeptical eyebrow. There was no need to express his opinion of Naomi Sandburg’s parenting skills… or lack thereof. “What kind of issues?”

“Paranoid schizophrenia. You think Naomi’s bad at the parent gig? William Reid was worse. He bailed on the family just as Diana’s problems began to manifest. Spencer was ten at the time, halfway through high school already, and doing his best to keep his mom from attracting any official attention that might put them both in institutions. He kept it together until he turned eighteen, then found a sanitarium where Diana could get the help she needed.”

Jim stared at his partner and Guide. Okay, this was a new low, even for the unconventional Ms. Sandburg. “Naomi left you with a kid and a schizophrenic? What the hell, Chief!”

Blair winced. “Diana was actually a pretty good mom, Jim. No, really. Her delusions were pretty harmless, and when she got lost, she mostly thought she was lecturing in medieval literature. I actually learned a lot from her. The paranoia was all about the government spies living next door. She wasn’t very good at housekeeping and time management, but Spencer was, so it all worked out.”

Jim was grim-faced. “You’re really pushing my bull-shit meter, Darwin. Sell it to someone who doesn’t know you.”

Blair sighed. “Okay, so it was better than foster care… for both Spencer and me, and I’ve had worse babysitters. Just… chill in front of Spencer, okay?”

Jim knew Dr. Spencer Reid by reputation… the few times the BAU team had worked cases in Seattle, Portland and other near-by cities over the years, had prompted lots of stories among law enforcement. Brilliant and eccentric, he was clearly critical to the success of his team, legendary for their solve and arrest rates, able to point out a potential suspect from a handful of nothing.

Spencer and a little boy were engrossed in their game, but the young man was clearly more vigilant than he appeared, on high alert from the tense set of his thin shoulders, the stiff line of his spine, his rapid heart-rate, the way his eyes kept tracking over their surroundings. If there was trouble here, personal trouble, Jim wanted a little more time to check things out. A meeting in a neutral public place? He held his partner and Guide back with a gesture, and let his senses unfurl over the park to check it out.

The little boy seemed a little anxious himself as he looked up at the tall young man across the board from him. “It could be dangerous. Really dangerous. You’ll tell them that?”
“Of course. I’ll tell them everything I can. And what I can’t, you can tell them yourself.”

“What if they say no, Spencer?”

“There are a few other possibilities… some of them are a little too close to me… if they do actually connect me to you, then anyone known to have a close relationship with me will also be under scrutiny. Alex and James Blake would be willing to take you in, I’m certain, and she has law enforcement expertise… she used to be on my team. But they’re in Boston, and I see Alex on a regular basis. I do a lot of guest lectures in her courses…”

“Dr. Alex Blake?” the little boy perked up. “The psycho-linguist?”

“That’s right. I thought you might know of her. Or there’s Lila Archer…”

“The pretty lady actress who was on that beach party show? Jack really likes her.” Jim suppressed a chuckle. Lila Archer? He was a bit of a fan himself. The woman was gorgeous, and very much his type, beautiful, blonde and leggy.

“Yes, that’s Lila. I met her on a case… she had a stalker. She’d take you in, no problem, if I asked… but she’s kinda high profile. Paparazzi follow her everywhere she goes. That might be good, in that you’d sort of be hiding in plain sight, and I doubt the bunker people would be looking for you on the front page of grocery store magazines, but… California is a little too close to Las Vegas. That would be a little too risky. My next choice would actually be my old friend Ethan. He’s a jazz musician in New Orleans, owns his own blues bar in the French Quarter. He might not be able to put you up himself, but he’ll know someone else who can take you in.”

“Those are all friends? I don’t want to get your friends in trouble.”

Spencer considered this. “I’ve worked a number of cases over the years where women and their children are trying to escape abusive situations… running from a spouse or stalker… I know how to make contact with the people in social services who can help people disappear and change their identities. But their services are geared more to adults with dependent children, not children on their own… I’d prefer not to go that route if I can avoid it. I don’t want to leave you with someone I don’t know and trust personally.”

“I’m not really five years old, you know.” Jim’s eyebrows lifted at that piece of intel, given without a single marker for lies.

“I know,” and the man reached out to ruffle the boy’s hair. “But in many ways you are. You’re three and a half feet tall, weigh forty pounds soaking wet… JJ’s Thanksgiving turkey last year weighed more than you do. That makes you vulnerable. And I can’t stay with you if I’m to work on this problem from the other side. And the longer it takes for me to surface back in DC… the more suspicious I look. I’d like to get you settled as soon as possible. Me being off the grid two weeks is already a little too long for anyone trying to check into my activities.”

The little boy nodded thoughtfully. “What about people I know?”

“I thought you wanted to avoid them. You said you didn’t want to go back to Jack, that he couldn’t keep you safe anymore.”

Ethan gave a heavy sigh. “He can’t, if I go back there. And any little boys who suddenly appear around him, they’ll know it’s me.”

“Wouldn’t that be the same for anyone you know?”
“Maybe,” he admitted, dejected. “I just don’t want to get you in trouble, you and Dr. Grissom, and Nick, and Greg, and your friends here… I don’t want anyone else to get hurt because of me.”

“Well, we’ll be as honest as we can be in this case, so it’s not like they won’t know what they’re getting into, and I knew the risks the night we found you, and accepted them. But come on. It won’t be forever. Those people were involved in *highly* illegal acts, quite apart from what they did to you, and I’m sure me and my team can make sure someone stops them. If not us, then HomeWorld or some other agency. Okay?”

HomeWorld? Yikes!

Young Ethan obviously wasn’t convinced. He moved a chess piece and dropped his chin on top of his folded hands with a sigh. “I didn’t think I’d ever have to worry about foster parents again after I got myself emancipated…” which comment just made *no* sense to Jim, “Are they… are they nice?”

“I only know Detective Ellison by reputation, which is excellent. He was an Army Ranger before he became a police detective. He has an outstanding arrest and conviction rate, made Detective of the Year in Cascade eight out of the last ten years… But I’ve known Blair since I was a little kid, just about your age, and he’s a great guy. He’s an anthropologist. I’m sure you’ll get along great together.”

And, weirdly, the little boy perked up at that. “An anthropologist?”

“Yes. Dr. Blair Sandburg.”

“Oh! I know his work! He’s really smart. He has some really original theories about aboriginal legends and myths tracing back to historical and factual events… which is true. I read his paper on Chopek shamanatic rituals and healing traditions. It was really cool. I wanted Jack to hire him for the program, but he said no… they’d reached their quota on long-haired hippy freaks with me. I think he was just teasing me… and Dr. Sandburg didn’t pass the security check.”

“Probably not. His mother has been arrested too many times in anti-war and anti-government protests. And then there was that thing a few years back when he recanted his doctoral thesis…”

“Oh yeah. I saw that.”

Jim blinked. Blair’s press conference was almost ten years ago now, and long forgotten by everyone – but Blair. And the stuffy-as-hell academic community. It had taken considerable pressure from the Cascade Mayor’s office to get the Rainier Doctoral Board to accept Blair’s revised thesis on the ‘Thin Blue Line’, or police closed societies, which finally won him his doctorate. How on Earth could a five year old… unless… he wasn’t really a five year old?

“That must have been really hard for him to do that. Public ridicule like that… trashing his career and his reputation… I know exactly how that feels. I once had to do pretty much the same thing. I did it because the truth was more important to me than the chance I’d get laughed out of archeology.”

What the hell, Jim wondered. “Dr. Sandburg must have had a really good reason for going to such extremes. Someone with super senses, like a Sentinel… someone like that could have ended up in the bunker, just like me, or being dissected in some lab somewhere. The NID were always trying to do stuff like that to my friend Teal’c… So I just figured he had to lie to protect his Sentinel subject from being exposed.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty much what I figured, too.” Shit, Jim thought, swallowing. He hoped everyone hadn’t found Blair’s great sacrifice so transparent. “Blair’s one of the most honest, dedicated and
straight-up guys I know.”

The little boy looked straight up at Spencer Reid and said, “You think Detective Ellison is Dr. Sandburg’s Sentinel. That’s why you brought me here.”

“Yes, but let’s not say anything about it to them, okay? Blair wants to keep the Sentinel thing a myth, and I think it’s best if we keep it secret too. Okay?”

“Okay,” said the three and a half foot oddity, willingly enough. “It’s pretty cool, isn’t it? Like a super hero secret identity. But you know, they’re probably here already, and Detective Ellison is checking us out right now. So he’s probably heard all of this already.”

“Well yes, probably, but Blair didn’t hear, and if Detective Ellison wants to pretend he doesn’t know, that’s fine. We just need to be honest about our own situation.”

“Well. Um… check.”

Spencer chuckled, and Jim withdrew.

“Shit. You’re right, Blair. Your friend Spencer has himself a bit of a problem. But we need to know their whole story before we get involved. Right?”

“Sure, man,” Blair agreed readily. A little too readily, but then, that was Blair. Long-haired hippy freak that he was. Jim shrugged with a sigh, and followed his Guide across the meadow to the picnic tables. Blair ploughed right in, clutching the other man around the chest for a big hug as soon as he stood.

“Spencer! Man! It’s good to see you. What’s it been, three, four years?”

“Three years two months. Not for lack of trying. I call every time I’m in the region, and you blow me off.” Spencer grinned, accepting the physical attention with just a hint of awkward reluctance, quickly suppressed.

Blair huffed a laugh. “Well, major crimes wait for no man, and the bad guys rarely give us much advance warning or appreciate our scheduling issues. Spencer, this is my partner, Detective Jim Ellison. Jim, Dr. Spencer Reid.”

“Dr. Reid.” Jim made to shake hands, not too surprised when the good doctor held up his right hand to give a funny little wave instead. Touch avoidance, yeah, he had heard that about the odd young genius. But Jim supposed someone with Reid’s background was entitled to a few eccentricities. He was constantly astounded Blair wasn’t more screwed up than he was, given his nomadic and –the best Jim could do was – unconventional, childhood. “Your reputation precedes you. All good,” he clarified when the profiler looked slightly alarmed. “You’ve done some damn good work.”

“Well, me and my team,” Spencer replied modestly with a becoming shy blush. “Blair, Detective, this is Ethan. Ethan? Say hello.”

The little boy was five or six years old (or certainly appeared to be), blonde hair and blue eyes, a little on the scrawny side, maybe, and shyly half-hiding behind Spencer. But the Cascade pair were far too experienced to miss the subtle signs of abuse about the child, fading, yet visible on bare legs and arms, even without a Sentinel’s enhanced senses. Ligature marks on his wrists and ankles, fading track marks on the inside of his arms, and bruises around his neck that could only be from choking. Blair and Jim traded quick glances, verifying they were on the same page here, before they met Spencer’s knowing eyes and nod. Yes, the child had been abused.
Blair, ever the best at making friends quickly, knelt on one knee to put himself closer to Ethan’s level, and held out a hand with a wide open smile. “Hey, there, buddy.”

“Hello,” came the shy little voice.

Spencer had never been one to beat around the bush. “I need a favor, Blair. I need somewhere safe for Ethan to stay for a while. I don’t know how long. But it has to be under the table. No official record anywhere, no searches of missing child databases, no blood typing or DNA searches… I need you to trust me here. He’s in danger, and so is anyone caught anywhere near him if his identity or location are exposed in any way.”

Blair glanced up at his Sentinel, who had been studying this old friend of his Guide’s.

“We’re officers of the law, here, Dr. Reid…”

“And so am I. I’m an agent of the FBI. And I’m telling you that absolute secrecy is in the best interests of the child, in this case. Consider it a protective custody situation, or witness protection. Either works, and it is the truth. But the threat isn’t from the usual sources, mobs, gangs, stalkers or abusive unfit parents. His enemies, the people who kidnapped him, held him in confinement and hurt him, are well funded and well supplied, have official, military and political connections that go very high, although I don’t really know how high, and at least some of them have backgrounds in black ops. I can’t explain much more than that. To tell you the truth, I don’t really know much more. I have yet to identify them, or get an idea of how large or well connected their organization is. But I have to think that they are capable of accessing any official record that might be made on Ethan’s location, and have people working for them who are at least as efficient as my own team’s technical analyst. They were involved in ops so black they probably weren’t *officially* sanctioned in any way, and I sincerely hope they weren’t approved by any proper legal authorities. And no, I’m not being paranoid. You can see for yourself the treatment this little boy received. The circumstances under which he was found… my conclusions are unavoidable.”

“And what were those circumstances, Dr. Reid?”

“I was visiting Mom in Las Vegas when the Wraith Invasion began, and all off-duty military, law enforcement and EMTs were called to assist in the defense. I joined three local CSIs, and we were deployed to Nellis Air Force Base, which was taking the brunt of the attack. That much, at least, is in the public record. The next day, I had a Air Force General and a couple of colonels come to me to sign a seventy-two page non-disclosure contract, under the National Secrets Act.”

Blair blinked. “They didn’t want you to tell anyone that aliens attacked? I gotta say, man, I think that horse has left the barn.”

Spencer grinned. “That’s pretty much what I told them. But see, they were more interested in what was in my after-action report… And that’s what they won’t want me to reveal. Now, I read every word in that contract, and it only applies to the events covered in my report… and I didn’t mention that we – me and the CSIs – discovered Ethan that night, injured, disoriented, alone and barefoot in the middle of the desert. We assumed that the damage caused by the attack must have broken the cell where they were holding Ethan and he managed to escape. But considering the location, and certain other evidence… well. We made a lot of conclusions. I have no doubt at all that Ethan was held by a large, organised, well-supplied and funded group with access to come and go as they please on a highly secured military base, and if they find out he’s alive and free, they will hunt him down, and anyone he might have talked to, if nothing else to preserve secrecy and save their own asses.”

Jim Ellison knew the man was being sincere, believed implicitly in what he was saying, and cared deeply for the child. There was a little flutter of something not being said when he mentioned the
desert, but Jim was prepared to let that go. And there was nothing in Reid’s manner to suggest he was having some kind of schizophrenic break, which had to at least be considered as a possibility given his mother’s condition… but he was completely lucid and rational.

He turned to his partner, and found Blair looking up at him imploringly. Oh yeah, he was going to be entertaining a five-year-old for the foreseeable future. But that didn’t mean he had to make it easy on them.

“Chief. We need to talk,” Jim declared, and jerked his chin to the side. The two men walked off a few yards.

“I know this is big, Jim, but…”

“Yeah. We’ll be taking responsibility for a kid. An unknown kid in an unknown mess that sounds pretty damn extreme. You ready for that?”

Blair gave his partner a knowing smile. “Your Blessed Protector instincts are already in overdrive, right, Jim? Spencer wouldn’t be asking if it wasn’t vitally important. And he wouldn’t be passing this off on someone else if he could take it on himself.”

“A kid suffering trauma, being hunted by Men in Black, and we can’t ask and can’t tell anything about him… I’m not liking that situation at all, Chief. You don’t think we deserve to know more than that?”

“Maybe… I’m sure Spencer will tell us as much as he can.”

Jim gave in with as much grace as he could. “Okay, Chief. Temporary fatherhood, here we come.”

The pair rejoined Spencer and the little boy.

“Hey, Ethan,” Blair said, once again kneeling before the child and taking his small hand. “How about you come and live with Jim and me for a little while?”

Ethan stared down at the adult’s warm hand, then frowned into the open face. “Are you a shaman?” he asked suddenly.

Blair was startled. “Um… yes, as a matter of fact, I am.”

As he met the solemn blue eyes of this oddly mature child… if Blair didn’t know better, he’d say the little boy was glowing… and then, sudden as a lightning strike, he was falling…

 Blair was only dimly aware that his physical body had folded into a sitting lotus position. His awareness, his soul, was also sitting in a jungle glade, shades of glowing blue all around him, and a little boy before him, in a similar lotus, eyes closed, head tilted up to the sky. Blair’s wolf-spirit joined him and sniffed at the boy, making him giggle as the muzzle tickled at his neck.

“Blair! What the hell?” Jim demanded, abruptly appearing at his side, even as an immense and irritated black jaguar paced behind him, growling lowly.

Blair merely shrugged and stared at the little boy, awaiting events. From the jungle behind the boy, came a Chopec shaman, and a tall white man in military-style BDUs, sandy hair and blue eyes with a familiar shape behind gold-rim glasses. On the shoulder of the white man perched a large black crow, who cawed loudly and took flight to sit on the little boy’s right shoulder.
“Incacha?” Jim greeted his old mentor, the shaman who had first helped him learn to control his enhanced Sentinel senses in the jungles of Peru. Incacha had been dead for some years, now, but it hadn’t seemed to slow him down any.

“Sorry about the hijacking,” the white man apologized, chagrinned, “I didn’t realize that would happen. But this is probably a good thing. Blair, do you think you can get Spencer here?”

“Do I… h uh?”

As it happened, there was no need for Blair to do anything. Incacha made a pass in the air, and suddenly, Spencer Reid, sitting Indian style with his eyes closed and one hand on Ethan’s left shoulder (the one without the crow perched on it), materialized with them. He blinked and stared at the two strangers settling down to the ground facing him, then at his old friend.

“Um…” he said intelligently.

Jim gave a sigh and took his own spot to make the gathering a circle. “Welcome to the Sandburg Zone, Dr. Reid.”

The unidentified man chuckled. “It’s a relief to know you can take this in stride, detective. Jack always freaks a little with the woo-woo mystical stuff. Dr. Reid? Spencer? It’s so good to meet you. I wonder, can you guess who I am?”

“Well, your picture has been all over the news, with the Stargate Declassification following the Wraith Invasion. You’re Dr. Daniel Jackson, I presume, linguist, archeologist, interstellar explorer. The man who unlocked the secret of the Stargate. I’m a little confused, however… I was under the impression that *this*…” and he patted the little boy’s shoulder, “was Daniel Jackson.”

“Yikes,” muttered Blair.

“Yeah, didn’t see that coming,” Jim admitted fatalistically.

Daniel-the-elder passed a hand over his short-cut hair. “Ye-e-ah. That’s a long story… but a good one! Short version, I had a little accident with an alien artifact six months ago, and ended up as a five-year-old. The mechanics are a little confusing, but my brain was also re-arranged somewhat… my knowledge and certain skills seem to be intact, like my languages, but my personal memories are shredded, and mostly age-appropriate, in that form.”

Spencer nodded. “That’s probably a good thing. I was a little alarmed when Ethan started talking about his wife.” Spencer glanced at Blair and Jim and sighed. “I signed non-disclosure contracts with HomeWorld Security after the Invasion… so I can’t explain exactly how I found Ethan, but the rest of what I told you is the truth. He is in grave danger, and I hoped you might be able to help me hide him, Blair.”

“He is in danger,” Daniel the elder confirmed, reaching out to smooth the feathers of the crow still on Ethan’s shoulder. “And I didn’t sign that contract, Dr. Reid, so I’m free to tell the story. It begins two months before the Wraith Invasion. There is a covert criminal group called the Trust, operating on Earth, made up of Goa’uld, Lucian Alliance spies, and Earth-humans too greedy and power-hungry for their own or anyone else’s good, whose avowed goal is to take over the planet for themselves. They’ve used off-world contacts and stolen alien technology to worm their ways into the highest levels of the US government and military, and the governments of several other countries. When they learned that I had been… down-sized, as Jack calls it, they decided that this made me vulnerable and
ripe for the taking, to milk for any information or abilities they imagined I possess.”

“Like, appearing in two places at once?” Jim asked, dead-pan.

“Ye-e-ah, that would be one thing. In the nearly two decades I’ve been exploring the universe with SG-1, a lot has happened to me. A *lot*. I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve died… I’m pretty sure it’s double digits by now… but I don’t seem to have the knack of staying dead. Alien devices, actual aliens with awesome powers, standard medical interventions, and a few friends in high places… If you have the right friends to help, or have been taught the proper path to enlightenment, you can Ascend to a, so-called, higher plane of existence, as a being of pure energy. I had one of those friends. My experiences give me a certain leeway when dealing with situations like this – on the spirit plane.”

Blair blinked at Incacha. “Is that what you did, great Shaman? You Ascended?”

The Chopek nodded. “It is the gift of any great Shaman, young one. And any Sentinel, among others. You need not be parted from your Enqueri when your time comes. But that lesson is for another occasion. There is great danger coming to us all. The Invasion you survived will not be the last. More black ships come from the stars, filled with starving Wraith.”

Daniel-the-elder nodded. “Trouble is coming, and I need to be able to help. But the Trust is going to make re-acquiring me their priority, and that can’t happen. The Trust took me two months ago, and managed to tie the hands of anyone interested in finding me, up to and including the President. They had no intention of ever letting me go free, whether or not I answered any of their questions, or performed any little parlor tricks they thought I might be able to do. They were quite determined not to let me die, either, because they figured I would only Ascend and come back in one form or other. They held me in an underground bunker they had set up on the grounds of Area 51, along with more than forty other ‘guests’. Two of them were Wraith. A number of others were Goa’uld.”

Spencer nodded. “And then there was one who was both.”

“Yes, and that was a *bad* idea. The Goa’uld consider humans an inferior species, fit only for hosts or slaves. The Wraith only think of us as food. That’s a bad combination.”

Spencer studied the man carefully. “The Wraith-Goa’uld called you Destroyer of Worlds.”

The man looked steadily back at him, direct and unflinching. “Yes. He did.”

Jim and Blair traded looks.

Daniel-the-elder took a deep breath and continued, “The night if the Invasion, the Wraith primary target was Bunker Thirteen, on the grounds of Area 51 on Nellis Air Force Base. Colorado Springs, and Cheyenne Mountain, is where the Stargate and the SGC is housed, so they certainly wanted that destroyed or taken, too. The attacks on DC, Antarctica, Las Vegas and Area 51… all locations where there are bases, facilities or labs full of alien tech, those were all pre-emptive strikes first, diversions second, maybe a little shopping for provisions third, but mostly to keep attention away from that bunker. And their strategy would have been a complete success, except for you, Spencer. You walked into that operations tent and immediately identified the true focus of the attack, and the location of the bunker entrance. You brought your friends from Las Vegas CSI to check it out. You saved my life, Spencer. Thank you.”

Spencer nodded. “You saved me too. When I killed the last Wraith and went to take off its head, per protocol, I didn’t know I was putting myself in danger.”
Daniel-the-elder shrugged. He explained for the others, “The Goa’uld symbiote in the dead Wraith was attempting to jump to a new host, and Spencer was closest. I got to it first. But guys, you need to know… those six Wraith Hives and their support craft… the primary goal for that first Invasion, was to locate and rescue their own people held captive, gain what intelligence from them they could, and to destroy two humans they considered significant threats to their long-term plans. One was Colonel John Sheppard, the military commander of Atlantis, and therefore way out of their reach. The other was me. And they failed, mostly because they grossly underestimated the strength of Earth’s defenses, but also, in no small part, because Spencer and his friends were there to stop them.”

Jim set his jaw. “You’re that critical to Earth’s defense?”

Daniel-the-elder shrugged. “I have been in the past. Not always on my own… and I’m not sure how events will play out with me in this shape,” and he gestured to Ethan. “But no matter what I may, or may not, be able to do against the Wraith, the Trust won’t want me to run around loose, spoiling all their plans for world domination, any more than the Wraith. Come to think of it, the Lucian Alliance also have a contract out on me… Well, you get the picture. I have a lot of enemies out there.

“The Trust know I wasn’t found at Bunker Thirteen after the Invasion, but they probably assume I Ascended, again. Which is why they didn’t bother trying to look for me. Spencer did a really terrific job getting me out of Nevada quickly, without leaving any trail behind. And with their cover blown, Jack – that’s Major General Jonathan ‘Jack’ O’Neill, two ‘L’s, director of HomeWorld Security – should be able to seek and destroy most of the Trust operating on Earth. Once that threat is neutralized, I should be able to come out of hiding.”

Spencer turned his attention to the little boy leaning into him, eyes closed and seemingly asleep. “I promised I would do everything in my power to protect him. I brought him here hoping you could help, Blair. I needed to make sure he was as far from me as I could manage before I return to the BAU. Even if no one is looking for him now, that’s bound to change. And when they do come looking, I’m the first logical connection. I took great pains to make sure the Vegas CSI team, Dr. Gil Grissom, Nick Stokes and Greg Sanders, were also as clear of this as possible.”

Blair drew in a sharp breath. “That puts a hell of a target on your back, Spencer.”

“Getting a bit singed is an occupational hazard for a knight,” Spencer returned with a jaunty grin for his old friend. That had been a running theme for the pair when they were boys. Blair had been the closest thing to a big brother the young genius had had growing up. In many ways, it was Blair who had prepared him for the teasing sibling relationship he enjoyed with Derek Morgan. It was certainly Blair who had taught him the proper no-holds-barred approach to a prank war.

Daniel frowned. “Don’t underestimate the Trust, any of you. Even I don’t know how far their tentacles extend, or where, but they have access to information and influence at the highest levels, even to the Oval Office. And they are absolutely ruthless. Spencer, you must not let them catch you. They won’t even bother with torture, they’ll go straight to their favored option – putting a Goa’uld symbiote in your head. The moment they do, you’ll be a prisoner inside your own body, with no control, no defense, no way to fight them. They’ll have access to everything you know, enough so that the symbiote will be able to fool even those closest to you that you’re still you, at least for a little while. They’ll destroy your life around you, will kill those closest to you with your own hands, and you’ll be helpless to stop them. And they’ll know exactly where I am. So. Don’t. Get. Caught.”

Spencer regarded the man a moment. “Why didn’t they try that with you?”

With an unpleasant smile, he retorted, “They did.” He reached down for little Ethan, turned his head and brushed away his long blonde hair to show a small scar at the nape of his neck, along with scratches. “The first one actually got inside, before it died. Rather abruptly. The second was
scratching at my neck when a bolt of... electricity, I guess, fried it to a crisp. The third one wouldn’t go near me. And before you ask, no, I don’t know how I did it, or even if I did. I’m inclined to think the Others, the Other Ascended Ones, didn’t want a Goa’uld in my head. Go figure. I doubt if that’ll work for you, though.”

Spencer nodded thoughtfully. “I see. I’ll do my best to stay out of their hands, then. Once I’m back with the FBI in Quantico, surrounded by my team and hunting unsubs again, I should have enough cover and protection while I work to expose the Trust myself, or at least that bunker-cum-torture chamber they were operating. If I do get into trouble, I plan to give General O’Neill a call. But, before any of that... I need to know Daniel – Ethan rather, is safe.”

Jim and Blair shared a look, and Jim gave a subtle nod. Blair said, “Well then, I guess we’re in. We’ve just wrapped a case and aren’t due back on duty till Tuesday, so that gives us a little time to get things set up for a guest. Any special advice for us, Dr. Jackson?”

Daniel-the-elder merely smiled. “Thank you. Both of you. And you can call me Daniel. Call the little guy Ethan, by the way. He’s still pretty traumatized, after two months in that tiny cell underground being tortured and drugged by monsters, cretins and traitors, and six months with the nightmares of a once-married forty-something intergalactic explorer. Not all my adventures were PG rated, by any means. And in spite of Diana calling me an angel, and the whole Ascension thing... I’ve done some... I’ve...” He stopped and turned his head away in order to collect himself. “There’s a reason the Wraith called me Destroyer of Worlds. My younger self chose to be Ethan for a lot of reasons. He doesn’t want to be me... and I can hardly blame him.”

Ethan whispered something to Spencer... and the profiler chuckled and said, “I think that would probably be fine, Ethan. He wants to know if he can keep the crow for company.”

“Of course,” Incacha intoned. “It is your spirit guide. It is here to guide you on your path, little one. And may it guide you well. For all our sakes. But there is one more thing you all must know. There will be trials ahead for each of you, but you are strong and brave and true. You will overcome them all. But beware the slaughter of the innocents. That, too, is coming.”

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Spencer agreed to stay over the weekend, to help Ethan feel settled with Blair and Jim, and to work out strategies and contingencies. Incacha’s warning about a coming ‘slaughter of innocents’ had them all worried, but the shaman wasn’t able to be any more specific. He had heard only vague whispers from the spirits, and they were unable or unwilling to be any more clear.

Back at Jim and Blair’s loft, Ethan had sighed and complained, “Higher beings are annoying like that. Most of the quests me and my team were led on were traps by the Ancients, to get us to clean up their messes. They left a *lot* of messes behind when they Ascended… The Ori, the Wraith, the extermination machine on Dakkara... They’re not supposed to interfere, but they really do, all the time. They just have to be sneaky about it.”

After brain-storming ways Spencer could begin his journey home with the least trace left in his wake, Blair remembered a student of his wanting to unload a motorcycle he had from a friend... the ownership of the little ten-year-old Kawasaki had never been transferred from the friend’s cousin, it bore Ohio plates, the student only wanted one hundred for it, cash, and the machine was in decent condition.

And yes, Spencer did know how to ride a bike. Morgan had taught him to ride during a hiatus a few years back when three weeks of working cold cases had them all going squirrelly with boredom and inactivity. Morgan had tricked him into making a ridiculous bet, and after losing, Spencer had found
himself on the back of a huge Harley, struggling just to keep it from toppling to the side. Stung in his pride, Spencer had learned the tricks and skills required, just to spite his nemesis.

And so, Sunday after lunch, Spencer found himself on the back of the little bike, his carryon strapped behind the seat, blue jeans, boots and leather jacket, not to mention a helmet, all obtained from a second-hand store. He hugged a suddenly sniffly little boy, assuring him that it would all be okay, and he’d be in touch using the covert methods he’d worked out with Blair. Among other things, he promised that, when this was all over, he’d introduce the little linguist to Dr. Alex Blake.

While Jim distracted Ethan by pointing out a squirrel in the park across the street, Spencer and Blair hugged. “Thanks for this, Blair. I can’t think of a safer, or better place for him right now. I know this is a lot to ask…”

“Don’t make me noogie you, little brother. We’re glad to help. This is what a Sentinel does, you know. Protects the Tribe. Same as Knights, only different.”

“Yeah, well… just watch out. I’m glad he’s coping so well, of course, it would be awful if he was having even more problems than he is, but… it’s just…”

“He shouldn’t be coping as well as he is. I get you, man. You expect some kind of blow up.”

“I think he’s repressing a lot. Both as a five year old, and a forty year old. Considering all he’s been through, just the stuff I know about… well. He’s entitled to a king sized temper tantrum.”

“I hear ya. We’ll see if we can’t encourage him to let it all out in a safe and welcoming place.”

Spencer nodded in gratitude, then said his last goodbyes, and kick-started the Kawasaki, leaving no room to hear anything but its purring motor, gunning into action.

Ethan kept waving until the distant motorcycle turned a corner, and could no longer be seen.

“Come on, buddy,” Blair offered kindly. “How about we play a game of chess. I’m gonna beat you this time, little man.”

Ethan gave a wistful sigh, then turned to his newest host and protector. “In your dreams, Blair.”

When Major William Matthews (not to be confused with the recently departed Vincent Hoskins), was finally allowed to remove the bag from over his head, he didn’t know whether he should be furious, or terrified, or both. He had decided that it was a good sign if they didn’t want him able to identify his final location, that they had no immediate plans to eliminate him as an inconvenient witness with too much to tell HomeWorld, should he be swept up in the massive dragnets currently being cast all across the world.

The stone-faced Marine Major at his side didn’t even glance at him as they proceeded down a featureless corridor, walls painted in military gray. Today, Major Scarface’s name tag read “Charleston”, and he sported red hair and a rather stylish little moustache. The pair followed in the wake of the businessman who gave them both their orders, and had not been brought in under a cloth bag. There were only two doors – the elevator doors closing behind the trio, and the solid door ahead with a key-pad and biometric lock, requiring both retinal and hand-prints to open. His boss, Stanley Bradshaw, was on the list of accepted IDs, but Matthews doubted very much if he was. As for the other Marine Major, it was anybody’s guess.

He didn’t ask any awkward questions, just let the situation unfold. The ability to accept without
question was one of the reasons he had been recruited in the first place.

Past the heavy metal door was a lab facility that would not have looked out of place in Bunker Thirteen. Pexi-glass walls on cells either side of the central corridor held a variety of devices and occupants Matthews was only too familiar with, since his previous incarnation, Hoskins, had given the orders for them to be ‘acquired’ in the first place. White lab-coated scientists, also well-known to him, though he knew not one of them had any knowledge of *him*, worked at their projects, ignoring him entirely as he passed.

An office at the end was almost as comfortable and spacious as Bradshaw’s Manhattan aerie, and Dr. Peter Kavanagh looked up briefly when the three men were ushered in. Bradshaw at once took the comfortable visitor’s chair, and Matthews took a cue from his counterpart, “Charleston”, and settled into a standing parade rest at his boss’s right shoulder, as the other Major had the left. Matthews found if he tilted his head just right, he could catch a reflection in the glass wall behind Kavanagh that revealed Bradshaw’s face. The scientist at once ignored the two military men in the room, to focus on the one assuming all the power by sitting in the single guest chair as if he owned it (and the rest of the facility), uninvited.

Bradshaw sent a disgusted look at the tall, lanky scientist, whose every twitch and aspect seemed to annoy him, from long greasy hair tied in an affected pony-tail, to the ostentatious monogram on his pristine white lab coat. Now, Matthews knew only too well that Kavanagh was a complete idiot, mostly, with no people skills and a ludicrously inflated opinion of his own worth, but no one could deny he had the most experience with alien tech outside the HomeWorld employment rolls.

A quiet woman stood behind him, middle-aged with a painfully tight bun of sable-dark hair at the nape of her neck, thick horn-rim glasses and a mouth screwed up as if she had sucked a lemon. She held a computer pad, typing into it and using fingers to navigate whatever the hell she had on there… she was apparently Kavanagh’s keeper. Ostensibly, she was his secretary, but she was actually there to ensure he didn’t blow up the planet, by accident or otherwise. No one bothered to introduce her, so Matthews named her in his own head, Ms Sour-puss. His imagination had her sweeping off her glasses, shaking out her raven-s wing hair, and turning into a beauty… ‘oh, Ms Sour-Puss, you’re so beautiful without your glasses…’. With a start, he realized that was actually kind of true… Ah. Another disguise, then.

“Well, Dr. Kavanagh. Nice to see you again. I take it you requested my presence?” Bradshaw began, his tone chilling.

Kavanagh had an expression every bit as sour as his assistant. “The Wraith is being… difficult. He wants to speak to someone in charge. I told him I was in charge, but he didn’t believe me.”

Well, no. Even a Wraith would be able to figure that out. A few more pieces of the puzzle began to slide into place. Matthews sighed. Bradshaw, he knew, wasn’t going to be happy about this.

“Let me guess. You circumvented standard procedure, and tried to go over my head, right? In spite of our current black-out and radio-silence protocols, while HomeWorld Security executes their little witch-hunt across the planet? They’ve already located and raided two of our other labs, and they’re not even close to being done, yet. Let’s not even go into how you knew who I report to, a violation of confidentiality in itself, you then tried to get them to authorize you to deal with the Wraith yourself. The Wraith who was supposed to be in the Ancient stasis chamber. The only Wraith the invading six hives evidently didn’t know about, because he was locked in stasis and therefore unable to communicate with his kind. Because they hunted down all of the others we had on the planet, to attempt to spring them loose. Is that the situation, doctor?”

At least the ego-centric narcissist paused, to consider if there was a less-damaging answer to that.
Matthews sighed again, and spared a glance at the other Marine Major, who merely leveled a glower on the scientist. Yeah, this idiot was going to sink the whole organization, if they let him.

Bradshaw, his mirrored face clenched into a grim mask, said, “Okay. Let’s see if we can make this easy for you to understand, Dr. Kavanagh. HomeWorld Security is hunting for every one of us, and there will be no trials, no defense, if they find us. If we’re *lucky*, they’ll move us to some desert planet with minimal resources and no stargate, and strand us there. You are familiar with the Hadante mission? That’s where they’ll send us if we’re unlucky. Have you ever been to Bunker Thirteen? Yes? Then your face and signature are on evidence HomeWorld currently has in hand, along with date and time stamps that will allow them to track back your transportation here from Nevada. You will be easy to find. They may already have a target on you, are tracing your communications and entire history. I’ll leave it to you to consider how *eager* Dr. McKay will be to nail your carcass to the wall. And you’re sitting here in one of our most important remaining facilities, with a live Wraith, awake and communicating, for the next wave of Wraith invaders to find. But, worse than all that, you’ve attempted communication with one of our superiors, a name you shouldn’t even know, so you’ve put them at risk, too. For that, they’ll just have you shot in the head, or maybe fed to your Wraith.”

Kavanagh had paled alarmingly and gulped on his prominent adam’s apple. “We had to wake him up. We had important tests to run, and the other specimens were lost in the Invasion.”

“Yes. You might want to consider how and why we lost them, doctor. Every single human at Bunker Thirteen was eaten by the Wraith. HomeWorld think we’re the reason for the Wraith finding Earth in the first place.”

“That’s… that’s ridiculous! Their telepathic range isn’t much more than within a single star system…”

“Unless you add a Goa’uld symbiote.”

“Our Wraith doesn’t have a symbiote.”

“Not yet. And I would strongly advise you to hold off on any and all experiments with him for the time being, and shut him back in stasis.” Bradshaw stared meaningfully at the scientist, then huffed impatiently. “Now, Dr. Kavanagh! Right now.”

Kavanagh jumped at the sharp tone, and was out of his chair and half-way out of his office before he remembered he was supposed to be in charge around here. He deliberately slowed his pace and straightened his spine, even as he continued to a nearby cell, where a Wraith was, indeed, awake and strapped to a gurney, with various pieces of standard medical equipment taking his status.

Matthews and the other Major followed Bradshaw, with Ms Sour-Puss on their heels.

The creature grinned its horrible rotted-teeth smile as they entered. “Ahh. No Master still, but better. My brother-who-holds-notWraith gives you message, food-who-keep-us-restrained. He say, Destroyer of Worlds is free. Tremble.”

Matthews frowned at the Thing. He could feel shudders working around his spine, neck and shoulders… the Thing’s influence, perhaps? They were known to be able to extend a psychic link to other living beings, to make them more pliable and easier to control.

“I don’t understand your message,” Bradshaw replied coldly. But he held up his hand for the technician who prepared a hypodermic to inject the IV tubes with anesthetic.
“He who walks the stars and brings disaster in his wake. Disaster for the Goa’uld, for the Replicators, for the Ori… Even Our Makers bow to him, tremble before him. The Asgard pass their legacy to him. Worlds and Empires he brings down. Now he brings the end for you. He will bring it for my kind, if he lives. Our Queens did not come to rescue us, as you have supposed, pitiful males that we be… they came for Him. Destroyer of Worlds. Dan-yel Jack-son.”

Everyone in the cell froze. Matthews stared into the Thing’s black eyes, mesmerized. Then he shook himself loose of its glee. Bradshaw, apparently made of sterner stuff, replied, quite calmly, “No. He died in his cell when the attack leveled Bunker Thirteen. He Ascended. He’s done it before.”

The Wraith slowly shook its head, grin widening impossibly, and chuckling. “My brother-who-holds-notWraith was last in your Bunker. He saw. He was released so he could destroy the Destroyer. He sent me visions, even while I was in stasis-sleep, even in hibernation. Destroyer of Worlds escaped. He lives. My brothers-kept-by-food do not live, not even brother-who-holds-notWraith, but the Destroyer lives. Tremble, food. Tremble.”

The Wraith began to laugh, uproarious, and Bradshaw angrily signaled the tech to go ahead with the sedation. “Get that Thing into stasis, now. And leave it there.” He marched out of the cell, just to get away from the fading chuckles of the Wraith. Kavanagh made to follow, but cringed at the single quelling look from Bradshaw.

He turned to “Charleston”. “If Daniel Jackson escaped the Bunker…”

Charleston nodded. No more needed to be said. A five year old stray, wandering the desert, perhaps lost among the hundred thousand or so displaced refugees in Nevada after the Invasion… Worlds, Empires, Dynasties had fallen because they made the fatal mistake of underestimating Dr. Daniel Jackson. Letting him run loose was not a good thing. Charleston saluted and made his way back to the elevator.

Bradshaw sent a last disgusted look at their head scientist, and Matthews desperately wished they didn’t need the cretin so badly. His secretary was excellent at actually running their labs, and they had hired the most brilliant people available, but no one else they had in their employ could match this idiot when it came to alien tech. Earth-bound scientists who had never been through the Stargate simply had no concept of what was truly possible, locked in the limits of their own severely claustrophobic experience.

Bradshaw said, in a menacingly calm and quiet voice, “Dr. Kavanagh… Call in your second in command. He’ll need to beef up security on this installation, to make sure sub-space comms are properly secured against inadvertent tampering. I will also suggest he see if he can monitor brain activity within the stasis pod… if the Wraith can communicate from inside that thing, we may not be able to safely keep him alive any longer.”

Kavanagh swallowed, more bobbing of his adam’s apple. “What about me? This is my command…”

Bradshaw studied him, up and down, as one would a worm under a shoe, thinking… then he came to a decision. “*Was* your command. You are being relieved. You’ll come with me. I’ll have to report in person to our superiors on your failure of security protocols. There may be a spot for you in Somalia. Under the supervision of someone who knows how to obey orders.

“And, last but not least, I would strongly advise you *never* to attempt communications with anyone else in the organization, ever again, save through your direct supervisor, or Major Matthews, here. You send all reports, all requests, through them and only them. You’ve had your one warning on this subject. You understand?”
Yeah, thanks for that, Matthews thought sourly, as he followed his boss out of this hell hole, already anticipating the deluge of whining emails he was bound to collect. People complained about McKay being hard to deal with, but at least that annoying scientist didn’t *whine*.

Once Kavanagh’s second had been called in and given orders, the bald man smirking gloatingly at Kavanagh as he was relieved of duty, Bradshaw led the way out. Matthews glanced back at the security door as it slammed in place, behind Bradshaw, Kavanagh and himself. This place was a rat trap, just waiting to be raided by HomeWorld, and Matthews had no doubt that would come sooner, rather than later. Unless his bosses decided to cut their losses, and their risks, before that.

He was even more sure of it when he recognized Ms Sour-Puss, waiting in the car that carried them away from this accident-waiting-to-happen.

He and Bradshaw were just boarding the private GlobalTech jet, with Kavanagh and Ms Sour-Puss (now acting as Bradshaw’s new executive secretary), when a distant boom sounded, from the direction of the installation they had just visited.

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She was a wonderful little machine, Spencer acknowledged, as the miles flew by. He was careful to obey all the travel laws and speed regulations, and rather enjoyed the freedom of straddling such a responsive and open form of transport. He was anonymous under his face-obscuring helmet, on a motorcycle registered to some guy in Ohio, as he journeyed south-east across breath-taking countryside. The ramparts of the Rocky Mountains of Washington State, the foothills of the mid-west through Montana and Wyoming, the flat prairies, badlands and awesome river valleys of Nebraska, Iowa…

After days of easy travel, and stops in campgrounds requiring no identification and only a little cash for a nightly stay under an army surplus pup-tent, he had reached Ohio, and at last allowed himself to breathe with relief. If he were stopped now, with the Ohio motorcycle, and the ownership in his wallet signed over to him, there was little to no paper trail to track back to Cascade.

After that much time on the road, with only brief stops for food and contact, he decided to risk a motel for a real bed and a shower. He picked a small town outside Cincinnati. There was a truck-stop next door with the kind of traffic in the large parking lot that indicated truckers endorsed the cooking at the attached restaurant.

As with almost every other public bar and grill these days, there were large screen televisions tuned to either sports or news channels. Spencer was almost conditioned to ignore everything but mention of the Stargate or aliens… but a longer and stronger training brought his attention up from his excellent hamburger, at the mention of a tragedy in Las Vegas, already reeling from the blows dealt in the past weeks.

An Amber Alert was being issued for four little boys missing from the Sanctuary Shelters for refugees still remaining in Vegas. Four rough ID pictures were flashed across the screen, not school pictures or family shots, as with most cases of this kind, but from what were evidently ID photos taken as the refugees had been processed into the Sanctuaries. Four little boys between the ages of four and six, dark blond hair and big blue eyes…

The Slaughter of the Innocents had begun.

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Ready to Give the Profile

Chapter Notes

Okay, folks, here is where the ‘child death’ comes in, so if this is a trigger for you, beware. This is canon-typical for Criminal Minds, handled as CM handles such case-fic detail. Nothing too graphic or gory, and, I hope, handled with appropriate sensitivity & seriousness. But in CM, someone has to be the victim…

~ *Hollywood continues to present the U.S. Army as being the good guys, always defeating the aliens or foreigners.* ~ Hideo Kojima ~

~

Captain Jim Brass and Dr. Gil Grissom were there at the air-strip to meet the FBI jet as it landed. Both had brought department SUVs, two vehicles enough to ferry the BAU team to the CSI headquarters, where a conference room had been set up for them. They had been in constant communication with a technical analyst in Quantico and the team on the plane, to deliver the bad news about the most recent development in the case of the four kidnapped boys. One had been found dead, left in a graveyard outside town.

The autopsy had already determined that the horrific mutilations and evidence of sexual assault on the pathetic little body were all post-mortem. The actual cause of death had been a drug overdose of phenol-barbital, which had evidently been used to subdue the little boy and keep him doped while held captive. As far as they could determine, the boy had been unconscious the entire twelve hours he had been missing.

Both Gil and Jim Brass discussed case details with the two halves of the team on the way to CSI, and tossed around various speculations, so it was only when they arrived at their destination and got settled around the conference table, with Penelope Garcia on the big-screen TV monitor to join the meeting, that Captain Brass addressed the tension around them.

“Just to get rid of the big pink elephant in the room,” he began, “Yes, Gil and I know your Dr. Reid. We were all at Groom Lake the night of the space-vampire invasion. And yes, Gil sent me a copy of the after-action report from that night, just as I know Dr. Reid sent it on to you, so I know about as much as all of you do about the mess our boys walked into. He’s a really smart cookie, your Dr. Reid, and we could sure use his help on this, but I know he’s not available right now. So. Any questions? Any questions, that is, not covered by the non-disclosure documents we all had to sign?”

Hotch gave a rueful nod and admitted dryly, “I’m sure we’ve got a thousand questions. But that’s not why we’re here…” he held up a hand toward the conference room camera to forestall his tech analyst, “that’s not *entirely* why we came. We’ve got three little boys to find, and an unsub to capture. We’ll go have a beer afterwards to trade Reid stories.”

Hotch’s team, Dave Rossi, Derek Morgan, JJ Jareau and Tara Lewis, all nodded agreement, and even Penelope Garcia, her (currently) henna-red hair held in pig tails by acid-green berets shaped like butterflies, and wearing a dangerously low-cut scoop-neck t-shirt in bright sunshine yellow and big
flowers of acid green, reluctantly nodded her acceptance. The many rhinestones on her acid-green framed glasses sparkled and flashed as her chin went up and down.

Hotch then offered Garcia the floor for the briefing re-cap.

“Last night between twelve midnight and one a.m., four boys were abducted from three different refugee Sanctuaries around Las Vegas. Four year old Davey Martin, six year old Kyle O’Brian, five year old Steven Parker, and an identified boy, John Doe, thought to be around five years old, too traumatized after the invasion to give his name to authorities. All four boys were separated from their families one way or another and had yet to be re-united, none of them native to Las Vegas, which is how they ended up in the Sanctuaries, in the foster care sections. They were all reported missing within an hour of each other, and an Amber Alert was issued immediately. Considering the ongoing transportation issues in Nevada in general and Las Vegas in particular, it’s almost certain the children have not been moved out of the immediate area.

“This morning, the body of one of the children, John Doe, was discovered in the St. Mark’s Presbyterian cemetery. I don’t need to tell you that I have not viewed the picture now appearing on your monitor, for fear of life-scarring nightmares. The boy labeled John Doe was found naked, wrapped in a blanket, cut all over, with evidence of sexual assault. But the mutilations and… desecrations, were all post mortem. He was actually killed by an overdose of sedative, less than two hours before his body was found.”

Views of the small fragile body laid on an autopsy table alternated with close ups of various wounds, and shots of the cemetery where he was found… the body had been wrapped carefully in an old worn blanket, and laid against a large head stone with an angel statue on top.

“I have since been able to match John Doe to a missing persons report filed by his grandparents. John Doe was Justin Nelson, five years old, of St. Paul Minnesota, whose parents and sister were also reported missing, known to be on vacation in Las Vegas. Justin’s family were victims of the Wraith. His mother was a teacher, her DNA was on file, and so a positive identification was made earlier today from among the mummified remains the Wraith left in the downtown area. Her husband and daughter were then also identified from dental records. Justin must have escaped somehow, but it’s no wonder he was in shock and mute when they found him and took him to the Sanctuary. This is just so sad… what that poor little boy went through, only to be targeted by some… some… monster in human form… sometimes I despair of my species, I really do. Except, then I take a deep breath and remember who I work with every day.”

“Garcia,” Hotch said, with some sympathy, but enough sternness to get his soft-hearted analyst back on track.

“The other victims, and I can only hope they’re still alive, were being held in the Sanctuaries until relatives could get to Las Vegas to pick them up. The Martins, O’Brians and Parkers were all in Las Vegas on vacation. Davey Martin’s parents were caught in a Wraith culling beam, so they may still be recovered. At last check, HomeWorld was estimating three more weeks to finish processing all the darts and hives for possible survivors. Kyle O’Brien’s father and Steven Parker’s parents are all in hospital, recovering from injuries received in the attack. And that’s about all I have for you right now, sir.”

“Thank you, Garcia,” Hotch said, and the tech analyst signed off. “Our usual approach is to study victimology by interviewing family and friends, to see if we can determine why the unsub chose these particular boys. Then we work up a geographic profile to identify hunting and comfort zones… and we’ll certainly do all of that, but those options aren’t going to work for us this time. The Sanctuaries, the church, were all within about a two mile radius. JJ and I will go talk to the Sanctuary
volunteers and staff, Rossi and Morgan will take a look at the cemetery where the body was found, and Lewis will spend some time with your ME to see what she can make of the body. If you can find anyone from the hotels where the families were staying who can give us some insight into their activities while here in Las Vegas, that could be helpful, although I know it’ll be a tough job. But for now…”

He hesitated, and Derek Morgan leaned forward. “Usually, this kind of case indicates a preferential pedophile and psychopath. All the victims were almost identical in size, age, build and physical type. Definitely preferential. And the sexual assault and mutilations… would usually be indicators of sadism and psycho-pathology.”

“But?” Grissom asked with a raised eyebrow.

Rossi leaned back. “It’s extremely rare for this type of offender to take more than one victim at a time, for one thing. It’s even more rare for them to have a partner – and given the times of the abductions, there had to be at least two of them. If Dr. Reid were here he could give you the stats on that, but take it from me, it’s plenty rare. Then there are desecrations of the body, as Garcia put it. They were all post mortem. It was a display, for us. Which makes us think it was a forensic countermeasure. They want us to think the unsub is a sadistic preferential pedophile. But the boy was drugged the entire time he was held, and never knew what was happening. The body was carefully wrapped and laid to rest under an angel. That’s some serious remorse.”

“If this isn’t a pedophile,” Captain Brass asked, alarmed, “then who is it?”

Hotch declared, “That’s what we need to discover. But for now, I’d triple and quadruple your security around all the Sanctuaries and hospitals, particularly around boys under ten who are currently without parents. Whoever did this, and there was definitely more than one unsub involved considering the timing, they were highly organized and coordinated. They knew that once the first Amber Alert went out, their ability to raid the Sanctuaries for more victims would be drastically reduced. Whatever they want from these children, they didn’t get it with Justin. They might need more time to see if the other three boys meet their requirements, whatever those might be. But if not, they’ll be looking for more victims.”

JJ stood from her chair, collecting her files and purse, and offered, “I don’t suppose we need to warn you, the likelihood that this is an inside job is extremely high. Someone had access to the Sanctuary records and patient profiles to target those boys, and knew enough about the scheduling and security to bypass it. The more helpful the Sanctuary staff and volunteers are being, the closer we may need to look at them.”

She was almost ready to leave with Hotch, when her cell gave a quick buzz. She had a text from Garcia.

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Garcia was trolling for background on the victims’ families when her personal cell registered a text from an unidentified source. ‘Something’s on the burner, 187.’

“Omigod, Reid,” she gasped and immediately picked up the burn phone she had carefully purchased the week before. The number she placed had been supplied to her in pieces via a series of different chat rooms under different email addies, all of them she recognized immediately as her genius friend. “Sweetie, is that you?” She was careful not to use names. Paranoia was rather rife around her favorite BAU team just now.

“Hey, PG. Does Mom have a hotplate?”
“Just as you wanted, junior. Time for her to get cooking?”

“Oh yeah. I presume they’re in my old stomping grounds?”

“You know it.”

“Then they need this.”

“Oh no… this… this isn’t related, is it?”

“You know better than that, PG. Bye for now.”

And he hung up. Yes, she supposed her question had been ill-advised, if anyone was really out there listening. But she sent an immediate text to JJ, with a code they had worked out together for just this situation.

‘Uncle needs a whistle. P’

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Derek, Dave and Tara were already out the door. Captain Brass offered to give the men a drive to the cemetery scene, while Grissom led Tara to Autopsy, so it was just Hotch and JJ still in the conference room, late in getting organized.

JJ took one look at her text and lit up. “Well, it’s about time,” she muttered and glanced at Hotch. “Reid’s in touch.”

She also had a burn phone purchased specifically for this eventuality. She dialed in the number as swiftly as she could.

“Hey, you! You’re missed, you know.”

“Probably not for much longer. It’s not a preferential pedophile, JJ. You’re looking for a highly organized, highly trained unit of at least three men with extensive black ops experience, former or possibly current military. They’re following orders to acquire one specific target, but all they have to go by is a picture and rough description. They’re true believers, adhering strictly to military chain of command, with absolute reliance on their superiors, and think this is for the greater good. They probably believe they’re acting under National Security. But as soon as they identify those boys aren’t the one they’re after… I’m afraid they’ll kill them, and then go get more. And with heightened security around their target prey, displaced children unidentified or separated from parents, there’s going to start to be collateral damage.”

JJ took a deep breath, to interrupt the rapid-fire delivery of her friend. “They’ve already killed one boy. Mutilations and evidence of sexual assault…”

“Post mortem. There’ll be extreme remorse shown in the dumping. Tell Dr. Grissom they’re after Daniel. He’ll fill you in, as much as he can. They’ll be searching among the refugees for displaced boys of the right age and look. JJ, your best option is to give a press conference. Have Dr. Grissom tell them Daniel is out of reach. Make sure it’s plain he and his team have no idea where Daniel is right now, just that he’s safe and out of Nevada. Say their mission is over, and if they’ve been careful and professional, the boys won’t be able to identify them, and they can no longer be used as a diversion, so they can let them go. It’s pointless, even dangerous to keep them. Then you get on and make them bleed for those kids. Men like this… well, they see themselves as heroes doing their duty. You can reach them. You know what to do.”
“Oh God, Spence… if the boy they’re after isn’t here, and Dr. Grissom and his team don’t know where he went… they’ll go after you next, won’t they?”

“Don’t worry. I have a plan, and I’ve been careful. Very careful. Bring those little boys home safe and sound, JJ. Please.”

“You know I will.”

And the line went dead. JJ took out the burner SIM card, stomped on the phone, collected the remains and dumped them in the trash, then broke the little blue card and dumped it, too.

She looked up at her supervisor and friend, and took a deep breath.

“Okay, Hotch, I need to give a press conference, and I need Dr. Grissom back here to do it. We’re ready to give the profile.”

This press conference had all the ingredients for a really big story, even after the riches of the past few weeks, so attendance by every single reporter in the entire south west who could beg, borrow or steal a lift was simply a given. Not a few of them had never actually left. Since Las Vegas had been ground zero for an alien invasion, it was already flooded with members of the fifth estate. They were a rowdy and raucous bunch, but JJ had faced worse. Much worse. She couldn’t look at those images without seeing her very own blonde-haired blue-eyed angels. She had her game face on, and made sure the pictures of three little boys were blown up and displayed behind the podium. This was all for them, and a very slim chance that Spencer Reid was right, and the unsub could be reached. But considering how often their young genius was wrong… JJ would take that bet any day of the week. She tightened her smile and marched to the dais.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” she said in a quiet voice before the microphone, the very softness of her tone settling the large crowd with speed and ease. An old trick from her media liaison days.

“I am Supervisory Special Agent Jennifer Jareau of the FBI Behavioral Analysis Unit. My team was called to assist the Las Vegas Police Department in the case of four missing boys, abducted from three refugee Sanctuaries set up after the Wraith Invasion.”

Turning, and ignoring the storm of flash bulbs and blindingly-bright spot lights on her, she gestured to the pictures projected on the wall behind her. “Justin Nelson, Davey Martin, Kyle O’Brien and Stevie Parker were all taken between twelve and fifteen hours ago. The body of Justin Nelson was recovered barely two hours ago, from the cemetery behind St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church. I know that early reports speculated about how he had been killed, but we now know that he died of a sedative overdose. We have reason to believe he had been drugged the moment he was taken, and kept unconscious until his death. Any damage done to the body was post mortem. We believe it was an attempt by the perpetrators to mislead us, to make us think it was one psychopathic pedophile responsible. We have reason to believe that is not the case.”

That produced a storm of questions from reporters shouting to be heard over the din, jumping from their chairs.

JJ merely raised a hand for silence, and order was quickly restored.

“It is our belief that the perpetrators who are holding Davey Martin, Kyle O’Brien and Stevie Parker, and who murdered Justin Nelson, are an organized group of at least three men, military or ex-military with extensive black-ops training, who are acting under the orders of another, and believe that their
actions somehow serve the greater good. They believe their mission is one of National Security, and it is to locate and acquire a little boy named Daniel. They were told he might be found among the displaced children in the refugee camps in and around Las Vegas, or perhaps any community around Nellis Air Force Base. For some reason, they were able to determine that Justin Nelson was not the boy they were looking for, before the others."

“Oh, hell no!” barked out General Jonathan “Jack” O’Neill, with two ‘L’s, leaping to his feet as the press conference from Las Vegas rolled across his screen. He touched his speed dial for Carter. And yeah, she got coverage from the bridge of the *Hammond*. “Carter! ZNN, press conference from Las Vegas, those missing kids… the FBI think it’s the Trust, looking for Daniel!”

In the central building of the Cascade Police Department, Washington State, the offices of the Major Crimes Response Team, all was humming along at the usual fast pace. Several major cases had been closed, nothing new was on the horizon, so the various detectives were chewing into paperwork back logs, or diving into the cold case files. Jim Ellison and Blair Sandburg entered, Blair with a hand on the shoulder of an angelic-looking little boy. Blair settled him into a chair at Ellison’s desk, and gave him a notepad.

“There you go, sport. The shelf you want is labelled ‘Homework’. Start on the term papers, and let me know what you think. Jim and I need to go talk to—“

Before he could finish that thought, Captain Simon Banks roared out, “Sandburg! Ellison! My office, now!”

The two men exchanged fatalistic looks. Oh yeah, no flies on Simon; he knew the moment anyone tried to pull some stunt. They left Ethan looking a little worried, but working the notepad to find the files he could read.

Jim was just shutting Simon’s office door behind him when their boss launched into his usual ass-chewing. “This is not a day-care! What the hell is going on, Sandburg?”

“Sorry, Simon. One of Naomi’s sorority sisters lives in Las Vegas, and she needed somewhere safe for Ethan to stay until things settle down. We got the tap. One of our neighbours has been taking care of him, but she needed to fly back east last night, family issues, so… We haven’t had time to find other arrangements for the kid yet… but he’s real quiet and well-behaved, and we’ll have him settled at Rainier’s child care tomorrow.”

Jim hoped his wooden poker face was firmly in place, because he was absolutely floored by his partner’s skill at obfuscation. Every word he just spoke was gospel truth… it was just the whole package that was a big fat lie.

Simon eyed Blair carefully. Yeah, no matter how good Blair was at this, Simon had known them both too long not to smell a fish. His bull-shit sense was as highly tuned as any sentinel’s. “Uh-hunh. Well… you better. We got work to do here, either of you could be called at a second’s notice, and we got suspects coming in… this isn’t the place for a kid.”

“Promise, Simon. I just need to know he’s safe for today, and we’ll have other arrangements settled by tomorrow.”

“Yeah, well, just for today…”
They all looked out the glass walls of Simon’s office, to find the little boy was no longer sitting at Jim’s desk, but standing with the other detectives, staring at the big screen television. There was a news conference on ZNN from Las Vegas about missing boys… Ethan turned to find them, his little face screwed up in horror, tears already welling in his big blue eyes.

“Oh hell,” Blair muttered, racing out of the office to sweep Ethan up in his arms, and take him to a quiet corner where he could set him down and talk to him in calm, soothing whispers. Simon and Jim went to stand by the other detectives, riveted to the FBI press conference.

Simon heard enough of the briefing to get an uneasy feeling in his gut. He glanced at his best detective, and saw the iron set of his jaw, the furious look in his eyes.


“You tell anyone else he’s from Las Vegas?”

“No, thank God.”

“Amen. When Sandburg has him calmed down, set him up at my round table. I could use the company.”

Jim glanced at his boss with a small smile. “You old softy.”

Simon growled, and turned his full attention back to the FBI briefing.

JJ introduced Dr. Gil Grissom. Although the crusty CSI supervisor seemed to be a little lacking in people skills, there was nothing wrong with his keen intellect, and JJ had carefully coached him in the last half hour, on how to use his fulminating rage at the situation to best effect.

“My team participated in the defense of Nevada, the night of the Wraith Invasion. In the course of our security sweeps at Nellis Air Force Base, northwest of Las Vegas, we discovered a little boy wandering alone. He was injured and badly traumatized, and had been severely abused, with injuries up to two months old, so most weren’t from the Invasion. His condition was consistent with being held in close confinement, he had ligature marks on wrists and ankles, bruises, electrical burns and cuts, needle tracks on both arms, and whip marks all over his back, buttocks and legs. We believed that the Wraith attack must have damaged the cell he was being kept in, somehow, allowing him to escape. He told us his name was Daniel. He appeared to be five or six years old, with blonde hair and blue eyes, remarkably similar to our four abducted boys. He was terrified that ‘they’ would come for him, and would kill us all if we interfered, or even for just seeing him. But that was all he could tell us.

“The situation was such that we immediately realized the people behind Daniel’s abduction must be powerful and important, with sufficient security authorizations and clearance to have free and easy access to the Nellis Air Force Base. As such, we determined that it was in the best interests of the child to keep him out of the conventional welfare systems, and enact the protocols for at-risk children when there was extreme likelihood of an abuser locating and harming them. Sad to say, this is not an unusual or uncommon situation. Spouses and children in abusive relationships or the victims of stalkers have been taking advantage of this kind of underground railway for some time.

“Daniel is no longer in Nevada. Beyond that, I and my team,” and Gil gestured to Nick Stokes and Greg Sanders behind him, “have no idea where Daniel is at this present time, only that he is safe, and
out of this state.

“I am breaking the seal of secrecy in this case and at this time, because I believe, along with the members of the FBI Behavior Analysis Unit, that the four boys abducted in the past day were not taken by a pedophile, as initially believed, but by men serving the group who held Daniel prisoner and tortured him until his escape. They were, in fact, on a mission, under orders to locate and retrieve Daniel. They took four little boys who answered to the same general description, from the refugee Sanctuaries, but they must know by now that none of them are the boy they’re looking for.”

Somewhere close by, there was an odd rushing sound and a brief flare of stark white light. It was followed by a contingent of military personnel in generic green BDU’s, shoving into the room to stand at the back. In the lead was a tall, slender man with silver hair and an air of command. His three subordinates all wore communications devices on their ears and kept their hands near their sides as they scanned the room. There were no identifying patches or rank devices on their uniforms, but anyone with a television would recognize their leader, after the past few weeks.

JJ Jareau stepped back to the podium, to stare directly into the cameras aimed her way. “At this time, I am directly addressing the men who have taken Davey Martin, Steven Parker and Kyle O’Brian. I am appealing to you to release these innocent little boys. Davey, Steven and Kyle are not the boy you want, and therefore are useless to you.

“We know that there are three or more of you, and that you are now, or have been, in military service. You are currently under the orders of superiors who, you believe, are acting for the greater good of the nation, possibly the world. Your mission is to locate and re-acquire the little boy we know only as Daniel. You don’t have a certain identification of Daniel, so you took displaced children without parents who were close to his description. But the four boys you found and took are not Daniel. Taking more boys, or harming the boys you still hold, or killing them, will in no way serve you. We know that what you did to the first little boy, Justin Nelson, was done after his death, that he did not suffer, but that you felt you had to make some attempt to try and mislead us. That is no longer possible.

“Davey Martin is just four years old. His parents were caught in a Wraith culling beam, and may yet be rescued, as HomeWorld experts continue to process the darts and hives, and more victims are returned to us daily. Imagine their horror if they come out of the beam only to find their little boy is lost to them. Stevie Parker is six years old. His parents, Alice and Mike, had left him with a babysitter while they went to a show on Invasion Night. Both of them are in hospital recovering from injuries, or they would be here with us now. They are so distraught over their little boy’s disappearance that they have had to be sedated.

“Kyle O’Brian’s father is a decorated Marine, probably not unlike yourselves. He has served two tours in Afghanistan, and only returned state-side when his wife was diagnosed with cancer. She died a month ago, and is still being mourned by her husband Donald and son Kyle. Sgt. Don O’Brian made this trip to Las Vegas as a special treat, to celebrate Kyle’s sixth birthday, in hopes that they could both ease their pain over Janice’s loss. Sgt. O’Brian was injured by falling debris in the Invasion, while attempting to lead a group of civilians to safety, and is currently in hospital with a concussion, still unconscious at this time, but expected to fully recover. Please, do not let him wake to find his son Kyle is lost to him too. A war hero like Donald does not deserve this.

“Davey, Steven and Kyle are innocent victims in all of this. We have to assume that you have sedated them, as you did Justin, so that they would not suffer, and would not be able to identify you. Please, just let them go. You are professionals, men of duty, and your first duty is to protect the innocent. These little boys are of no use to you, and can do you no harm, at this point. You can release them easily enough, in front of a church or hospital, in a playground or school yard, in a busy
restaurant… but please, do not harm them.”

Although there was another brief explosion of questions from the floor, JJ once again held up a hand, and said simply, “That is all we have at this time. We will be sure to keep the public informed.”

The silver-haired military man at the back snorted at that. “Yeah, right. Reynolds, secure the exits. I need to have a word with Dr. Grissom and his team before they get snatched. And if anyone catches sight of Dr. Spencer Reid, let me know. Odds are he’s at the bottom of this mess.”

General Jack O’Neill then ploughed his way inexorably through the stubborn members of the fifth estate to get to the door leading back into the offices of the local CSI divisions.

Stacey and Violet were having lunch in the student union cafeteria when the big screen monitors set up all around, dialed to news networks for the latest on the invasion aftermath, began running the BAU press conference from Las Vegas.

They watched, like all the other students around them, in stunned and horrified silence, until coverage switched over to the recovery and rescue reports. Then the girls stared at each other, wide-eyed.

Violet seemed to be breathing rather quickly. “You don’t suppose… Ethan… he had a lot of bruises, but kids get bruises all the time, and…”

Stacey swallowed with difficulty. “Did you tell anyone about Spencer and his brother?”

Violet shook her head. “All anyone wanted to know was where we were during the invasion, and did I see any aliens. Nobody cared how we got home.”

Stacey nodded. “Same here… and even if I wanted to tell the folks where I really was that week, I sure as hell wouldn’t tell them we picked up complete strangers for the trip back. Okay… so, we won some cash at the casino, and that’s how we could afford gas money home. Right? Just you and me, no hitchhikers.”

Violet glanced back at the screen and took a deep breath. “Absolutely. It was just you and me. Till the end of time.”

“Till the end of time,” Stacey agreed. And then she whispered, “Good luck, Spencer… and… Ethan.”

Every law enforcement officer in Nevada was running on fumes after the past few weeks of constant alert and emergency measures, but the abduction of four little boys had given them a second wind. Losing those boys had been the last straw, and taken as a personal affront by everyone. How *dare* they. With so much tragedy, so much loss of life, to add those four more to the pile? At a time like this? And, bad enough if it was a normal, or rather ab-normal, pedophile with insane and uncontrollable lusts triggered by the chaos, but for it to be the calculated scheme of a bunch of black ops domestic terrorists? How *dare* they?

Every refugee centre, Sanctuary, hospital and social services shelter were on high alert, and already exhausted officers and security personnel were patrolling the streets.

No one really expected the press conference to work on the perpetrators in this case… they could
hope, but the men behind the murder of Justin Nelson, and the cold blooded desecration of his remains, couldn’t possibly have any conscience to work upon. Could they?

JJ stared the HomeWorld Security Director straight in the eye and said, “If Spencer says it’ll work, it’ll work. He profiled true believers, men of duty on a mission. Men like that don’t kill innocents.”

“The kind of people who work for the Trust do,” Jack argued. “It was a stupid move, Agent Jareau, and all you did was paint a very big target on the backs of Dr. Grissom and his team, not to mention your friend Spencer. *Especially* him, since he is conspicuous in his absence.”

The argument had been going on for almost half an hour, as HomeWorld Security brought more and more of their people in to ride herd on The BAU team, Dr. Grissom, Nick Stokes and Greg Sanders, corralling them all in their conference room, along with Captain Brass, who wouldn’t let them evict him, on general principals. He hadn’t actually been to the installation known as Bunker Thirteen, but since he had read the after-action report, he knew pretty much everything the rest of them did anyway… and going from ‘Daniel’ wandering the desert, and actually being the only survivor from Bunker Thirteen, was not that much of a leap of logic.

But Hotch had had enough. “My agent is the best there is, General. My whole team is the best. Dr. Reid knows better than anyone what is needed to save those boys. He felt the risk was worth it, and I agreed. He also was confident that he had a plan in place to protect both Daniel and himself, and I have every confidence in his intelligence and abilities. Which is why I signed off on the press conference. So lay the hell off my agents.”

Tara, Derek and JJ were hard pressed to hide their grins at this, but Dave Rossi muttered a heart-felt “Ooh-rah!” under his breath.

O’Neill (with 2 ‘L’s) face-palmed in frustration. He keyed his radio and barked out, “Carter. Whatcha got?”

A woman’s voice was broadcast on some kind of speaker system spilling from thin air. “A lot more phenol-barbital use than I would expect… filtering out all the sources in hospitals and clinics and the refugee centers… a number of sources in the Vegas storm-sewer system…”

“Ignore those,” Jim Brass recommended. “That’s where our homeless population likes to hang out. Lots of addicts down there.”

“Okay… I got three isolated sources, moving away from one central location… one is stationary… two… three. All three are stationary now. And... we have life signs. Transmitting locations and addresses to LVPD. Back tracking and re-winding time stamp to source… fourth address being routed to SG-3. Reynolds, be careful. I doubt they’ll return to that location, but you know what to expect from the Trust.”

“Got you, Carter. On our way.” Four of the men with O’Neill abruptly left.

“Any way to ID who was there, Carter?” O’Neill asked, a little mollified, and not a little astounded that life signs had been found.

Penelope Garcia, on Skype from Quantico, and with her own squad of HomeWorld guard dogs leering over her shoulder, said, “Give me the fourth address, and I’ll find you security footage of everyone coming and going in the last five days.”

“Oh please,” grumbled a man’s voice over the same invisible speaker as Carter, “Teach your grandmother to suck eggs. I’ve already got all the footage from the past ten days, and I’ve run facial
recognition… we have positive ID on five men. All have US military records, all were forced out for one reason or another… two on disability, one on conduct unbecoming, the others retired. One is former SGC. Who should I send this to, General?"

O’Neill didn’t appreciate much about Dr. Meredith Rodney McKay, but he had to smirk at this little bit of one-upmanship delivered on a platter. “Yeah,” he couldn’t resist commenting smugly, “My people are pretty damn good, too. McKay, send the IDs to Reynolds for now. These guys are a little too dangerous for the local LEOs to handle.”

“Aw hell, why don’t I just shoot you now?” Brass suggested in an irate tone. “A little fragging in the left foot? Pop that inflated ego of yours just a little bit? You need to let us get a little of our own back, okay? Take some of my guys with you, at least.”

“You do realize we need at least one of them alive for questioning, right?”

“Yeah, sure. You mean they don’t all carry cyanide pills or something?”

Rossi nodded and added, “Or whoever is in charge hasn’t already killed them on his way out the door?”

Since it was all too likely this is just what had happened, O’Neill said, “Carter, if you can get a bead on any of these guys, beam them straight to holding, okay? And get them sedated and stripped soon as.”

“Will do, sir.”

“Thereby by-passing the entire legal justice system?” Hotch accused.

O’Neill shrugged. “They’re all ex-military. The Military Code of Justice applies. And I can get a Presidential Order in five minutes with enough evidence, and we apparently have plenty. They wanted Daniel. Their next target is going to be Dr. Reid or Dr. Grissom, in order to get to Daniel. You want that? Seriously?”

Hotch stared at the man. “Destroyer of Worlds?” and he was very interested in the way O’Neill, and the men with him, winced. “Just who is Daniel?”

“Not the Destroyer of Worlds,” O’Neill insisted. “That was another person entirely. But… I can see why the Wraith would call him that.”

“And?”

O’Neill sighed. “I can’t help but think if I had gone to you guys in the first place, two months ago when he was first taken, none of this would have happened. He’s properly known as Dr. Daniel Jackson. Famed in song and story. The man who opened the Stargate. The man who found Atlantis for us. The man who is, at least partly, responsible for the defeat of the Goa’uld, the Replicators, and pretty much entirely responsible for the end of the Ori. His current abbreviated appearance is due to an accident with an alien device, six months back. As far as the Trust is concerned, it made him vulnerable, and they took advantage. And, because Daniel drew in the Wraith, and the Wraith destroyed Bunker Thirteen, we’re closer than we’ve ever been to completely eradicating the Trust. So, yeah, maybe Destroyer of Worlds fits.”

Rossi blew out a long low whistle. “Sheesh. No wonder they want him dead.”

“Not dead. Dead doesn’t really work on Danny,” O’Neill corrected. “They think that as a five year old, they can control him, force him to work for them. Yeah, like that was ever going to happen. The
Trust was doomed the moment they took him, they just didn’t know it. But that doesn’t mean I want him roaming around loose like this. I want him home with me. Soon as.”

Dr. Grissom shook his head. “Not a good idea. The one thing he told us that night was that Jack couldn’t protect him, even if Jack was a General. That’s true, right? If you get him back, and this Trust organization still has even a few members left, they’ll just take him again.”

O’Neill sighed. “Probably.”

Hotch frowned at the man, who seemed to age ten years, just sitting there. “You know what Bunker Thirteen was, don’t you, General? It was a torture chamber built by and for psychopathic, sadistic serial killers, even if they were in uniforms and lab coats, and drew their pay from the same place as you and I. No one who went into that place was ever intended to come out. And that probably goes for the employees as much as the prisoners. The infirmary and interrogation rooms were set up as a sadist’s fun room. They enjoyed what they did to their victims. They enjoyed what they did to a five year old child, no matter who they thought he was. It’s all in Dr. Reid’s report, the pathology of a group of entitled serial killers, who were true believers and thought their cause justified indulging their sick twisted whims. I imagine Dr. Grissom and his team saw exactly the same thing. A crime scene masquerading as a military installation. These are not people who know how to stop, unless someone stops them. You have to know this.”

“Yeah,” O’Neill admitted. “Add in that the guys at the top all have god complexes, think they’re entitled to rule the World by divine right, and everyone under them thinks they deserve to be one of the bosses and run the show themselves, there’s a long established history of lieutenants killing and taking over the places of their superiors, and you’ve pretty much got their profile down.”

“Then maybe,” JJ suggested gently, recognizing the pain of another parent, “Daniel is better off with Spencer, for the time being. He’s been right so far, and done a pretty good job of hiding himself and Daniel from these Trust people.”

“Oh thank God…” Captain Brass exclaimed over his cell. He announced to the room, “Davey Martin, Stevie Parker and Kyle O’Brian have all been found, alive and well. Davey was in a Chucky Cheese ball pit, Kyle was in a MacDonald’s play area, and Stevie was found on a school playground. All three seemed to be sound asleep, but EMT’s report their vitals are good. They’re all being taken to hospitals now… for Kyle and Stevie, the same ones their parents are in. And Sgt. Don O’Brian is showing signs of coming out of his coma.”

There was a collective sigh of relief from everyone, even from the disembodied Colonel Carter and Doctor McKay.

Then Carter announced, “I’ve got two of our Trust agents… they’re zatted and in holding here on the *Hammond*. Processing them now.”

“And the other three?” O’Neill asked.

Reynolds’ voice reported in mid air, “Two are at the abandoned motel they were using as their operations base, dead. Must have been killed soon after the boys were taken out of here. We’ve got the third. He didn’t have a chance to track down the men Carter nabbed. They must have been on returning the boys.”

“Get that third man zatted and sent to Carter. Take the bodies, too. Captain Brass, Dr. Grissom, think you can get us all the evidence we need from that motel room to legally fry the three survivors?”

Grissom, Nick and Greg were already reaching for their CSI kits. Brass grinned. “Oh, you betcha.”
“SG-12, you stay on their asses. The Trust will be after anyone they think will get them closer to Daniel, and these guys qualify. No alien abductions, no unexplained disappearances, no stray shots from a grassy knoll, they get so much as a hang-nail on your watch, and it’s diplomatic service with the Tok’ra for you. Got it?”

“Sir, yes sir!”

Hotch tipped his head to the side to consider the general. “And us?”

“Well normally, I like to give interrogations to Danny and Teal’c to do. That is a good-cop/scary-cop team that never fails. In this case? Maybe the BAU would like to take a crack at them? With an extra bonus of getting a ride on a real honest-to-goodness space ship?”

“Oh, hey, I’m in!” Morgan pounced.

“Can I come too?” Penelope Garcia pleaded over her Skype link, still stinging that *anyone* could get to the critical answer before she could.

“We’ll all go,” Hotch announced sternly, but all the while thinking, “Wait till I tell Jack! He’ll flip. His super-hero dad on a space ship! Cool or what.” Oh yeah, super cool props for this one, to go with the happy ending no one thought possible for three families already devastated in the Wraith Invasion.

“After,” JJ advised, “we inform the press that the three boys have been released alive, and the suspects in the case are dead or in custody. Because Spencer will want to know, and this is the safest way to get word to him.”

Once again, the attractive blonde was at the podium from Las Vegas, over the national ZNN air waves. Since it was little more than an hour after the previous press conference, the experienced detectives of the Cascade MCRT knew this probably meant bad news. With a hand gesture alert from Jim, Simon closed the blinds on his office windows, told Ethan to stay put, and came out to face the music with the others.

Hearing that the three missing boys had been recovered safely and the five suspects were either dead (killed by their own) or in custody, was the cherry on the sundae. A cheer went up from all the officers, and Blair raced back to Simon’s office to let Ethan know.

“But Justin is dead,” Ethan wept, heart-broken. “They were looking for me, and…”

Simon came in and said briskly, “None of this is your fault, Ethan. Trust me on this. The bastards who took you in the first place, the monsters who took those other little boys, and whoever was giving the orders… that’s who’s to blame. Not you. It’s all on them. Got it?”

Reluctantly, Ethan nodded. Blair took a tissue from the box on Simon’s desk to wipe the tears away and ordered the little boy to give a good blow. “There, now. How about you check out the anthropology shelf on my notebook. It’s got some really nifty stuff on Central American manhood rites…”

“Whoa!” groused Darryl’s father. “How about something age-appropriate, Sandburg?”

“I could help type up reports,” Ethan offered, dragging a sleeve under his still-damp nose. “I used to do all Jack’s reports for him. I can spell better than he can.”
Simon gave a double-take at this, ignoring the mention of ‘Jack’, and staring at the apparent five-year-old. Blair, meanwhile, took it in stride.

“Yeah, well, I think that comes under the heading slave-labor, and violates all kinds of child-labors laws. What did you think of the student papers?”

“Well… that one guy, Chatsworth? He totally stole that article from the Arizona State Journal of Native American Culture. 1997, June edition, I think. Three quarters of it is word-for-word. And two other guys, Stevens and Basmati, were also ripping off published articles, without giving proper credit. I’d have to look it up later for exact references, but I’m pretty sure.”

Blair chuckled. “Good catch, Ethan. I knew about Chatsworth and Basmati, but I missed Stevens. A buddy of mine who’s doing TA duty this semester for the first years was pretty sure there was some whole-sale plagiarism going on in his classes, but he couldn’t catch them at it. Those guys are all pre-law, too. This is going to be good.”

Ethan chuckled with him.

“Yeah yeah,” Simon broke up the party. “You got reports of your own due in, detective, consultant. And I *will* know if you cheat.”

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Spencer watched the press conference, feeling a wave of home-sickness, missing his team acutely. Relieved that the kids were safe, but…

With a sigh, he ducked out of the little road-side café once it was over, and threw a leg over the rusty Harley he had traded for the little Kawasaki. He was going to miss that sweet machine, but he didn’t feel comfortable sticking with it after breaking radio silence. The guy he had traded with was on the dark side of shady, and Reid was pretty sure if he went looking for a serial number on the big clunky bike, he would find it filed off, or eaten by acid. But it did come with an ownership slip that *looked* legit. All the better to cover his tracks.

He had already sent cryptic messages to friends in New Orleans, Los Angeles, Chicago and Boston to use the credit and debit cards he had already sent them. Small purchases of magazines, candy or other innocuous items would be made once, and only once, at local stores with security cameras that were currently out-of-order, then the cards would be destroyed.

He had done as much as he could to obscure his trail. Now it was time to head for home.

Â
Interview with a Villain

~ *We meet aliens every day who have something to give us. They come in the form of people with different opinions.* ~ William Shatner ~

The BAU team stood at the monitors, watching the unsub sit silent and hard as stone as the SGC SFs hurled questions and threats at him. The interrogation technique wasn’t particularly bad, it just wasn’t all that effective on a Marine Sergeant who had been heavily involved in black ops his whole career, so was familiar with the whole interrogation playbook, and trained to counter it.

The agents had taken their time getting this far, enjoying the tour of an honest-to-god space ship, the spectacular view of Earth from orbit, watching the sun rise over the crescent silhouette of Africa, and lamenting the absence of their youngest team-member, who would undoubtedly be able to tell them what all the techno-babble thrown their way actually meant. The only other truly tech-savvy team-mate had given a loud squee at all the pretty lights as soon as they arrived (by *beam*, no less!) and had been lost to the dataflow from the nearest console ever since.

Eventually they had been ushered into this small control room, a circle of six consoles facing inward, chairs on the outside, and large-screen images thrown on the various walls, showing the interrogation rooms. The set-up was so professional, in fact, that Hotchner felt compelled to comment on it.

Colonel Samantha Carter, in command of the *Hammond*, had explained, “Most of the elements in this ship were designed to be modular, so we can throw whatever we need together and configure it any way we want, or replace units damaged in flight. My mission for the past year has been chasing down space pirates… yes, we have those, a group calling themselves the Lucian Alliance.”


Carter continued on, “Since the fall of the System Lords, they rose up to fill a power vacuum, running drugs, slaves, and an effective little extortion racket. Without the jaffa armies to keep them in check, a lot of worlds are vulnerable, and the pirates have been pretty good at scavenging abandoned or scuttled Goa’uld ships. So we hunt them down, take them prisoner, and interrogate them.”

Rossi shook his head. “Sounds like the rise of the Russian mafia after the collapse of the USSR. So, there really is nothing new under the sun.”

Sam smiled ruefully. “Not really. Same old song, just a different stage. And we’re the Untouchables.”

General O’Neill smirked and raised a hand. “Meet Elliot Ness.”

At this point, Garcia finally rejoined them. “Oh sir! The stuff they have on this ship is *amazing*! Is there any way we could…”

“Garcia,” Hotch interrupted gently to quickly curtail the imminent flow of enthusiasm, and their tech goddess instantly shut her mouth and refocused.

“Right. Right. Bad guys to stop, Reid being hunted… right.” She looked around and spotted an empty stool at the central console and plopped herself down, immediately familiarizing herself with
the keyboard and screen.

O’Neill blinked, impressed. “Wow. How did you manage to train your geek to do that? Mine don’t stop until the oxygen is totally gone from the room. Or the overhead projector breaks. Whichever comes first.”

Hotchner ignored the man, waiting for Garcia to look up at him. “Ready, sir.”

Aaron merely nodded, and with a mere glance at his team, they all took their own places around the console, most doubling up to allow O’Neill, Carter, and a Colonel named Mitchell to share space. “What have we got so far?”

Carter took the reins with a glance and smile at Garcia. “It was a five-man team of ex-military, two unofficially re-activated, though not on any books we could find. All have extensive experience with covert ops. Their operations base for this mission was an abandoned motel just inside Vegas city limits. It was a little too derelict to be of interest to FEMA when they went looking for temporary shelters after the invasion. The team reconnected water lines, and brought their own power generator with them. One of the team was a trained medic, to handle doping the boys, I assume.

“After the press conference, their commander, Marine Sergeant Thomas Bruner, made the decision to terminate the mission, apparently on his own authority. The pre-arranged contingency plan given by his superiors was to terminate the children as well as his team members. Instead, he sent one of his men with each of the surviving boys to dumping points he decided upon, while he and the fourth man, ex-Army private Leonard Gifford, remained to clean up and set charges on their base. The three men were supposed to rendezvous with them at base before they all left town. But once the charges were set, Bruner killed Gifford. Broke his neck, and shoved his body out of sight. The first of the last three men to return, ex-Navy ensign Howard Steiner, was killed as soon as he got in the door. Presumably, Bruner would have done the same with the other two as they returned, then ignited the charges to eliminate evidence. But he never got the chance.”

Carter highlighted something on her screen, and the wall behind her displayed three rooms, obviously also on this ship, with two men spilling their guts to their own interrogators.

“Ex-Marine corporal Casey Vine and ex-Army corporal and medic Zack Harrison, are both being questioned, but we don’t think they know much beyond their own level. The operations they took part in, and some of the installations being run by the Trust. They got all of their mission briefings from Bruner. He’s the only one who had any actual contact with their superiors.”

“And he’s going to be a hell of a hard nut to crack,” Colonel Mitchell lamented.

O’Neill sighed. “In cases like this, we used to just throw Teal’c and Daniel at them. As a good cop/scary cop duo, they couldn’t be beat. Every one of these assholes underestimated the geek in glasses so bad, and focused so hard on strong-and-silent Teal’c, that they never saw it coming until they gave up the entire farm and every pig, chicken and goat on it.”

“I hear ya, man,” Derek Morgan nodded. “Alpha males like these take other alpha males as competition and just… tough it out. That’s where we usually send Reid in. He looks about fourteen, like a strong breeze would blow him over, and his every move ad gesture tells them he’s scared stiff of them… and they never see he’s got nerves of steel and a mind that can run rings around twenty of them at once without breathing hard.”

Hotch nodded. “He told me once he does his best work when in situations of extreme terror.”

Hotch and Rossi shared a speculative glance, then checked with JJ, Morgan and Lewis. Oh yeah,
they were all on the same page here.

“That’s certainly what we need here,” Rossi spelled it out for the General and his staff. “Someone he isn’t expecting, someone who will really throw him off his game. He’d be expecting me, Hotch or Morgan, another hard-ass alpha male. And our secret weapons are usually JJ or Reid, or both.”

Everyone turned to look at Garcia. She wasn’t paying a lot of attention to the strategizing. Not her job, usually, and, although she had spent the past few hours collecting reams of info from the awesome facilities offered on an honest-to-god space ship, and happily freaking out over the amazing access, now, at an official debriefing, she was reminded of what had brought them all here.

“How could anyone *do* that?” she gasped, with difficulty curbing the urge to cry. “I mean… the people we usually chase, the sickos and the pervs, we know they’ve got a screw loose and really really bad pasts, and there’s reasons, but… this guy… he was a *war hero*! He served his country with honor and distinction! He’s got a purple heart! What they did to poor little Justin… How could he… How *could* he?”

Morgan smiled wryly. “Why don’t you ask him yourself, baby girl?”

And suddenly, Garcia realized they were all looking straight at her.

She squeaked. “Me? You want… me? Oh no! I can’t! I mean, I know I did that once, with that poor goth kid in the choking game, but… This guy is a big bad soldier! I wouldn’t know what to do, what to ask!”

JJ put an arm around her trembling shoulders. “You do exactly what you feel, Penelope. I’ll be right with you on the com, we all will, to guide you in case you get stuck, and… I think Tara would be best to go in with you, right beside you. Between us, we’ll turn this guy inside out. Right?”

“But but but…”

Tara smiled gently. “Come on. I’ll give you a few cues we can use, while these guys get him primed for us. And bring your notepad. You’re already connected with the systems on board, right? You can run whatever you want up on the monitors, just like a regular briefing.”

O’Neill watched the three women go and shrugged at the grinning Colonel Carter. “Well, the guy sure as hell won’t see *this* coming. How do you want to prime him, gentlemen?”

Rossi just grinned, and beckoned Morgan to follow.

The two Supervisory Special Agents banged their way abruptly into Sgt. Bruner’s interrogation cell, and gruffly ordered the SFs to stand down and leave. When the SFs hesitated, Rossi, every inch the retired-but-still-badass Marine, barked out, “The professionals are here now, soldiers. You are relieved. You got a problem, take it up with your zoomie three-star. This is our show now. So leave.”

The SFs backed out reluctantly, and Rossi and Morgan stared down at the defiant unsub.

“So you’re the professionals?” he jeered, looking them up and down. He said nothing more, gritting his teeth together, but his manner radiated a distinct lack of being impressed. Whatever these new guys brought to the table, he couldn’t see it being any more effective than what he’d already endured.
He did pretty well, trading silence for silence for a good twenty minutes before frustration made him lash out. “What good is this supposed to do?” he demanded.

Morgan grinned meanly. “Oh yeah. You just keep digging that hole, man. It’s gonna make a pretty good grave for you later.” Then both he and Rossi chuckled over their shared secret, obviously in great anticipation of coming sport. They stood propping walls, ignoring the suddenly uneasy Bruner.

The cell was basically little more than a metal box painted military grey, with a table and three straight chairs. The prisoner was chained to one. The second, empty, was positioned directly across from him. The third, also opposite and currently empty, was off to one side. The door was controlled by the electronic locks of the ship’s systems. Nothing to look at but the other people in there with him, it was the next thing to a sensory deprivation chamber. But, being the high-tech space ship it was, the *Hammond* could turn any wall into a large-screen monitor, with the right interface.

Dr. Lewis came in alone, merely nodded at the two men, who left abruptly and silently, bestowing a last mockingly sympathetic grin at Bruner on the way out. The woman was cool, indeed professional, composed, betraying nothing as she took the seat off to the side. She had a half dozen thin manila folders, which she deliberately set out, straightened, and then a steno pad which she opened to a blank page, and a pen which she set out to her right. Then she folded her hands on top of the folders, only then looking directly at the man.

“I’m Dr. Tara Lewis with the FBI Behavioral Analysis Unit.”

The prisoner abruptly relaxed. “So you’re the professional? I expected one of those big jaffa guys. Maybe even Master Teal’c himself. You’re a shrink, right?”

He was almost chatty, compared to his previous demeanor.

Dr. Lewis smiled easily. “I have a lot of interviewing experience, yes. Before the BAU, I conducted a lot of interviews with serial killers, rapists, and pedophiles, in an effort to refine our profiling and investigation techniques. With many stranger abductions and murders, profiling is often the only really effective tool we have to identify and capture the perpetrators. Although we call them the unsub – the Unknown Subject. Even though, in this case, we already know who you are.”

Her easy smile did not flicker for the brief instant that Tara had registered this man’s discomfort at being linked, even indirectly, with rapists and pedophiles. In the control room, however, the BAU team all grinned. Yup, this guy was already toast. He just didn’t know it yet.

O’Neill wanted to know, “What was that? What just happened?”

“Oh thank you, sir,” Colonel Mitchell muttered. “I didn’t want to ask, but the suspense is killing me.”

Hotch nodded to Rossi to fill them in.

Rossi said, “This man is a true believer. He believes he’s a hero doing his duty, his actions serve the greater good, and he, and his superiors, know better than the rest of us mere mortals, what that is. He’s career military, a Marine, no matter the circumstances he was kicked out, or what he’s done since. He considers himself a patriot, best of the best, a warrior, a guardian of Truth, Justice and the American Way. A hero in every way. That pride and self image wouldn’t take well to being lumped in with rapists and pedophiles.”

“And that’s what you’re going to do, then?” Carter asked.

Derek boasted, “Oh, my Baby Girl is going to deliver a wake-up call on this dude that will have him on suicide watch for the rest of his life.”
Dr. Lewis, meanwhile, made no attempt to ask any questions, or even address the man again. She opened the top folder and read the pages within, occasionally jotting down a note, but essentially ignoring the prisoner.

This puzzled Bruner, and set him on edge again.

“You’re not going to ask me anything?” he demanded in a breathless rush.

Lewis looked up, faintly surprised. “If you have anything to tell me, I’d certainly like to hear it.”

“No! Hell no!”

Lewis merely smiled and nodded. “Very well then.” And she went back to consulting her reports.

It was more than half an hour later when the door burst open, and a loud, vibrant battering ram of a personality burstled in. Tall in her four-inch neon green stiletto heels, ample bosom almost bursting out of the low scoop-neck of her knit t-shirt, bright sunshine yellow with big acid-green flowers printed on it, a necklace of big plastic beads also in yellow and acid green. The scarily brief mini-skirt of yellow over neon green pantyhose, plastic frame glasses in matching green sparkling with rhinestones… Penelope Garcia was definitely a vision to behold. Her hair, dark henna red today, was done up in pigtails, held in place by green plastic butterfly clips, bobbing over her shoulders as she wobbled in, a slightly ungainly and awkward gait in those shoes. She gratefully thumped down the burden clutched in her arms, a laptop perched precariously on top of a pile of manila folders. She was like a brightly-feathered goose on stilts.

“Sorry I’m late, sorry, sorry,” she babbled as she quickly passed the files to Dr. Lewis and settled herself in the remaining chair, the one directly across from the prisoner. She bustled about setting up her laptop, peering under the table and giving a squeak of delight as she found an outlet to plug into.

Bruner just stared, blinking. It was doubtful if he had ever faced anyone quite like Penelope Garcia before, even if he had once dealt with aliens. Garcia was one of a kind, after all. Around the consoles in the monitor room, the BAU team merely smiled fondly at her antics, well familiar, but the General and his people laughed out loud. One of the screens displayed the prisoner’s open-mouthed gaping, and it was pretty damn funny.

“Oh man, this is priceless,” Mitchell observed.

Derek grinned. “You ain’t seen nuthin’ yet, man.”

The prisoner kept glancing at Lewis, clearly pleading with her to take control, but Tara only accepted the extra file folders and began shuffling them into place.

Once Garcia had plugged her laptop into the ship’s systems, and located the area she wanted, she quickly typed the command to throw the images she wanted on the wall behind her.

“So Sergeant Thomas Bruner of Lubbock Texas,” she reported, holding a remote control in one hand and twisting in her chair to watch the monitor, comfortable in her briefing-mode. Beside her, Dr. Lewis had turned to the relevant page in one of her own files and silently read along. “Son of Dean and Marion. Father is an assistant district attorney with political ambitions, mother a criminal defense lawyer. Did they ever face each other in court? That must have made for interesting meal times. You joined the Marines right out of high school. Ouch. I bet that was a bit of adolescent rebellion, right? They wanted you to go to college and you wouldn’t? Two lawyers, money couldn’t have been a problem. Or maybe you couldn’t take the pressure? Too many expectations? Or they wanted you to
follow them into law, and you would rather have died first? Oh, bingo. You didn’t want any part of the family business. So, Marines.

“Let’s see. Tours in Afghanistan and Iraq, also Somalia... heavily redacted, so it was pretty hush-hush. Citations for bravery... wounded in action... offered a medical discharge, which you refused, so they put you on a guard post at the Pentagon. Phew, that must have rankled. They kinda forgot you then, didn’t they? The VA reports you completed a course of physical therapy for a shrapnel-damaged leg... clean bill of health... but two requests for transfer back to the action were denied. Then... poof. Somehow, you were reassigned, somewhere, but all the paperwork kinda disappeared. Well, except for payroll. That has you attached to General Brady of the JCS. That was two years ago.

“So, were those Trust guys just waiting for you to get out of physical therapy? What slime balls. What was their pitch? The Marines shuffled you to the back of the line, so come work for us and you can still save the world and be a hero? Only better, because you’d be saving the whole entire planet. What a rush that would be, hunh? A whole universe opening up out there, right in front of you. Wow. I mean, I know I was pretty thrilled when they declassified HomeWorld and the SGC, but... to actually be able to take a place on the front lines? Yeah, that would be a rush. You must have been thrilled! Marines?” Garcia blew a loud, wet raspberry. “Who needs ‘em? Let them sideline you, you’ve got the plum job of all time. Defending the entire planet.”

Bruner actually cracked a smile, sitting straighter. He didn’t need to even say a word. His body and expressions were telegraphing every thought in his head, in 3D Surround Sound Technicolor. Where hours with heavy-handed SFs had only toughened his stoic blank walls, just by entering the room, Garcia had cracked him like an egg-shell.

“Oh wow,” Mitchell breathed in admiration.

Rossi chuckled. “We have got to get Garcia out of her tech room more often.”

Hotch shrugged. “Without a space ship as a lure? Not going to happen.”

“So, Thomas. When did you realize they were lying to you?”

Thump. It was obviously a shock, how hard that hit him.

“When did you realize you were actually working for the bad guys?”

The sudden accusation froze him.

“I mean, you’re a smart guy. You had to have known, right? Even before this last mission? I mean, we have your face and ID on the security tapes and logs from the bunker they were running at Area 51. You did a tour there, right?”

On the screens Garcia brought up security footage showing Bruner hauling a straight-jacketed prisoner into an interrogation chamber. He directed other guards to secure the struggling man to a chair, then water-board him while Bruner stood and watched, grim and stone-faced.

“I work for the Behavioural Analysis Unit, and we hunt serial killers, among others. And we’ve seen set ups like that before,” Garcia told him. She keyed up more pictures, running them alongside more archival footage from the bunker. They were strikingly similar in layout and equipment in full view. “This is the mobile home of a man named Frank Breitkopf. We think his total body count is over a hundred, but we’ll never find all the remains. He fixed up this trailer to be a mobile play-room for his little hobby.” More images flashed past, of the room in use from camera footage Frank had kept, and
crime scene photos of the various dump sites, and a dilapidated porch somewhere with hundreds of wind chimes – made from human rib bones. Garcia looked resolutely away as more comparison shots of Breitkopf’s work room and the Bunker Thirteen interrogation cells marched side by side.

“They found the mass grave you guys were using for your bunker. So far, they’ve determined there are bits and pieces of one hundred twenty three men and women in that trench…”

Shots of the trench, filled with jumbled bones and rotting body parts in an excavated pit, with tarps and teams of people wearing gloves sorting through, carefully placing bright yellow markers and laying out skeletons, flashed by in a montage, that matched a few more of Frank’s dumped and dismembered victims.

“And that doesn’t count the three bodies just dumped on the open desert, weeks before the Invasion.”

The shots now showed forensic photos of mummified and desiccated bodies, now all too obviously the result of Wraith feedings.

“We’ve got IDs on about a dozen of them so far. Dental records, mostly, a few dog tags left with the bodies. Scientists, soldiers, reporters, a couple of politicians who haven’t even been reported missing… even businessmen whose companies were suddenly bought up, I’m guessing by your bosses.”

Photos labeled with names, ID photos taken from driver’s licenses or passports.

“Guard duty, though? Not much better than that Pentagon job, was it? Must have been boring. But I guess they must have appreciated your work, your loyalty and diligence, or something. Maybe they just liked how few questions you asked. Anyway, you got re-assigned after six months, and got into the real action.”

Another security clip was displayed. Bruner with four other men, wheeling in a hard-sided Pullman suitcase, which was passed over to others at the Bunker Thirteen reception desk, then a quick-cut to the same suitcase being opened to show a child curled up inside. A little boy, five or six years old, tow-headed and limp in unconsciousness, a plastic mask over his face hooked by a hose to an oxygen bottle.

Outside interrogation, O’Neill and Carter bristled, but Mitchell was absolutely furious. “So this is one of the guys who grabbed Daniel? Bastard! Did you know, Sir? Sam?”

O’Neill curtly shook his head. He turned to Hotch. “How did you guys find this so fast? I know our investigators have been sifting through years of security footage from that bunker, and have barely scraped the surface.”

JJ smiled briefly. “Garcia is the best. She trolled for every shot of Bruner, narrowed the time frame to the days following Daniel’s kidnapping, and the last thing that popped up was this. She wanted to see what they brought in that day.”

More shots showed the little boy waking in a cell, in terror, hysterical with fear, tears streaking down his little face as he ran at an invisible force field time and again until his jailors had to gas him to calm him into sleep.

An uneasy and defensive Bruner protested, “That may look like a little kid, but it’s not.”

“Perhaps it wasn’t, once,” Dr. Lewis agreed, calmly reacting with clinical detachment. “Apparently, it was once Dr. Daniel Jackson, archeologist, linguist, diplomat, intergalactic explorer, genius, the
man who opened the Stargate, located Atlantis, helped defeat the Goa’uld, the Replicators and the Ori, and gave his life, several times, it seems, in defense of this, and other, planets. Due to an accident with an alien artifact, again to save another, his age was regressed. But from what I’ve seen on the security tapes, your ‘Subject X’ is, at present and while these scenes were filmed, in every way a five year old boy, in terms of physical, mental and emotional age.”

“And they tortured him,” Garcia whispered, her eyes behind the neon green glasses bright with unshed tears.

“And they tortured him,” Garcia whispered, her eyes behind the neon green glasses bright with unshed tears.

“Not me. I wasn’t there. That delivery was the last time I set foot in the bunker.”

Garcia’s heavily glossed fuchsia-painted lips fell open. “What did you think they were going to do to him?” she demanded, incredulous. “You worked there for months! Did you honestly think they were ever going to just… let him go?”

Bruner blinked, having nothing to say.

“But, you know what, you’re lucky you weren’t still assigned to the bunker on Invasion Night. Because if you were, even if you weren’t on duty at the time, you’d be dead right now, like all the rest.”

Bruner stiffened. “What? No. What are you talking about?”

Garcia gasped. “What, you didn’t know? You don’t, do you? Well, let me just brief you on that.” She typed furiously for a moment, for a new montage. Frame after frame of guards and lab-coated scientists and technicians being devoured by Wraith in the bunker, more men falling in defense of the main Area 51 complex, and then a shot of two officers, their eyes glowing, being shot down as they ran.

“Ooh, ooh, look at that one. Those gloowy eyes? Those are Goa’uld, right? So not really human, or just the hosts are, but the hosts are under control and helpless, right? They were your supervisors when you worked the bunker, right? Captain Downs and Lieutenant Sanford. Were they Goa’ulds then? Or don’t you know? Ooh, you didn’t know! What a dummy. I thought the Goa’ulds were the bad guys, the very ones you were supposed to be fighting, the guys wanting to take over the Earth and enslave all of us. At least, the ones they didn’t pick to be hosts. Me, I doubt I would have been much of a draw, but I know some people who would have been prime meat to them… a certain chocolate god, for example. Well, don’t you feel like an idiot now? I bet you thought you were working for the good guys, even if you were doing mostly really bad things. Protecting the Earth. I guess they told you you were doing the tough things General O’Neill and his people didn’t have the nerve to do, right? And you bought it. You ate it up like mocha fudge ice cream.

“So, some of your guys died in the bunker, fighting off Wraith or in cave ins, some died at Area 51 during and after the attack, and everyone else, the attack survivors, along with those on down time, in their homes or out on the town or whatever, were all gathered up the next day and put on a plane to Utah, to get them the hell out of Nevada. Yeah, not surprised they were going to Utah, hunh? And then…”

Another slide show began, of aerial footage of a plane crash site on a wooded hillside, people in jackets with FDA and NEMA printed on their backs, crawling all over the burned-out wreckage, debris and bodies everywhere, only some under sheets, or being stuffed into black plastic body-bags.

“They’re still counting the dead, because the plane’s manifest said there were supposed to be only twenty on board at the time of the crash, but obviously, there were a lot more. By the way, the FDA has already determined it was deliberate sabotage. Someone didn’t want any witnesses. You must
Garcia queued up a display with the official ID pictures of those for whom they had dog tag identification. “Played poker with them? Cruised the Vegas Strip on nights off? All dead now. From the personnel records we got out of the bunker, we’ve accounted for everyone stationed at Bunker Thirteen, except for the CO. He’s the only one still missing, Major Vincent Hoskins… he was supposed to be on that plane to Utah too, but we haven’t found his body yet, so we have our doubts he was on it when it crashed. But, see that guy there? Well, that half-a-guy there? That could have been you. Nice bosses you work for. Much better than the Marines, right?”

Bruner seemed truly shaken as the progression of military ID’s fluttered past the wall behind Garcia. He winced at a couple.

“I don’t know why you’re so shocked, right now. Isn’t that what you did to your own team? Well, the two we didn’t get to before you, that is. Under orders, I bet, to kill any potential witnesses? You honestly don’t think they’d do the same to you once you report in? Hunh. Not too bright after all, are you? And all this because the Wraith crashed their little world-domination party. Yeah, the Wraith screwed things up for everybody, didn’t they?”

Garcia typed up a few more lines of code, and the slide show darkened and disappeared.

“But I guess you didn’t know any of that. That you were actually working for the enemy, a ruthless enemy that would torture children, kill innocent random homeless people to keep their Wraith prisoners fed, dump their victims in a mass grave, and even kill their own employees, without a thought, just for breathing and maybe being a witness against them later. So when you were given your last mission…”

Garcia paused, took a deep breath, and suddenly, it was as if a dam inside her broke.

“How *could* you? What *possible* excuse could there be for what you did? Four innocent, adorable little boys!” Behind her were the pictures of the four abducted boys. “They were babies! Helpless, innocent babies! All they did was survive a horrific ordeal and lose their families… and you took them! Why? What possible justification could you have?”

“Jackson!” the man blurted out. “We were looking for Jackson!”

“But you knew what he looked like! You took him two months ago!”

“I didn’t remember! I only got a glimpse of him before we bagged him... All we had was a photo to go by and it could have been dozens of kids. They all look alike! Any of them could have been him…”

“So you took four children, knowing at least three of them had to be innocent? Even if you couldn’t tell him apart from a hundred other little kids… Okay okay, you thought *one* of them *might* be Daniel, but when you found out one of them definitely wasn’t… you didn’t let him go, you slaughtered him! Slaughtered him, then mutilated and violated his poor little body! Did you know what would happen to the boys who weren’t Daniel?”

“No. I… no.”

“But you must have guessed. You were supposed to be in charge! You must have had an idea.”

“No! I didn’t know… I thought we’d just let them go. That was the whole point of keeping them drugged.”

“Then why didn’t that happen? You killed Justin! An innocent little lamb who never did any harm to
The brutal photos flared up on the wall in all their horror. The body of a little boy lying naked on an autopsy table, his wounds in horrible relief.

Garcia shielded her eyes and looked away from her laptop display. “I can’t look. I can’t. Bad enough you killed him… what you did to the body after… You flayed him like a fish! You *raped* his poor dead body! You tossed him out like trash!”

“No! I… that wasn’t me. None of that was me.”

“Then you stood by and *watched*? You were in command, so you ordered one of the others to do it?”

“It was the mission! We had to…”

“Had to what? Murder, eviscerate and rape *children*? Why?”

“I wrapped him! I took him to a church. I placed him under an angel.”

“Fat lot of good that did him. He was *dead*! You *killed* him! And after Justin, you couldn’t pretend there was any different fate waiting for the other poor babies. But why even do that if he couldn’t identify anyone?”

“Too many questions were being asked. We had to make it look like the work of a serial killer. Like a pedophile was taking them.”

“So, what, you could do to more children what you were doing to these? If these four boys didn’t work out, you could just… grab another three or four, until you found Daniel? Who isn’t even in Nevada! How many would you have taken and killed before you gave up and went away? How many? All of them?”

Dr. Lewis took out another file folder. “There are twenty six children presently in the Sanctuaries who roughly answer to the same general description. Boys four to six years of age, fair hair and complexion, blue eyes, unidentified or unclaimed by family members.”

“Twenty-six. Would you really have murdered and tortured twenty-six little boys? For God’s sake, you were a Marine! You were a war hero! Protecting the innocent is what you were about! But look at what you’ve become. You work for enemies of the nation and the planet, doing their dirty work, kidnapping, murdering… you *are* a serial killer and child molester. Every bit as bad as the worst I’ve ever seen in twelve years at the BAU. But you’re not sick, you don’t have a mental disease or injury, you weren’t abused as a child, you don’t have a single excuse we usually see in our cases. You don’t even have a grudge against kids! Did you honestly think there could be anything *good* about this?”

Tears streamed down Garcia’s cheeks, tracks of mascara with them. But she wasn’t alone. Bruner was weeping openly.

“I didn’t know… I didn’t know,” he protested soggily.

“Then tell us what you do know,” Tara suggested gently. “Tell us everything you know about the Trust, so we can keep them from doing anything like this again. Because you know they will. Daniel left Nevada, but they’ll do anything they can to track him down, and they’ll start abducting and killing children someplace else.”
“We had to keep under the radar,” Bruner said. “If these four were a bust, we had to be able to get access again. It was already going to be hard enough with the amber alerts and the increased security on the Sanctuaries, and then the FBI involvement... We had to get attention off us, get you all chasing monsters in the dark. That was the mission, our orders! We had no choice!”

“Tell us who, where, why.”

And it all spilled out. All that Bruner knew, at least.

But it had been as harrowing and draining on their tech goddess as on the unsub, as Garcia staggered out, leaving Tara to mop up.

“Ms. Garcia,” General O’Neill addressed her. “Thank you. Sincerely. Thank you. That was… That was outstanding work in there. I commend you. And anything you want, any time… you got it.”

Garcia blinked, falling into Derek’s supportive arms for much needed comfort. “Um… well… when we get our Junior G-Man back… could we all have a tour of Atlantis? With Jack and Henry and Michael, too? I would *love* to see an alien flying sentient city!”

“Done!” O’Neill agreed readily, not caring who the hell Jack, Henry or Michael were.

“And on that note,” Colonel Samantha Carter declared, “We really need to find your Doctor Reid as quickly as possible. Because right now, the entire focus of the Trust will be on locating him and grabbing him before we do. And that can not happen.”

Garcia shuddered. “No, right. It can’t. It won’t. Oh, I left my laptop in interrogation…”

“We’ll get it for you, right, Carter?” Mitchell assured grandly. “Come on, I’ll show you around the *Hammond*. I think you missed most of the tour before.” Fully aware that this was a distraction to help the soft-hearted woman regain her equilibrium, Mitchell turned his southern charm on full blast and ushered Garcia away.

O’Neill gave Carter a *look*. “Why *can’t* we get one of those?”

Morgan huffed. “Because they broke the mold with Penelope, and you can’t have ours.”

“You can’t have Reid either,” JJ added blithely as they all prepared for the next stage of the investigation. “And if you think it’s going to be easy to track him down, even with Garcia… well. He’s a genius, has an eidetic memory, has twelve years of experience hunting criminals who don’t want to be caught, listening to Garcia as she finds them anyway, so he knows all the tricks… and how to avoid them. Reid will be caught only when he’s good and ready to be caught.”

O’Neill glanced at Aaron Hotchner, who could only shrug in agreement. “He may have come out of hiding temporarily to help us rescue those boys, but even that won’t help us track him now. We’ll do our best, but we’ll probably have to wait for him to contact us.”

O’Neill glanced at Rossi who only grinned and nodded agreement.

“Alrighty, then. Plan B. Find Reid.”

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Major Vincent Hoskins, or rather, Major William Matthews, although he was presently disguised in an expensive civilian business suit, wanted to squirm in his chair. He was seated at a huge conference table of dark rich wood, once again at the side of Stanley Bradshaw, his boss, who wore a suit even more expensive and impeccably tailored. Bradshaw’s new executive assistant, Miss Smith (or, as he still thought of her, Ms Sour-Puss), sat on his other side, organizing manila file folders, opening a laptop to tie into the room’s projection system. Major “Jerico”, or so said his name tag, sat on Smith’s other side, also uneasy in civvies, with an unlikely paunch and even unlikelier bald spot. And the ever-present scar on his chin.

They had their backs to a projection screen at one end of the room, large screen television mounted on the beige wall to the right, running ZNN coverage and a stock market ticker-tape along the bottom, the left wall was glass, floor to ceiling, end to end, looking out on the Manhattan skyline. The fourth wall, directly opposite, was tastefully done in dark wood paneling, disguising a series of cabinet doors which hid book shelves, a fully-stocked wet bar, and an equally well-equipped armory.

At the far end of the table sat Ms. Charlotte Gant, CEO of GlobalTech, whose premises these were. To either side of her sat General Aubrey Evans, and Senator Ulysses Stahl.

The Major was in a room full of arrogant assholes, and he was low man on the pole. Again. Great.

“This,” growled General Aubrey Evans, “is a very bad idea. You know this, correct? Any one of us might be under scrutiny right now as suspected conspirators of the Trust. I’m already at risk after that stunt your man Kavanagh pulled… and have you found out yet how he identified me as one of your superiors? No? The man sent me an email, for god’s sake! A bloody email! And we needed to meet, why, exactly? The entire organization is a train wreck right now, and there are sharks everywhere smelling blood in the water. I don’t intend to get bitten. Do you?”

Ms. Charlotte Gant’s smirk grew wider. “It is precisely that train wreck we need to review, senator,” she said smoothly. “You realize that it isn’t as bad as you think? So far the casualties have been those expendable assets we intended to remove at some point in any case. Think of it as down-sizing, stream-lining the operation… or as evolution in action. Most have been those too stupid to survive. And there has been a great deal of stupidity rampant among our colleagues of late.”

The Major squirmed a little in his seat at Gant’s sharp tone. So far, Major Matthews and his superior,
Stanley Bradshaw, had remained silent and motionless at the large solid oak conference table, with nothing of substance to offer. Miss Smith had already passed the reports around to the Triad, the true powers behind the Trust, with a damning summary page on top. It catalogued the members of the Trust fallen or taken by HomeWorld, and among the middle and high echelons, the only survivors were in this very room. Anyone even tangentially connected to the Trust had either been eradicated as knowing too much, or were in HomeWorld cells.

There was only the one labs left, in Siberia, and that’s where they’d stashed Kavanagh, with tight control on his internet access, and any other form of communication confiscated. The remaining security staff, his three surviving Sierra Units, were portioned to the lab or as protection details to the remaining leaders of the Trust. Matthews had recently learned that Scarface had three Foxtrots teams of his own hidden away, scattered to various bolt holes to await further instructions. Zebra Unit (all two of them) were still at large, gating around the galaxy, desperately searching for transport. That left independent assets (AKA potential extortion victims) who knew little about them, but held useful positions in government, military or business circles, about whom the Trust held enough blackmail material to force compliance. At the moment, even a hint of connection to the Trust was a potentially fatal risk, and keeping it secret was a powerful motivator.

A year ago, Charlotte Gant, forty-six, divorced mother of two estranged teenagers, whose driving ambition and control issues had made her one of the wunderkinds of the high tech computer industry, had undergone something of a personality change. Already CEO of GlobalTech, she had ceased her relentless efforts to gobble up every smaller company she perceived as vulnerable, and had begun consolidating her holdings, instead. Her wardrobe changed, became far more… well, sexy. She had dispensed with her glasses altogether, and her staff presumed she had either gone for lasik, or wore contacts now. She had wasted little time on her ex-husband or her children before this, her career taking precedence, but now she never saw them at all. Her “friends” were business associates, she had no other family, and appeared to need no other human contact outside work. But then, she never had. The interest in politics, though, was new, and GlobalTech had never dabbled in military or government contracts before that. Most upsetting to the organization she ran was her mass firing of the executive and board of directors, replaced by new faces, all fanatically loyal to her.

Gant sat straight and opened the folder before her. “But let’s review the situation, shall we? Stanley, why don’t you bring us up to date?”

Bradshaw stifled an inner sigh. “Well, you can all review the summary at your convenience, but the most urgent matter is the first bullet point covered.” At his merest eye-flick, the scarily efficient Miss Smith sent her laptop cursor to click on a slide to display on the projection screen behind them. “I need authorization to continue the hunt for Dr. Daniel Jackson.”

“Hell no! Let Jackson go!” the General commanded.

General Aubrey Evans was an Army two-star who had worked his way up from private, used his one tour in Iraq to gain an MBA on the GI Bill, parlayed that into Officer Command School, and proceeded on up the ladder as a staff officer. Ambitious, street-savvy, he had early on learned the knack of ingratiating himself with superiors, learning their secrets and weaknesses, and using them to his advantage. Some ten years ago, he had found himself assigned to Area 51, and… well. That was the mother-lode of secrets. It hadn’t taken long at all for certain like-minded parties to recognize his talents (among them, a certain flexibility in moral character) and offer him the right incentives to join their ranks. His rise to the JCS had been described as meteoric after that.

“There’s such a thing as sending good money after bad,” he insisted. “It’s not like we got anything useful out of the brat the entire two months we had him, and he’s no threat to us at this point. He can’t tell them anything they didn’t already get from the Bunker security tapes and files. There’s too
much damn heat right now to keep after him. And on page three of this report I see the long list of sweeper teams we’ve recently lost to the HomeWorld purge, including the last team we sent after Jackson.”

Bradshaw took a deep breath, and the Major knew he was fighting not to roll his eyes. For a military man, the General was amazingly risk-averse. But then, the Major knew most of his battles for the past twenty years had been the bloodless back-room political kind.

“It’s not that simple,” Bradshaw said in a soft, patient tone that had Lord Baal glance sharply at him. “Our friends the Lucians have decided they want him, and are being… difficult about cooperating with us unless we produce him.”

Senator Ulysses Stahl glanced briefly at Baal. “So they won’t provide us with the necessary escape route unless we can give them Jackson.”

“That would be the situation, yes.”

“What the hell do they want him for?” the General demanded. “Okay, so once upon a time he was a hot shot genius at languages and puzzles. But now he’s nothing but a snot-nosed brat. There’s nothing left of the glowy stuff, right?”

Bradshaw actually cringed, and Baal gave the General a hard level look, obviously re-evaluating the man’s place in their Triad. Frankly, the Major was surprised Baal still had any use for either of the two other men at the conference table.

Senator Ulysses Stahl was an attractive and personable man in his mid-fifties with the backing of his wife’s wealthy family, his former partners in a prestigious Wall Street law firm, and a team of advisors who had been carefully crafting his political career for the past decade. As a result, he was being touted as a candidate for his party’s next presidential nomination, and had begun building his campaign team. When names had been suggested for prominent business people to assist in building his war chest, Ms. Charlotte Gant, CEO of GlobalTech, had come up. Gant had been making tentative overtures to the party for the past year, offering her time and support. After cautious consideration, Stahl had taken her up on it.

General Aubrey Evans was the same age as Stahl, but from a far less auspicious and advantaged background. Both Evans and Stahl were valued partners under usual circumstances, due to their positions, connections and influence, but since the Wraith invasion, nothing had been usual. With the Wraith fleets aware of the Milky Way Galaxy, Earth was nothing but a smorgasbord waiting for the life-sucking aliens to come ring the dinner bell. What allies and ships Earth possessed due to HomeWorld would quickly be overwhelmed by sheer numbers, if Atlantis reports from the Pegasus were to be believed. The current Trust plan was to cut and run as quickly as possible. As such, a quick planning session to discuss exit strategies had been deemed worth the risk of exposure to the three conspirators of the Triad getting together, along with Stanley Bradshaw and his aides. None of them knew, yet, if the trails from Bunker Thirteen had led HomeWorld as far as Bradshaw’s office.

This meeting with GlobalTech CEO Charlotte Gant, attended also by Stahl’s chief campaign advisor, Stanley Bradshaw, had some legitimacy to it. The presence of General Evans would be somewhat less easy to justify, if this meeting were ever uncovered, but GlobalTech held several extremely sensitive military contracts, and Evans had been to their headquarters in New York many times over the past year to go over progress and financial reports. The offices of GlobalTech were in a Manhattan skyscraper, the premises shared by countless other global corporations, and the security video feeds ended at the company reception desk, directly across from the elevator access. The whole thirty-fifth-through-thirty-seventh floors were leased to GlobalTech.
Bradshaw motioned to the Major to review certain critical information. Hoskins (no, damn it, Matthews) cleared his throat and explained, “Dr. Jackson is in the body of a six year old, but we were able to determine even before we acquired him that he had most of his memories as an adult, and all of his former abilities with language and code breaking. But in his mortal form, with a few notable exceptions, the Merlin incident and his temporary conversion to Prior, he has not been observed or reported to use Ascended abilities or knowledge. It was one of the questions we hoped to answer while we had possession of him. He also seems to have lost any abilities or knowledge he might have gained from Merlin’s memory down-load, or his time spent as a Prior of the Ori.”

The Senator’s eyes narrowed. “And the Lucians want him, why?”

Bradshaw took a breath. “Not just the Lucians. That advance invasion force of six hives made stops on their way to Earth, and left messages. Apparently, the Wraith are offering a deal. A truce and immunity from attack, in exchange for one of two men. John Sheppard and Daniel Jackson.”

“Okay, so Sheppard is in command of Atlantis… They know him from Pegasus, where he was a pain in their collective patoot, and without him, we only have one other guy with a strong enough ATA gene to run the Ancient’s City – General O’Neill, who they wouldn’t know from Adam. I can see why they’d want him. And we have no way to get to him. But what the hell do the Wraith want with Jackson?” the General demanded once again. “And it’s not like anyone can trust the Wraith to keep any deals, is it? I sure as hell wouldn’t feel obligated to keep any deals I made with a ham sandwich.”

Once again, with a nod from Bradshaw, the Major plowed in. “According to what we know from the Atlantis reports, if the Wraith make a deal like this, they actually do keep it. Several of their lords made treaties with populations in Pegasus for the communities to choose for themselves who would be culled. The communities would start with murderers and rapists, then thieves… eventually they’d work down to traffic violators, then the poor, old, sick and weak. As long as the quotas were filled, the Wraith left them alone otherwise.”

“Sick,” the General huffed.

“Efficient,” the Senator granted. “Saves them the effort of hunting.” The Major suppressed a shudder. He could see in the Senator’s eyes that the politician was already sizing up the Earth population into ‘food’ and ‘not-food’.

“So what do the Wraith want with a forty-pound kid?” the General demanded again. “It’s not like he’d make much of a meal.”

The Major struggled not to wince this time. Was excessive bluntness a feature of all higher ranks? “They call him Destroyer of Worlds. They know he was largely responsible for the defeat of the System Lords, the eradication of the Replicators, and the Ori… They know he was Ascended. The Ori and Ascended are related to the Lanteans, who were the progenitors of the Wraith as well as their hereditary enemies. Acquiring Jackson before they come here in force is in the nature of a pre-emptive strike for them. He is, after all, the reason they targeted Bunker Thirteen in their scouting mission.”

“How’d they find out so much about Jackson?” the Senator wanted to know.

“The Hoktaur project,” the Major replied briefly.

“Excuse me?” the General demanded. Oh yes. This would not go down well.

“The Hoktaur project,” and the Major elaborated reluctantly, “was an initiative at several of our labs
to develop a superior host for Goa’uld symbiotes. They investigated different races, ages, genders, backgrounds and talents, various health, fitness and intelligence levels… and, of course, for the purposes of the project, other species and… past history with ascension. Once other tests and experiments had been completed, of course.”

“And including the Wraith, I take it,” the Senator commented.

“Yes.”

The General and Senator glared pointedly at Lord Baal, who held up her beautifully manicured hands with the blood-red nail polish to match her lip gloss. Gant was looking extremely professional and capable in her dark power suit with the flaming red blouse, open at the neck to reveal a thick gold chain necklace. Her dark hair was styled fashionably short, her dark eyes were sharp with intelligence, and she exuded an air of calm assurance. Her lips held just the shadow of a mocking smile. She sat at the head of the conference table, clearly the mistress of all she surveyed, and the attitude clearly annoyed both Stahl and Evans, alpha males to their bones.

“It’s nonsense, really. In the nature of a Goa’uld urban myth. It was one of Niirti’s bugs, finding, or engineering, a superior host. We allowed the project at the labs and the Bunker – encouraged it even – as a useful distraction for the younger Goa’uld. If they were concentrating on that, they were less of a problem in other areas. Believe me, one human host is exactly like another, and who the human was before implantation has little to do with making a superior host. After the initial settling and control period, the host personality retreats to a tiny dark corner of their psyche and fades quickly from existence.”

“‘Nothing of the host survives’?” the Senator queried.

“Well, very little, anyway, and progressively less over time,” Baal confirmed. “Beauty and fitness are important. If they have useful knowledge that can be pulled out of them, or a high position of influence, that’s certainly of value. Otherwise…”

The Senator turned to Bradshaw. “So you implanted Jackson with a symbiote? Was that… wise?”

“That was a failure,” Bradshaw hurriedly assured. “Those symbiotes… died.”

Suddenly, Baal was far more interested. “Died?”

“The first died after entering the body, even as it attempted to crawl back out. The second as soon as it touched the neck. The third refused to make the attempt, and when forced, also died on contact with the body,” Bradshaw reported.

There was silence at that as Baal absorbed the implications.

“And the Wraith experiment? I presume there was one?” the General demanded. The Major was beginning to see why the man had made it to General, even with Trust assistance. He seemed to have a talent for putting his finger on exactly the point you most wanted him to miss.

Baal made a dismissive gesture. “It goes without saying that would be a failure. It is well known that symbiotes need to spawn with genetic material from the host species to be most compatible.”

The Major hesitated, rather shocked that Lord Baal seemed unaware… he had assumed that she would have read all the reports on the Hoktaur project. But apparently not. He glanced askance at Bradshaw, who gladly prompted him to go on with a nod – the bastard. Of course he wouldn’t want to deliver this news.
“That wasn’t the failure… a Wraith host seems to be compatible enough… maybe too compatible, or perhaps able to adapt more quickly than a human. The failure was that the symbiotes, once implanted, failed to be able to take control.”

“What?” Baal asked, low, soft, intent.

“The Wraith had many qualities desirable in a host species. Stronger, faster, larger than a human, with impressive healing abilities, nearly infinite longevity, without the need to resort to a sarcophagus, and the inevitable side effects, progressively more severe over time. Of even more importance, they have psychic abilities… to communicate telepathically with others of their own kind, and, occasionally, to dominate humans, making them see visions and shadows that aren’t there as a means of distraction, or to draw in prey. According to Atlantis reports, particularly strong or old Wraith can communicate with their Queens between planets, within solar system range, and make humans within a kilometer or so see shadows and feel intense fear. All attractive attributes in a host species.”

“Exactly what Niirti was always after,” Baal agreed. “But the symbiotes couldn’t take control of the Wraith host body?”

“No,” Bradshaw confirmed. “Instead of the symbiote having all the natural advantages of the host, the Wraith subjects found their own characteristics enhanced, substantially. Even stronger, faster, healing far more rapidly, and their communication range vastly increased, to light years from source. Also, their ability to overwhelm the minds of nearby humans expanded and intensified. One subject managed to kill two guards before we got it contained. Cause of death was determined to be heart failure from excessive fear reactions.”

“Christ on a skateboard…” the General gasped. “Is that how the bastards found us?”

Bradshaw sighed and admitted, “Probably. We don’t think their fleets had an exact position on Earth before that. But one of our Wraith subjects managed to force his guards to release him, and gave him access to the deep-space communication network from Bunker Thirteen. He had half an hour to broadcast what he’d learned while in our hands, including his exact location, and the value we placed on Subject X, in the cell next to his.” Bradshaw ignored the gasps. Obviously, none of the Triad had bothered themselves with the reports from the Bunker. “There is no doubt that the attack was focused on Bunker Thirteen. I have no doubt they saw Cheyenne Mountain and the Antarctic Outpost as important strategic targets, but the assault on Washington and the main base at Area 51 were feints to distract and mislead. Their primary target was the Bunker, and Subject X. Not even their own people we held, but the person they call Destroyer of Worlds.”

“And yet, knowing you couldn’t control Goa’uld Wraith, the experiments continued?” Baal asked idly. “I was aware that there was a security violation previously, and at least one Goa’uld Wraith at the Bunker on the night of the attack.”

“Our scientists were under direction to experiment with methods of suppressing the Wraith personality, through behavior modification or chemical influence.”

“Torture and drugs,” the Senator nodded.

“Yes. Our experts assured us that, in time, they would find an effective means of control.”

The General suddenly asked in alarm, “You don’t still have a Wraith hanging around, do you? Goa’uld or not? One that can, presumably, act as a homing beacon for every Wraith Queen within ten light years, even without it getting loose and sending an SOS?”
Bradshaw shook his head. “No. The last was at our lab in Utah. We confirmed it was turned to ash, along with the rest of the site.”

Lord Baal tapped her fingernails against the conference table. “Tell me, Stanley. Is it widely known to the Wraith that there are significant benefits to them of having a Goa’uld symbiote implanted?”

Bradshaw winced. “We must assume that this information has indeed been passed to the Hives.”

“But you don’t know for certain?” Bradshaw shook his head. “Bad enough they have a target in Daniel Jackson.” With a definite chill in the host’s bifurcated voice, Lord Baal said, “It is quite… unfortunate that the Wraith are aware of the Goa’uld.”

“No kidding,” the General dared a smirk. “Gives them something better to hunt than humans.”

“And now the Wraith are offering immunity for anyone who can bring them Jackson?” the Senator mused with a speculative and avaricious gleam in his eye. “And that is why you think re-acquiring him is a priority, worth our throwing our dwindling military assets after him.”

“And soon,” Bradshaw acknowledged. “The Wraith main fleet is coming, very soon. Their ships aren’t particularly fast, but there’s a lot of them, and they know exactly where we are now. Zebra unit is trying to find us transport, but all they’re hearing from every contact is that the price of a ship is either Sheppard or Jackson. And if we aren’t already off planet by the time they arrive… having one or both of them is our only chance at survival.”

“Forget Sheppard. You have a plan for finding Jackson?” the General demanded, “Better than your last one of grabbing random kids off the streets of Las Vegas?”

The Major made an effort not to look at his superior at that dig. Bradshaw may have noticed his stiffening, however, for the man said, “Major, explain our initiative.”

“We now believe that Dr. Spencer Reid, the FBI profiler who was with the CSI team the night of the attack and was first on the scene at Bunker Thirteen, is the one who took Dr. Jackson and hid him away. Finding Reid is the key to finding Jackson. We still have assets in place, within the NSA and FBI, who have access to their databases. With a few keystrokes, we can switch Dr. Reid’s identification with that of a notorious terrorist, complete with picture, fingerprints, DNA. Our assets can issue a federal BOLO – ‘be on the look-out for’ – to nationwide law enforcement. As soon as he’s spotted, we’ll have our remaining sweeper teams rush in to grab him.”

“His team won’t notice the switch?” the General questioned doubtfully. “That doesn’t sound like the kind of ruse that will last more than a few hours, at best. Less, if his BAU team gets to him before we do.”

“A few hours is all we’ll need to get our teams in there to grab him,” the Major assured. “Then he’ll lead us straight to Jackson.”

“He will?”

Bradshaw nodded. “He will, once he’s a host to one of the remaining symbiotes we have in our possession. But we have a limited number of those, a limited number of teams, and most of those have been focused on clean up and damage control these past few weeks. I need authorization to make acquiring Reid, and then Jackson, our main priority.”

The members of the Trust Triad – the last remaining members of Trust leadership, traded glances and all nodded agreement. This was a matter of survival, after all. Their only escape off this doomed planet, and their only defense against the coming Wraith, would seem to be the possession of one
apparently six-year-old boy.

“Very well, Stanley,” Lord Baal commanded. “You have your authorization. Don’t screw this up.”

Penelope Garcia was finally back in her bat-cave in Quantico, still tingling with excitement from her trip to an honest-to-God spaceship, and relentlessly attempting to grill the poor young SF who was assigned to watch her, when one of her many alarms went off. A siren erupted from her laptop, the lights in her sanctuary flashed red, and the monitors threw up a huge sign reading ‘Unauthorized Access!!!!’

The fresh-faced young SF (whose proper place was in the hall just outside her team-only precincts) bolted in, demanding, “What the hell? What’s wrong, ma’am?”

“We have a breach,” Garcia replied tersely, and with a few key strokes, had all the information she needed. She downloaded a quick file to her iPad, and burst from her room, the SF trailing at her heels like a faithful dog. She made her loud clattering way to the BAU bullpen, and announced to all and sundry, “Emergency meeting! Round table, now!” Then added as all heads turned her way, “Please.”

The SF was firmly shut out on the upper deck walkway as Garcia brought up the monitors, and her team settled into their places.

“Someone has breached the FBI database and accessed personnel files for one of the team,” Garcia announced. “After the Replicator case, I put all kinds of alerts and flags on our team’s information, to prevent anything like that happening again. Well, it’s happened. Someone inside the FBI with clearance has altered our files. One in particular. Reid’s. This is his personnel file as it reads right now.”

The face showing on the screen was definitely not Reid’s. It was bearded, for one thing. Although the biographical text was still correct, the physical description now matched the new photo ID. This man was six inches shorter, fifty pounds heavier, and ten years older than their favorite genius, with a variety of scars, tattoos and other identifying marks.

“They’ve changed fingerprints and DNA code, too. This is who you’re actually looking at,” and Garcia brought another screen alongside Reid’s file. It was from the Homeland Security database of terrorist suspects. A man named Hamid Asuran, known ISIS lieutenant, wanted for multiple bombings across the Middle East. And even as they watched, the picture changed… into Spencer Reid’s distinctive face, light brown eyes, and unruly hair. The text also updated, removing mention of the scars and tattoos, altering the other physical descriptions, to match Reid. So did the attached records of fingerprints and DNA sample.

Out on the balcony, the young SF was getting an update over his slightly alien comms. There was a flash of light, and General O’Neill was knocking at the conference room door.

“You got a problem, folks,” he blurted out. “There’s a nationwide BOLO out on a man named…” he hesitated as he registered the monitor information. “Oh. I see. Well, never mind, then. Somebody has issued a BOLO on Asuran, so they’ll be looking for your Dr. Reid. This is the move from the Trust we’ve been expecting. We’ll do our best to intercept as soon as anyone reports seeing Reid, but it’s gonna be a race. They’re listing him as armed and dangerous. The BOLO says he’s on a mission to blow up something big and public, with lots of people, and he’s killed American servicemen before this. Well, this goombah Asuran has… I’m trying to get Homeland to correct their damn files and remove the BOLO, but once these things are out, it’s a devil of a thing to get them cancelled.”
Garcia had been steadily tapping away on her laptop. “I’ve got the IP for the source of the change here at Quantico,” she announced, passing the information to Hotch. The BAU Chief stared at it, even grimmer than usual, and nodded.

“Morgan, bring your sidearm. General. I assume you’ve got a team with you? Care to join me?”

“You betcha. You know, I don’t care what you guys say, I need a Garcia working for me.”

Garcia grinned. “Time for that raise we’ve talked about, boss-man?”

Hotch sent O’Neill a dirty look.

O’Neill suppressed a smirk with some difficulty. “Oh, well, never mind, then. Again.” He tapped on his own ear bud. “Thanks, McKay. Okay, Hotchner, our people have located the bad guy at Homeland. I’m sending a team.”

Hotch glanced back at Garcia. “I want you to track that BOLO. Any activity on it, let me know at once.”

“You got it, boss.”

As Hotch and O’Neill raced for the elevator, with Morgan close behind, O’Neill said, “I gotta give the kid his props. He’s been pretty damn good at hiding his tracks and staying off the grid. We’ve got at least half a dozen reports of him all over the damn country, using his bank and credit cards, making calls, accessing the internet from cafes and libraries… and we’re pretty damn sure he isn’t in any of these places, because not one of them has a decent camera shot of him actually being there at the time.”

“That’s our Reid,” Morgan grinned, a feral look in his eyes as they neared the office of the FBI Human Resources Co-ordinator, Donald Waymark. A four-man squad in green BDUs with the SGC patch on one shoulder – SG-14 – fell in behind them as they stormed the office.

The middle-aged man with the embarrassing comb-over looked up in shock at all the weapons aimed his way, even as he attempted to shut down his laptop and reach in his top desk drawer. Morgan got there before him.

“What’s this, Donald?” Morgan asked, pulling out a handgun. “I’m pretty sure I’m the one who gave you your last weapons qualifications test, and you failed, miserably. You aren’t actually authorised to even have this in your possession, are you?”

Hotch glowered at the man. “Care to tell us what you were just doing?”

Waymark’s eyes flashed around at the implacable faces around him, and crumpled into a weeping heap. “They have photos of me… they threatened to send them to my wife… I’m sorry!”


“I can’t! They gave me a code to lock it in… any further tampering will be reported direct to Homeland as a national security violation. The red-tape on that will take weeks to untangle.”

Arresting the man for conspiracy to commit treason was cold comfort when news from Homeland wasn’t much better. Their firewalls and data protocols were not created to make it easy or quick to correct an error, no matter how it was made or by whom, or to downgrade any perceived yellow-alert threat to national security, and this one had been marked as credible and imminent. And it had Reid’s face plastered all over it.
There simply was no way to override a Homeland alert of this nature, or recall their BOLO, once it was already out there.

Spencer had meandered down through Kentucky, Tennessee and North Carolina before picking up I95 to come at Washington DC from the south. He stopped at large camp grounds with his second-hand army-surplus pup tent and sleeping bag, ate at busy truck stops and diners along the interstates, wore his obscuring helmet as he drove his motorcycle demurely through the countryside, parking, when he had to, behind bushes out of sight of the parking lots or busy roads. He was very good at not attracting attention, and disappearing into a crowd.

He thought he had succeeded pretty well, until he stopped at a Dunkin Donuts for a coffee outside Richmond, and felt the eyes of a cop settle rather too intently on him. He acted as nonchalant as possible, but when he left with coffee cup in hand, he ventured near the parked squad-car outside, and managed to get a peek inside… at his own face on a BOLO coming up on the car’s dashboard monitor.

Not good. He quickly got on his bike and circled around the outskirts of a quiet suburb before he found a secondary road out of town. He made no more stops, tried to keep to back roads as he made his way north, closer and closer to the haven of Quantico. He wasn’t sure if the cops had linked him to the motorcycle, but they’d have a description of his leathers and black helmet, for sure. He was so close he could taste it, and decided to risk not changing vehicles at this stage. Any stops he made, and contact with people, could only work against him at this point. Even getting gas was going to be problematic now, and he didn’t dare use any of the larger chains. He found a couple of mom-and-pop operations in remote corners to gas up and grab drinks and snacks to keep him going.

But the closer to Washington DC he got, the more built up the areas he needed to travel, and the more risk he ran. It was a game of Prisoner’s Base. He had one safe destination, and those hunting him had to know once he reached FBI headquarters at Quantico, he would be relatively safe from them… their window to grab him was closing. But if law enforcement agencies were out hunting him too, Ethan’s nebulous enemies had a legion of eyes helping them look for him.

His luck ran out outside Fredericksburg. He heard the siren behind him, and put on some speed, using afternoon rush-hour traffic to try and weave in and out of jammed up cars, into a mall parking lot, then out through a quiet suburb, only to hear the chase heating up behind him. He took a gamble on a nearby park, the Mott’s Run Reservoir according to the signs, to hope he could drag his Harley off-road far enough to elude capture.

But then he spotted a crowd of vehicles on the narrow park roads, police, unmarked black SUV’s that couldn’t be anything other than government vehicles, and a big white Medical Examiner’s truck. He had to slow abruptly not to crash into anyone, and the green park service ranger’s truck opened to let an angry ranger yell at him for reckless driving, and tell him to turn around a leave immediately. This was a crime scene.

No kidding. Spencer knew the look from a mile off, even before he spotted the yellow caution tapes strung up near the edge of a large lake. Mott’s Reservoir, presumably.

A glance at a nearby car sticker said NCIS…

Spencer flashed on a memory of a meeting of the BAU team some years ago, after Emily had left for London, when they were considering recruiting a replacement for the BAU. Special Agent Tobias
Fornell from the Organized Crime unit had dropped by to see Rossi for some reason, and had weighed in with his opinion…

With his way forward blocked, and the sound of sirens coming up behind, Spencer dropped his motorcycle where it stood and bolted into the trees to the side of the park road. He dodged loud shouts, circled around, got a look at the team huddled around a body lying next to the water in a soaking wet Marine uniform.

There were six people from the Naval Crime Investigation Service attending the scene, identified by the letters NCIS emblazoned on baseball caps or jackets. The older gentleman kneeling by the body, and the young man in glasses by the gurney were evidently the medical examiners. Standing near and poking them for preliminary guesses was the man Spencer took to be in charge, a senior agent with silver hair and piercing blue eyes. He had that ex-marine look to him Rossi often got when he was throwing out orders. Spread around the scene, looking for and tagging evidence, taking photos or making sketches, were three younger agents. The youngest was a blonde woman with a thoughtful frown on her face. The next was a man who was showing some exasperation as he was teased by the third, the oldest of the three, who Spencer took to be their senior field agent, second in command.

The senior field agent, an attractive man in his late thirties, early forties, his black NCIS windbreaker over grey slacks, straightened from some tracks in the mud he had found, looked around at all the gawkers around the taped-off crime scene, park visitors, campers, local LEOs, and his hands made some quick passes in the air. Across from him, the tall, silver-haired leader snorted and made a few quick gestures of his own, then started barking out commands. Sketches, witnesses, photos, evidence tagged and bagged…

“Hey, you! Stop!”

Spencer turned to find two armed patrolmen running toward him, their weapons out and ready, waving rather unsafely in the air. It appeared his time, and luck, had run out, Spencer thought, even as he bolted out of the bushes and straight into the crime scene before him. The blonde young woman blurted out a “Hey! You can’t cross this line!”, but she was too late, because Spencer had already blundered through.

“NCIS? I’m giving myself up to your custody!” Spencer shouted out, raising his hands and falling to his knees, carefully placing hands behind his head.

The older man in charge stood before him, scowling. “You responsible for this?” he demanded, gesturing to the body even now being zipped into a black plastic body bag.

“This? What? No.” Momentarily distracted by the body, and the quick cursory glimpse he had got of it, Spencer announced, “Cause of death seems to be drowning, at least six hours ago, probably more like ten. I was nowhere near here at that time. But I…”

“Hold right there!” shouted a uniformed cop, gun out and aimed at Spencer, which immediately had the cops already on the scene and the four NCIS agents all reach for their own weapons, and it was just the nightmare scenario Spencer most hated, with him the helpless pawn in the middle. If even one anxious rookie or overeager cowboy finger slipped in this situation… all those muzzles were aimed right at his head.

“This man is a wanted fugitive! We got a BOLO on him from Homeland Security. He’s an ISIS bomber! Armed and dangerous!”

“I’m a what?” Spencer blinked, aghast. Well, he had to hand it to the opposition. Go Big or Go
Home, he supposed. He knew he had only seconds, and he needed to make them count. He talked as fast as he ever had. “No! My name is Dr. Spencer Reid. I’m a Supervisory Special Agent with the FBI Behavioural Analysis Unit. There’s obviously been a sabotage of my official FBI file, and I don’t know who I can trust. I’m begging you to keep me in custody and isolation until my team can come and verify my identity. Call Special Agent in Charge Tobias Fornell of the Organised Crime unit. He can identify me by sight.”

There was a breathless moment when Spencer looked up into the NCIS team leader’s steely blue eyes, his own imploring for just a chance. Just one. He cautiously lifted one hand to make the American Sign Language gestures for Please, and Help.

“Please, Agent Gibbs. I can prove I’m telling you the truth, if you just call in my team. We’ve been targeted by criminals with inside access before.”

Gibbs, and this apparently was indeed Leroy Jethro Gibbs, gave a huff of exasperated breath and slowly lowered his weapon. “Aw hell. Tobias is really going to owe me for this one. DiNozzo, handcuffs. We’re taking him with us.”

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~ *By the time I auditioned for 'Aliens in America,' the July 7 bombing had happened in London. So I'd had those experiences where I would get onto the Tube, and people would get off. So there was a lot about Raja that I understood.* ~ Adhir Kalyan

Then began the totally predictable jurisdictional wrangling-cum-pissing contest that came at any DC area crime scene. The local LEOs had been ready enough to let the feds come in and take away the inconvenient Marine body in their lake, with all the headaches that was bound to cause their overworked and understaffed department. But the capture of a notorious terrorist bomber was another matter altogether, and they weren’t quite as willing to give up the glory and nationwide press coverage that would inevitably entail. But Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs, leading the NCIS Major Crimes Response Team out of the DC Navy Yard, was not a man to give up. This particular suspect had dropped to his knees right in front of him and begged for his help. ISIS bomber or fellow federal agent, Jethro was not about to let this one go.

After an hour of shouting and confusion, the NCIS had their crime scene squared away, the body already secured in the ME van and on its way back to the Navy Yard for autopsy, and their suspected ISIS bomber in custody, hand-cuffed and in the back seat of a black SUV to be transported to NCIS for interrogation before handing him over to anyone… that anyone as yet to be determined.

Spencer could only sigh and hope he’d done the right thing, as Agent Gibbs drove at break-neck pace along I95, right past Quantico, and into the heart of Washington DC. So near and yet so very far…

Gibbs was looking at a major headache, he could just tell. His gut was telling him the kid was in big trouble and looking to Gibbs to save him. And jeez, was the FBI stealing them out of high-school, now? The gangly youngster looked barely out of his teens. And, sure enough, five minutes after the Major Crimes response team had hauled their asses into the evidence garage, and secured their suspect in Interrogation Room Three, he had the NCIS Director, Leon Vance, storming the observation room, chewing his damned toothpick at lightning speed. Most of the time, the big black man was laid back and projected the cool confidence of a major political player. But when he got riled, the hard-hitting boxer of his youth showed through in a belligerent chin thrust and tight fists at his side.

“What the hell, Gibbs! I’ve had the Directors of three major Federal Agencies on the line to me in the past hour, all demanding I turn over a known terrorist to their custody! Who the hell is this kid, and how did he land in our laps?”

“He stumbled into us at the crime scene in Fredericksburg. Ducky’s got the body, by the way, but it looks like an alcohol related accident, at the moment. McGee and Bishop are logging the evidence. There’s a BOLO out on our terrorist?”

“Yeah. ISIS lieutenant named Hamid Asuran. Except Asuran has been on our ten most wanted board for the past six months, and that kid in there is not him. Or wasn’t last week, last time our
board got a review and update. I just checked the Homeland database, and that’s not the picture it’s showing me now. I called a few people through MTAC, and it’s news to them that Asuran is in the States. They say he’s in Damascus right now, fighting for a government office with a corner window. And as near as I can figure, no one actually called in the amber security alert of a bomb threat on US soil, it popped up out of nowhere just this morning. You get in touch with Fornell? He know this kid?”

“Tobias is in New York on a case. He knows a Dr. Spencer Reid with the BAU, describes this kid to a ‘T’. We sent him a picture to get a positive ID, but that may not be enough, considering the goat rope we have here. He can’t get back in person till next week, but he says to pull in BAU Unit Chief Aaron Hotchner. You know him?”

“Yeah. Met him at a few functions, a few conferences, but I know his Section Chief Matt Cruz a lot better. We ran a couple of ops together in Afghanistan, back in the day. Hotchner’s BAU team has a pretty impressive record. Their close rate is just as good as yours, Gibbs. I’ve heard of Dr. Reid, too. Wunderkind of the FBI. Got three PhDs, a rep for being brilliant, oddball, and very very good at what they do over there. What the hell is going on?”

Gibbs tilted his head to one side as he considered the interrogation room on the other side of the glass, where DiNozzo sat with his back to the window, facing their mystery suspect.

“Someone is out to get this kid, Leon. Until we know for sure who and why, I say we hold on to him and don’t let anyone near him. He specifically asked to be kept in isolation, and he must have a damn good reason.”

Vance nodded, and only then looked around and noted that Gibbs was alone, no one on the monitoring equipment set up and running, which should be SOP. “You’re taping this?”

Gibbs smirked briefly. “The kid sat down and zipped his mouth. Barely said a word. But he knows ASL and has been using it non-stop since the ride from Fredericksburg. I figure he’s got a reason for that, too. Surveillance can be hacked. If this mess includes someone with inside access messing with FBI and Homeland databases, he’s not taking any chances.”

Vance raised an eyebrow. “That seem a bit paranoid to you, Gibbs?”

“Rule Forty, Leon. If it seems like someone is out to get you, they are.”

With a huff, and a snapping of his toothpick, Vance nodded. “I’ve already got three different sets of people upstairs in my conference room, claiming jurisdiction, and I’m letting them fight it out amongst themselves, for the time being. I’ll call Matt Cruz, see if he can up the ante. It’ll keep everyone busy until I get some answers.”

“Yeah. You might get Ducky or Abby to put them all through an X-Ray.”

“What? What the hell?”

Gibbs gestured through the window. “A suggestion our suspect just made. X-Ray any containers, and their necks and skulls. Yeah, I know. Sounds crazy. A couple weeks ago, so did an invasion by space vampire aliens, and look how that turned out.”

He and Vance had had numerous discussions about the wave of “suicides” and “accidental deaths” in DC since the invasion, all high-profile people in government, military and lobbyist circles. But all the information they had, and all they could hear on the grapevine, was speculation that the two were connected, somehow. All they knew for sure was that at least one body had arrived at the Bethesda
Naval Hospital with an eel-like “growth” attached to the brain-stem, and that was from one of Ducky’s ME friends. That did not sound like any “local” disease.

With a heavy sigh and a shaking head, Vance retreated.

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Very Special Agent Anthony D. DiNozzo Jr. was actually having a lot of fun. Dueling with their multiple personality suspect was challenging him in ways he hadn’t been stretched since he went toe-to-toe with the Director of Mossad. And it was in two different conversations, taking place concurrently, in spoken English, and American Sign Language. Not that the suspect was saying much aloud. Tony hadn’t had an ASL workout like this since their tech Goddess, Abby Scuito, had her deaf parents come to town for a tour of the NCIS labs.

“So. Hamid Asuran.” Tony opened up one of two files he had brought in, and dealt out a full-color picture of Asuran’s *current* face to show the suspect. “Syrian national, card-carrying member of ISIS, linked to multiple bombings in the past three years, several on American military targets. We had a confirmation of your identity via picture with facial recognition and fingerprints, and those all say you’re Hamid. We’re still running DNA for a match, but that takes a while.”

The suspect sat still and quiet, but his hands moved uneasily in his lap, as far as the handcuff chains attached to the table would allow him to go.

“And this,” Tony opened the second file, “is Dr. Spencer Reid, member of the FBI’s Behavior Analysis Unit. I hope you can see why we’re a little bit confused, here.”

“My team can identify me. Or Agent Fornell can. I’ll wait for one of them.”

“You don’t want a lawyer? Not that I want you to call a lawyer, that rarely ends well for anyone, getting lawyers involved, but surely they’d be more use than an FBI agent right now.”

“I’ll wait, thank you.” Under the table, the suspect signed out, ‘Just don’t let anyone near me until then.’

“Hunh. Okay… The BOLO on you, issued from Homeland Security, by the by, states that there’s a credible and imminent threat to national security, a plot to bomb something big and public, with a lot of people around. We retrieved your gear from the park, the Harley, your helmet, your stuff. No sign of explosives anywhere. You do have a licensed handgun and a lot of ID that marks you as an FBI agent. Dr. Reid is currently listed as on vacation. Which we’re all hoping doesn’t mean dead in a shallow grave somewhere, relieved of his identification and gear. So what’s the plan? You rendezvous with a supplier who gets you the materials to make a bomb, or someone has one ready for you to pick up? Then you use your stolen FBI credentials to get you in somewhere restricted to plant it?”

The suspect merely gazed back at him, wide mouth shut tight. ‘It’s all a frame. Just wait for my team to get here. They’ll tell you.’

‘Unless it’s a trap and it includes bombing them, too.’ “This looks pretty bad for you, Hamid. Can I call you Hamid? Well, no choice right now, because of the positive ID from Homeland’s own database. We compared your fingerprints to the FBI database too, but they definitely don’t match Dr. Reid’s. So here we are, Hamid. If we believe you really are Dr. Reid, then Homeland Security, and the FBI, have both had their confidential highly secure databases hacked, just to frame little old you. Now why would someone go to all that trouble, for a ruse that’s only going to last the couple of hours it takes to get someone here to eyeball you in person? I mean, come on. What’s the point in
that? You see why we would have our doubts?"

‘The BOLO flushed me out. It will only take them moments if they get anywhere near me.’ The younger man just looked back at him, blinking.

‘Assassination?’

‘Hamid’ looked at the camera, at his hands, then signed out, ‘Worse.’

“So, at our crime scene, you mentioned Fornell. You know him?” Tony asked aloud, while his hands signed out, ‘Or rather, does he know you?”

The young man across the table, presently handcuffed and sitting calm and polite, said only, as he had been saying all along, “I’ll wait till Agent Fornell, or one of my team, gets here, thank you.” But with his long, elegant, unquiet hands, he signed out, ‘We’re acquaintances, I guess you could say. We say hello when we share an elevator at Quantico, or pass each other at the local coffee shop. He’s more an old friend of my team-mate, David Rossi.’

“But you at least know he has a connection to NCIS, or you wouldn’t have dropped his name to us.”

The young man, whose actual name was still in doubt, squirmed a bit, then, glancing at the camera in the corner of the room with the little red light on, signed under the table where only Tony (or anyone in the observation room behind the one-way glass) could see.

‘BAU conference room, June 2, 2012. Discussion of possible recruits for vacant position. Fornell present at Rossi’s invitation. Fornell - The best, the absolute best? Leroy Jethro Gibbs. No question. But there’s not a chance in hell you’ll get him. Unit Chief Hotchner - I’ve heard of him. Good man. Not the best at the political game, but excellent at investigations and interrogations. Impressive solve-rate. He’s at NCIS, right? Naval Criminal Investigation Service. Fornell - He’s a Bastard. That’s what the second B in his name is for, but he’s dedicated, I give him that. His SFA calls him a functional mute. He’s the living embodiment of that old saw, once a Marine, always a Marine. He’s absolutely committed to serving the interests of servicemen and their families. Not much patience for anything but kids, redheads, and getting at the truth. You’ll never get him to leave NCIS, though, unless it’s in a pine box. Next best would be one of the kids he’s trained, you might have a shot at one of them if the timing’s right. The best are the ones who stay with him more than a year, but Jethro doesn’t like to let go, and neither do his kids. You’ll have to pick a moment when he’s pissed them off beyond belief, a semi-annual occurrence, or he’s taken one of his ‘siestas’. Which happens about once every twenty years. So, you know. Good luck with that.’

Tony blinked. ‘Okay. So, I’m sold, you know Fornell. And a verbatim recall of a meeting from years ago? That is just a bit creepy,’ “Are you sleeping, Hamid? I asked you a question.”

The tentatively re-labeled Dr. Spencer Reid shook himself, blinked again and said, “Oh, was that an actual question? Not a statement of fact? I think I mentioned I’m waiting for confirmation of my identity to speak further. Until that happens, there’s not much point, is there?” ‘I’ve heard Agent Fornell mention NCIS. Or, you know, shout and curse a lot when there’s a jurisdictional issue.’

Tony snickered. “Yeah, okay, fair enough.” ‘The Harley is a sweet ride.’

‘It’s okay… I miss the little Kawasaki I had before that. Had to ditch it.’

“You really think that is going to happen? All the physical evidence says you’re Hamid, Hamid.” ‘Had to ditch it?’

“They’ll identify me. I’ve been set up.” ‘Running dark. Under the radar. Off the grid. Since Vegas.’
“Hunh. Paranoid much?” ‘Invasion of the space vampire aliens?’

“It’s only paranoia if they aren’t out to get you.” ‘I found something a lot of very bad, very powerful people wish I didn’t find. They want it. I can’t let them get it.’

“We call that Gibbs’ Rule Forty around here. I’m trying to think of a movie that applies. There must be dozens, but I can’t think of one off-hand. Three Days of the Condor, maybe? No, wait, Captain America, Winter Soldier. Robert Redford just happens to be in both… hunh.”

Signing, Spencer Reid looked everywhere but at his interrogator, the one-way mirror, or the camera. ‘Think Firestarter. I’m Charlie’s only hope now.’

DiNozzo swallowed. “Hey, you want something? Food, drink?” ‘Charlie is an alien?’

“I’m dying for a coffee. And maybe a muffin?” ‘Alien destroyer, maybe. Bad guy aliens may be behind the people after us. I’m serious about that X-Ray. Puppet-master slugs grab the brain stem and take over the body. They can look and sound human, but show up on MRI, X-Ray. Get them angry and their eyes glow, voice becomes garbled. They get one in me, and it’s game over.’

DiNozzo made notes as Reid got his message signed out. “Sure, I’ll call McGee to go fetch us a snack.” ‘That their evil plan? Body-snatch you for what you know?’

“Thank you. Triple cream triple sugar. Yeah, I know, why bother with the coffee if all I want is sweet cream, so sue me, that’s how I like it. Maybe a bottle of water for now?” ‘It’s easiest for them. It only takes seconds. I get taken over, they won’t even have to ask, I’ll just tell them. Can’t let it happen.’

“Gotcha. Don’t fret, Very Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo is on the case.”

The younger man grinned, an appealing expression banishing the stress lines, all mouth and big warm brown puppy-eyes under an unruly mop of chestnut hair. “I like that, Very Special Agent. That an NCIS designation?”

“No, it’s a DiNozzo prerogative. But no less real for all that.”

“Can I be one too?”

“Sure,” Tony offered generously with expansive arms open wide. “If you are an agent at all, that is, Hamid.”

Tony stepped out into the hall, then around to observation, where McGee and Bishop had joined the Boss. “You guys get all that?”

“Bishop filled me in on *Firestarter*. Yeah,” Gibbs assented. “I gotta say, three weeks ago, before we got invaded by space vampires, I would have thrown that kid in a padded room.”

“No kidding. But I believe him. That stuff about puppet-master slugs attaching to the brain… sounds a lot like the eel thing Ducky was telling us about. What’s the famous gut have to say?”

“That we X-Ray everybody who tries to get in the building. I have Abby working on a portable unit we can get down here to check everyone through, including our guest in there. I think we need proof he came in here slug-free. In case he should acquire one before he leaves.”

Tony gave a shudder. “Ugh. Hey, McGee, you getting on that coffee and muffin order?”
McGee turned to the frowning young blonde woman at his side. “Hey, Bishop, you getting on that coffee and muffin order?”

Eleanor Bishop drew a heavy sigh. “Am I going to be a Probie forever?”

“Just until we get someone newer than you,” Tony reassured with a little pat on her shoulder. “Maybe I’ll try for a BAU position, next time the Boss pisses me off beyond belief, and everyone can move up one.”

Tony knew that slap was coming, and didn’t even try to dodge it.

Vance was more than ready to start throwing punches at everyone in the room. He had four different groups of people in his conference room, messing with his schedule, loud voices haranguing him, and he was digging his heels in. He had a call in to SecNav, to make sure the big guns were on his side, but these other people could call on some serious clout, too.

Homeland Security had been the first on the scene, a lawyer named Roger Cosgrove in an expensive suit. He came in flanked by two silent un-introduced minions carrying briefcases, who had their ears glued to Bluetooth units that kept giving them reports that grew more disturbing to them as time went on, to judge by the increased tension in their shoulders. Cosgrove had four ex-military security agents waiting for him down in the lobby, to assist in prisoner transfer, but Vance had refused to let them past the metal detectors, and they sure as hell weren’t getting in his building armed. Cosgrove stated it was a clear-cut case. ISIS bomber on American soil, hand him over. Vance merely pointed to the picture on their wall, still labeled Hamid Asuran, and asked, reasonably enough, for an explanation of the discrepancy.

NID, the National Intelligence Division, had been next to arrive, Agent Malcolm Barrett the sole representative, in a suit not quite so ostentatious as Cosgrove’s. He had a briefcase and Bluetooth too, but seemed content to sit silently and watch the others in Vance’s conference room argue themselves out. His reason for being there? To monitor ongoing security violation issues. Either Homeland and the FBI had both been severely hacked, for reasons as yet unknown, or a dangerous terrorist had got into the country without hindrance, and the FBI had a missing agent, presumed in dire trouble if not dead in a ditch somewhere. Either way, his agency would be involved in plugging the holes. Did he really want the suspect? For protective custody only, until this mess could be cleared up, one way or another, and to prevent any of the others getting hold of him.

The third group held papers that claimed they also represented Homeland, although Cosgrove had never met them, and seemed surprised they had been called in, from another division of his own agency, apparently. The military men were security, wishing to take custody of the suspect themselves. Marine Major William Matthews and his two aides were frighteningly competent-looking men who had black-ops background written all over them. They had left any visible and obvious weapons at the NCIS guard post, thank god, but who knew what lethal means they could bring to bear if necessary? Their authorization papers were signed by General Aubrey Evans, himself a highly placed member of the JCS, and on the Homeland Security executive committee.

Section Chief Mateo Cruz of the FBI had been the last to show, claiming his people had proof of the major security breach to both the FBI and Homeland databases, with the immediate perpetrators being arrested and interrogated at that very moment, in an attempt to find the source of their orders. He demanded to see his agent, Dr. Reid known to him personally, and one of his best and most highly respected people. Vance would have been glad to cave and hand their suspect to Cruz, a man he had worked with in the field and in joint operations, savvy enough to play the political game, cop enough to make sure the politics didn’t interfere with justice, leader enough to keep bureaucratic
nonsense out of the way of his people doing their jobs. Vance respected him like crazy. But his hands were tied with all these other sharks circling the bloodied water.

The tug-of-war for custody of the suspect raged on, until a rapid knock at the door brought in Dr. Donald ‘Ducky’ Mallard, the NCIS Medical Examiner, and their forensics expert Abby Sciuto following behind, rolling in two carts filled with alarming-looking equipment. Quietly and unobtrusively waiting out in the hall were a group of NCIS Marines, trying to pretend they weren’t there to guard against anyone leaving the conference room before the NCIS Director allowed.

“What the hell is this?” demanded Homeland Security Agent Cosgrove, eyeing the two carts full of equipment, even as Ms. Sciuto went about plugging into wall sockets, setting up laptop controls and calibrating.

Gibbs made his belated appearance, posting himself by the door, and giving Vance a nod.

“Not to worry,” Dr. Mallard reassured cheerfully in his most comforting Scottish brogue and carefully vague manner. “Although this may look alarmingly like electro-convulsive-shock therapy gone horribly wrong, I assure you it’s nothing of the kind. Although I do remember an occasion in my younger days when…”

“Ducky,” Vance interrupted the impending anecdote from the older gentleman. One day, someone would actually let Ducky finish one of his rambling stories, and the man would probably keel over with a heart attack from the shock.

“Yes, well, the point being I can confidently assure you that modern ECST units are far less cumbersome. This is a plain old X-Ray machine.”

Vance made careful note of who looked particularly nervous at this revelation. Oddly enough, NID Agent Barrett was watching closely too, and had the shadow of a smile on his face as he registered what Vance had… the Homeland Security Marines had all stiffened, looking even more stony-faced than before.

Cosgrove was just plain nervous. “I think I saw a Doctor Oz show on this once, about the dangers of excessive X-Ray exposure. Do you have a neck shield?”

“Actually, it’s the neck we’re particularly interested in,” Abby Sciuto said. Their forensics tech expert might not dress in the most professional manner, her Goth proclivities usually tending toward platform boots, black miniskirts and studded dog collars, but she was sharp as they came. “We can supply a lead-lined lap pad for your… nether regions, if you want.”

Her grin was especially horrifying to the men in the room.

“What’s this about, anyway?” Cosgrove demanded. “We went through the metal detectors in the lobby when we came in.”

Vance said, “I’m afraid I must insist. And we’re not looking for metal.”

Once Abby gave him the nod, Dr. Mallard turned to the room. “All set, then. Who’s first?”

There was no rush to the front of the line, but Barrett was willing enough. “Try me, Dr. Mallard.”

Abby Sciuto stared intent at her laptop display, then gave a curt nod. “Clear.”

Cosgrove, and his two assistants, were also clear. So was FBI Section Chief Mateo Cruz, who had also been a rapt observer at the undercurrents in the room since the X-Ray arrived. He wondered if
this had anything to do with the report Dr. Reid had sent from Vegas, describing a, eel-like parasite that could invade a body, and bled blue.

That left just the three Marines.

Matthews went first, protesting that this was ridiculous. With the way his two aides, a sergeant and a private, had been edging away to the back of the room, no one was surprised when the sergeant tried to make a break for the door.

Barrett cried out, “Careful! He may be stronger and faster than a human!” He ended up joining Gibbs and Cruz in jumping on the sergeant, pinning him to the floor, even as Vance opened the door to the guards in the corridor. Guns were leveled on Matthews and the private beside him, while the sergeant was subdued and dragged to the machine. The sergeant let out an inhuman scream that echoed oddly, and his eyes flashed with an alien inner light. The X-Ray was practically a formality, at that point.

“Oh wow!” Abby exclaimed with glee. “Yes, he’s got something like an eel attached to his brain stem! Euw!”

The sergeant was quickly cuffed. When the private apparently came up eel-free, Barrett suggested, “Take a look at his stomach. There’ll be a big ‘X’ there, and a symbiote in a pouch in his belly.”

Sure enough, that’s just what he had. And, in a thermos flask in Matthews’ briefcase, X-Rayed without having to open the container, swarm another of the little body-snatching suckers.

“Either they were going to use the one in the Jaffa, and replace his with the one in the flask, or just let the flask one take over your suspect,” Barrett explained. He tapped his Bluetooth, and reported, “General O’Neill? We have three bogies confirmed. One human, one host, the third a Jaffa, and we have a symbiote in a jar for Vala, too. I know she enjoys wringing their little necks when she gets the chance.”

Eleanor Bishop kept a thoughtful frown in place as she carried a fully-laden insulated cooler bag up to interrogation. She’d worked with the team long enough to know that you didn’t bring coffee or treats back without ensuring there was enough for everyone. She often wondered if it wouldn’t be more cost effective to just hire a barista, get them the necessary clearance, and have them set up a cafe in the break room. Think of all the time it would save, running out for supplies. Of course, then, she might never get out of the building at all, unless there was a crime scene to check out, a witness to bring in or a perp to take down, so, never mind. But all the same, the team did get through barrels of caffeine a week... Gibbs alone must account for half Columbia’s GNP.

She not only had coffee orders for the team and their guest (doubled for Gibbs), and the requested muffins, but seeing how pale and worn out the young man had looked, Ellie’s mothering instinct had gone on alert, and she had also bought him a soup and sandwich. And then sandwiches for the boys as well, to stave off the pathetic puppy-dog looks even Gibbs would give her if she hadn’t.

She came out of the elevator on the Interrogation level, expecting to see the Marine guards in place, as Gibbs had ordered, only to find the corridor deserted.

Gibbs’ orders, not being followed to the letter? Oh, hell, no. Something was very wrong. She silently set her cooler bag against the wall, and pulled out her side-arm. Two years of training by Gibbs and DiNozzo had definitely left a mark. Urgent as the situation was, she wouldn’t leave the doors along the corridor un-cleared, for fear of being blind-sided. In observation room one, she saw just the feet
of the two guards who should have been on duty. She quickly checked… pulses at their necks, thank god, but out cold.

Not good. So, so not good, and she wished she had a radio on her to report. She tapped the obs room PA system, and called up to the conference room.

“Gibbs. We have a situation. Interrogation deck. The guards have been taken out. I think they’re still alive, in Obs One. On my way to Interrogation Three right now.”

“Bishop! Wait for back-up!” Gibbs barked out.

Yeah, no, that was the order for a wet-behind-the-ears probie. But her Senior Field Agent was in there with a suspect-presumed-victim, and it did not look good. “Okay, then, Obs Three.”

There was a sub-vocal grumble from Gibbs, but he grudgingly said, “Be careful.”

Silently as she could, she crept into Obs Three. The lone tech was on the floor, also out cold. Her spine chilled even more than it already had as she saw the small Interrogation Room Three rather full of people. Tony was backed and pinned against a wall, wrestling to try and escape one guy in Marine BDUs with sergeant stripes, while Hamid was still hand-cuffed to the table, his head pressed down on top of the scattered files, neck exposed, by a second supposed Marine sergeant. A third in a Marine Major’s uniform was pulling a thermos flask out of a lunch-box.

They must have cleared the Obs room before they went in, and weren’t expecting to be disturbed. Time for a distraction. Pulling the microphone forward, she set up a feedback loop, and let a loud, ear-piercing “Scree!” fill the other room.

It was all Tony needed, almost as if he had been expecting it. He pulled his patented “Go for the Goolies” move on his Marine, then quickly punched him into an inert heap on the floor. Then he kicked out to push the second sergeant away from Hamid, who reared up and away from the table. The Major swore, and pulled a weird silver weapon from his belt. The flask, screw top already twisted off, fell to the floor, splashing water everywhere, and causing sergeant number two to slip and cry out a warning, petrified and backing hastily to the furthest corner.

“Fuck! It’s loose! Get it away!”

The Major was trying to get his silver weapon up, aimed and charged (and, really, Ellie thought, did it have to look so much like a bent penis coming up to attention?), but he ran out of time, with Tony going for his throat in a leap over the interrogation table, knocking it on its side. He and the Major crashed down on the floor in a tangle, while the suspect, Hamid, dragged up out of his chair by his short chains attached to the broken table, quickly did something with his wrists... what, Ellie couldn’t make out. But since he was cuffed to the table, as protocol demanded, he was trapped and could be no possible help.

What she could make out, all too easily, was a foot-long eel with fins and a weird four-spiked mouth, slithering along the wet floor, squealing in anger when the panic-stricken second sergeant kicked it away from him, and it turned to the wrestling two on the floor. It reared up, clacking its four-part jaws, squealing and fanning its fins, and made a leap – right to the exposed back of Tony’s neck, as he struggled to keep the Major pinned down.

“No!” shouted Hamid. Ellie gasped, knowing it was too late, that no one was near enough to help, no one could move quickly enough...

Except that, suddenly, the eel’s forward momentum was arrested, clutched around the middle in
Hamid’s hands, his freed hands, the eel’s jaws snapping millimeters from Tony’s neck.

The thing squirmed and turned on its captor, trying to wrestle free, and Hamid almost fumbled it once. But then he caught it in a firmer grip, and with a resolutely set mouth, twisted the thing until it screamed, and then tore it in half.

And then Gibbs was there, shouting orders, holding a gun on the Marine Major until Tony could get free, and all were staring at the two pieces of... thing, spilling blue gore all over the slippery wet floor.

The whole thing had taken barely a minute, maybe two, since the moment Ellie entered Obs Three.

The three ersatz Marines were taken away in cuffs to be X-Rayed and then bolted to the floor of a handy cell somewhere. Gibbs helped Tony to his feet, and the pair stared down at the eel-thing. Hamid, meanwhile, just sighed heavily and collapsed against the wall, sliding to sit on the floor.

Ellie went to retrieve her cooler bag before joining the others. She calmly pulled the seriously lop-sided table upright, setting out muffins, sandwiches, soup and coffee, then went to fetch more chairs for everyone.

“Nice move with the PA system, Bishop,” Tony congratulated. “Thanks. I think you saved one of us from getting... eed. And, Hamid? Thanks for the timely intervention. I prefer my alien invasion movies on the other side of a screen.”

Ellie helped Hamid off the floor to a seat, then hesitated, glancing at the Boss. “What’s the protocol, Gibbs? Do we hand-cuff him again? Since it seems he can get out of them any time he wants, anyway?”

Gibbs eyed the young man with a questioning brow.

Hamid gave a wan smile, and showed a bent paperclip in his long, agile fingers. It probably came from the reports that had been on the table. “I have very fast hands.”

“Thank god,” Ellie breathed. “You plucked that... thing right out of the air.”

“A little trick a friend showed me.” Spencer eyed the small feast being unpacked on the table, then glanced at the remains of an eel on the floor. “Do you expect me to have an appetite after... that?”

Ellie looked up, puzzled, and frowned. “Why not?”

Tony chuckled. “There’s the Probie we know and love. Come on, Bishop. What did you get me?”

Gibbs gave a faint smile – high hilarity for the stern ex-Marine gunnery sergeant – before he backed out to the Obs room, to give a quick call with a sitrep for the Director, then one to the bullpen for McGee to get his ass down to Obs One to check on the disabled Marines, then, lastly, a call to Ducky. His favorite Medical Examiner would no doubt love to get his hands on the... whatever it was on the floor.

Some time later, Dr. Spencer Reid (re-instated) had finished his meal, much to his own surprise. Just in time, too, because a meeting was then convened in the Director’s Conference Room. Team Lead Gibbs, Very Special Agent Tony, McGee and Probie Bishop were all in attendance with Director Vance. The (possibly) legitimate representatives of Homeland Security, Cosgrove and his two minions, had gone away with their tails between their legs, to try and track where the two (count
cover ops teams had come from, who had entered NCIS headquarters under official, and so far apparently genuine, Homeland auspices. NID agent Barrett had yielded any rights to custody of Dr. Reid, in exchange for a seat at the table for interrogating the six men in custody, so he had gone down with Team Lead Balboa to start the interviews.

Section Chief Cruz offered Spencer a hand-shake and a pat on the back, to which the young man wrapped his arms around himself and gave a little wave of acknowledgement instead.

“Oh yes, this is my Dr. Reid, all right. You okay if I take him with me, Leon?”

“Probably not a good idea,” interrupted a new player coming in the door, flanked by more uniformed SFs. Tall, lean, iron grey hair, three stars on his Air Force uniform shoulders. “Jack O’Neill, two ‘L’s. General, Director of HomeWorld Security. Hey, folks. And you, Dr. Reid. You’ve lead us one hell of a dance! Even my geeks with all their advanced alien tech, and your Miss Penelope, couldn’t track you after you broke the Las Vegas child abduction case. Congrats. On all of it. Now if you’ll just tell me where Daniel is, I’ll go fetch him and be on my way.”

Spencer blinked up at Ethan’s “Jack”. His expression morphed from startled, to flustered, to obstinate, in a mere moment.

“No.”

That made the General rear back in shock. “No?”

“Um… no, sir? No, I will not reveal Daniel’s location to you.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because his safety is my responsibility. Until I can be assured that he would be safe in anyone’s custody, I’ll keep his location to myself, thanks. And considering today’s events, I do not have that assurance.”

“But… Look, Dr. Reid, Daniel is my responsibility. Not yours.”

Spencer glanced around the room at all the attentive, alert faces. “Are you sure you want to talk about this now?”

“Good point. How about I just take you with me and we hash this out at my place?”

Gibbs gave a dangerous half-smile. “I don’t think so, General. Since Dr. Reid is still in our protective custody, and we have ample evidence that he is in danger, I think we’ll hang on to him a little longer. Who is this Daniel, anyway?”

McGee spoke up, “Would that be Dr. Daniel Jackson, archeologist and linguist, long time member of your SG1 team at Stargate Command, and the man who opened the Stargate?”

Jack gave him the evil eye. But Eleanor Bishop was frowning up at McGee. “Or do you mean the five year old boy with blonde hair and blue eyes, target of a para-military black ops group who abducted four similar children in Las Vegas last week, killing one and releasing the other three when they proved not to be the right little boy?”

“Or,” Tony jumped in humorously, “Is he both, maybe? Former archeologist down-sized by some kind of alien shrink ray?”

Everyone blinked at Tony with varying degrees of shock, and he merely shrugged. “Okay, so I got a
bit carried away. Almost getting eeled by an alien body-snatcher does that to me.”

Jack threw up his hands. “For crying out loud! If I can’t get a good answer out of you, Dr. Reid, I’m going to broadcast his face across the entire planet until I find him!”

“That’s not a good idea. He’s far better off where he is now, anonymous and safe.”

“The hell he is! He belongs with me.”

“But you can’t protect him. You saw what kind of resources these Trust people have. They hacked the FBI and Homeland, they put out a BOLO on me that had every law enforcement officer in the country hunting me down as a dangerous terrorist, then sent two black ops teams into NCIS to put an eel in my head. And their plan came perilously close to succeeding. You think they’ll stop at this? You think you have enough information or evidence to stop them all? They’ll be watching you, especially now, thinking I’ll turn him over to you. And then he’ll be a sitting duck. Again. Please, General, think. What is the best for Daniel?”

“He isn’t a child, Dr. Reid. You obviously know that much.”

“He wasn’t six months ago. Now? I’ve spent a lot of time with him in the past few weeks. In terms of behaviour, emotional and physical development, he is a child. A very intelligent and precocious child, yes, of course, but he is still just a child. You must know that.”

“Holy shit, you mean I was right?” Tony whispered.

Spencer squared off against the Air Force General and pressed, “Look me in the eye and tell me I’m wrong.”

Jack attempted to do just that... and failed. “No. He’s... but he’s still Daniel Jackson. My team-mate. My friend. How am I supposed to trust you with him?”

“Do you really think you have any other choice? Right now he’s suffering the extreme effects of being held prisoner, abused, drugged and tortured for two months by sadistic psychopaths and various behaviourally-compromised... individuals...”

At all the appalled looks from the NCIS crowd, Cruz could only shake his head. Yeah, the last cell in Gitmo West hadn’t been as empty as Reid reported. Shocker. But a child? Or... whatever Daniel Jackson really was? He decided to fill in the blanks for the NCIS crowd. “You obviously know about Dr. Grissom’s press conference last week. What he failed to mention was that his team included a fourth member, the night of the invasion. A visiting FBI agent. Our own Dr. Reid.”

Spencer continued, “Our first priority was protecting Daniel. We knew the people who had tortured him were highly placed and influential, seeing as they were operating on the grounds of Area 51, one of the most secure military installations anywhere on the planet, staffed by military personnel. We had ample reason to assume anyone openly assisting Daniel would also be in some danger. And he was suffering considerable stress from his ordeal. I was best placed to get him out of Nevada and into the care of someone I trusted to help him. I’m still best placed to protect him. In two hours, if my contacts haven’t heard from me, they’ll make their own arrangements to keep him hidden and safe, somewhere I won’t know to reveal to anyone. The friends caring for him right now are also best qualified to help him deal with the nightmares and panic attacks.”

“Nightmares? Panic attacks?” Jack asked, devastated. “Damn it... can’t all those damn aliens out there cut him a break? Snakes, glowy squids, space Mafia and space vampires included? What the hell does he have to do to... What if I beam him straight to Atlantis? We’re pretty sure it’s clean. The
damn city has an AI that’ll keep him safe, even if I can’t. And I think that may be the best place for you, too, Dr. Reid. Just until we get this stuff hammered out. Because, believe me, the Trust is on its last legs.

“This was a desperation move. Almost all their higher echelon people were outed after the invasion and the evidence we collected from Bunker Thirteen, and anyone they didn’t assassinate themselves as being a risk to their organization, we’ve got under lock and key, or in a hospital room somewhere, recovering from Goa’uld possession. They just blew up their best assets in the FBI and Homeland, setting up that faked BOLO to flush you out. With the two Majors we just hauled in... I’m thinking we’ll have just about all of them tied up with a nice big ribbon, and the others will go so deep underground, they’ll never come up.”

“But you can’t be sure,” Spencer argued. “I can’t be sure, and it’s my decision, ultimately, whether you like it or not. I was almost eeled within the last hour, so confidence is not high that... that...”

Spencer tried to think, but he was hit with a wave of dizziness. He was inclined to leave Ethan right where he was... but his perception suddenly wavered, and he saw the conference room through waves of rippling blue...

“Dr. Reid? Dr. Reid? What the hell is wrong with him?”

“Someone call Ducky up here.”

Â
~ *I think that all stories - if you make movies about zombies and aliens - it has always to do with your personal story. If not directly, it is about your fears, your obsessions, things like that.* ~

Marjane Satrapi ~

Spencer blinked, finding himself sitting in the glade of a familiar blue jungle.

“Spencer! You’re here! I did it! I did it! Look, Blair! Look, Incacha! I did it!”

Three-and-a-half-foot tall Ethan jumped up and down gleefully before him. While the two shamans, sitting cross-legged in lotus position, looked on, smiling indulgently. At the perimeter of the glade there was a black jaguar prowling, pacing a protective circle, although the imposing police detective didn’t seem to be present himself.

Other nebulous animals were gathering, in the trees beyond the glade, in the branches of the jungle, some hiding shyly in the foliage of bushes. Most were no more substantial than smoke, but some solidified, and, daring boldly, approached the jaguar to touch noses.

“Good work, Ethan,” Blair praised. “Spencer, we needed to contact you. Jim and I saw the BOLO out on you this morning. Hamid Asuran? ISIS bomber? An Amber Alert straight from Homeland Security? These Trust bastards have some serious juice to pull this off. We need to know if we should put plan B into action. You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. And no need for plan B just yet… I managed to get to a safe place before the Trust could catch up to me, and now the guys they sent after me are sitting in holding cells. But I didn’t expect to find myself here…”

“I pulled you here to the Spirit Plane, all by myself. Isn’t that great?” Ethan enthused.

“U-uh-m…” Spencer took a second to collect his thoughts. “That’s great, Ethan, and it’s great that we have a secure way of communicating, but… maybe you could… try and warn me, next time? In case I’m in an awkward or dangerous situation?”

“Oh,” Ethan’s little face fell a little. “Like… if you were going pee, or driving a car, or something?”

“Those would certainly be examples of times when this kind of thing could be… inconvenient.”

“Oh. But I asked your Spirit Guide, and she said it would be okay.”

Again, Spencer blinked and took a deep breath. “My Spirit Guide. I have a Spirit Guide?”

Ethan hid his giggles behind both little hands, while the two shamans chuckled.

“Everybody has a Spirit Guide, Spencer! Only, mostly they’re hard to see, and people have forgotten how to look and listen. But they still have them.” Ethan’s Crow gave a raucous cry and glided in from the trees, where it had been sitting on a branch beside a variety of other slightly more ghostly birds, to land on the little boy’s shoulder. “Do you want to meet yours?”

“Um, sure. Okay.”
It wasn’t a sound so much as a hush on the air... and then a small banded owl drifted in and settled before him. Giving him a serious full-on glare.

“Oh my god... I... I know this bird! I’ve seen it before...”

“She said she had to be careful when she came to you, because you might think you were seeing things, getting sick like your mom. She didn’t want to scare you like that. Well, mostly she didn’t, but there was a time when she needed to scare you.”

Tentatively, Spencer reached out to stroke the soft feathers. “I first saw her the night before I turned eighteen... I had an important decision to make. Well, I had already made it, but it was my last chance to change my mind...”

Blair nodded. “The decision of whether or not to commit Diana to mental health.”

“Yeah. I... It was hard. For her and for me. I don’t think I ever got over the guilt of that. I told myself it was the best place for her, that she could get the care she needed and deserved, but... it was also the best for me, you know? I could finally begin to live my own life. And that just made me feel really selfish. Especially when... it wasn’t what she wanted, and it was so hard for her, to lose what little independence and privacy she had. And that night, when I took a walk out on the desert, to try and clear my thoughts... this owl flew right by me. She flew to a nest in a hole in a cactus, and... pushed out some fledglings. They kind of flopped onto the sand, but then they tried out their wings, and eventually flew off. It just seemed...”

Incacha nodded sagely. “She told you it was your time to try your wings. As all young must.”

Spencer took a deep breath and nodded. “Yeah. I guess.”

“And when she scared you?” Ethan asked, big blues eyes serious and curious at once.

Spencer frowned. “I... made some mistakes. I got caught by an unsub on a case... he tortured me, then gave me a narcotic drug called dilaudid that took the pain away... I became addicted. I made it the solution to every problem, treating it with daily doses of dilaudid... I was on a downward spiral that could have destroyed me. Then I started having nightmares, where an owl, this owl, flew out at me from the darkness. Then I started to see it when I was awake... And I realised I might be triggering a psychotic episode, activating whatever latent genome I might have from my mother that creates schizophrenia. So I was kind of scared straight. I guess... I guess I have to thank you, Desert Owl.”

A small ruffled “Hoo” was his reward, and a slight dropping in the intensity of her stare.

Ethan had shifted over to sit right up against Spencer, and now he laid his hand on the man’s knee. “But now you two are friends, and you won’t be scared if she shows up, right? So this is good. She can help you better now. And that’s all they really want.”

Spencer nodded. “Oh, hey, Ethan. You know who I happen to be talking to right now? Or, I would be, if I were in the waking world?”

“Who?”

“Your General Jack. He’s kind of mad at me right now, because I won’t tell him where you are. He says he can send us both to Atlantis, and keep us safe there, until the Trust are dealt with. I’ve told him you’re better off where you are, but... what do you think? Blair? What wisdom from the Spirit Guides?”
Blair exchanged glances. Blair said to Ethan, “It’s up to you, sport, but I think you need to stay with Jim and me, to learn more about being a Shaman. You’ve been through a lot, and you need these skills. They can help you cope with everything that’s happened to you: not just the capture by the Trust and being littled, but everything you’ve been through. The losses, the Ori, Merlin, Ascensions... You especially need these skills if you want to learn how to fight the Wraith.”

Spencer blinked. “Whoa. You’re teaching him to be a Shaman? To fight the Wraith?”

Ethan looked up solemnly. “I’m the Destroyer of Worlds. The ones that need Destroying, anyway. The Ancients made me into this. They made me into a weapon. Oma teaches, the true nature of a man is decided in the battle between his conscious mind and the desires of the subconscious. The evil in my subconscious is too strong to resist and the only way to win is to deny it battle. I don’t want to be a weapon, even if I know that’s what the Earth needs right now. I want to be a person. A good person. And I don’t think I can be both. Unless I become a Shaman first. I need to find the Balance. And that means being a Shaman. So... can you tell Jack... I miss him, I really miss him, but I’m where I need to be. I know! Tell him about the first time you saw your Desert Owl. He needs to be okay letting me go, and letting me find my path. And... it’s not like I’m dying again, or anything. I’ll be back. Just... not right now.”

More and more spirit animals seemed to be congregating all the time. And in the shadows out beyond the jungle, human figures had started to appear as well, striding toward the glade. Male and female, young and old, some in aboriginal garb, some in leather and fur, some in silks and homespuns, some in Western T-shirts, blouses and jeans… as each arrived at the edge of the glade, an animal greeted and joined them.

Spencer nodded, slowly. It appeared that, whatever was happening, Blair and the Chopek shaman wouldn’t be the only ones standing by the little boy. “Okay. You guys take care of him for me, okay? If anything happens to him, Jack O’Neill is going to eviscerate me.”

Blair laughed. “I hear you, man. As one of my co-workers says, no worries, mate. But... you going to take O’Neill up on the Atlantis stay?”

“Well... staying for a while in an alien flying city, the actual for real Lost City of Atlantis... Gee, I don’t know...”

Ethan giggled and patted his knee again. “Say hello to Ganos Lal for me.”

“Say hello to who?” Spencer asked, blinking into a kindly old face, wreathed in concern.

“Say hello to who?” the man echoed in a pleasant voice, gently accented in a Scottish brogue. “Are you feeling quite alright, my dear boy?”

“Oh, uh, yes. I’m quite fine. Really.” Spencer struggled to sit up, finding himself lying on a couch in someone’s office, his shirt loosened, a sleeve pushed up and a blood pressure cuff attached. The elderly man had a stethoscope around his neck. Everyone from the conference room was standing or sitting somewhere near, but out of the doctor’s way. This was the elder medical examiner from the Mott’s Reservoir crime scene.

“So now you’re compos mentis again, I believe you were about to tell me where Daniel is,” General O’Neill barked out, trying to get close enough to lay hands on the FBI profiler.

The doctor pushed the General back with a filthy look, as he supported Spencer’s efforts to collect...
himself, still observably wobbly. “If you don’t mind, General, my patient requires a little space to breathe.”

The General grumbled, “Damn Scottish doctors… Beckett is just as bad, and don’t even talk to me about Fraiser…”

“Here, my dear boy. Let me just remove those… I’m Dr. Mallard, by the way, but you must call me Ducky,” and Ducky pulled off the cuff, and assisted Spencer in setting his clothing to rights.

“Thanks,” the young man said sincerely to the kindly ME. “Sorry about that. Um… I… uh…” There was a list of things it was unwise to say out loud in front of others if you had a history of schizophrenia in your family tree… Spencer was pretty sure this qualified for somewhere near the top. “I know this is going to sound crazy, but… I was just talking to… Daniel. He’s learning how to be a shaman, and… he was able to pull me to the Spirit Plane for a talk.”

“Oh,” Jack observed, passing both hands over his face. “Daniel messing with other planes of existence is not a good thing, Dr. Reid. Take it from me.”

Interesting, Spencer thought, that O’Neill didn’t protest the impossibility of it, a fact not lost on anyone else in the room, although most looked like they’d sucked on a lemon. “Actually, in this case, I think it might be very good.” He briefly wondered if a demonstration might be in order, and if it would even work… Having objective viewers witness this would certainly make *him* feel better about it…

And the Desert Owl was present once again, gliding in from nowhere, quiet as a hush of air, with banded wings outspread, settling on his lap. To the gasps of everyone in the room. “Meet my Spirit Guide. If you can see her, it will help you understand that Daniel is trying to access something… powerful and ineffable, that has a potential of helping us defeat the Wraith. Because they are coming.”

“No. No! Absolutely not! Not again. It can’t be Daniel this time. Not again!” Jack protested. Then he lifted his face to the ceiling, “Damn it, hasn’t he done enough for you bastards?”

Spencer understood. “He said the Ancients had turned him into a weapon. And all he wants is to be a good person. He needs to find a balance between the two, and I can certainly understand that. I struggle with the same thing every time we hunt down some unsub, and have to balance justice for the lives they’ve taken, concern for the lives they threaten, against empathy for the unendurable inner pain they’ve suffered that warped them and drove them to such horrible extremes. But I do struggle and I do find a way to cope, and I go out every day and face the same impossible decisions all over again. Because it’s my calling. I can’t turn away from the quest, and neither can Daniel. If learning to be a Shaman is his path, his way to cope and keep moving, you have to let him walk it, Jack.”

“He’s just a little boy. He’s suffered enough,” Jack whispered. “It’s my job to protect him, defend him, bring him home. It’s always been my job, from the first time I met him. I’ve failed to do that so many times...”

“When I turned eighteen, I finally had to decide what to do about my mother. She’d suffered with full-blown schizophrenia for eight years, and we hid it, both of us, so we could both live at home. But she wasn’t getting the help she needed and deserved, and I had a life to lead. I had her committed. It was the only possible choice. Yes, I felt guilty, like I had made a selfish choice for my own sake and not so much for hers, and it kept me from visiting her as often as I should have, still does, but... it was the best, the only thing for both of us. It was the hard choice, but the right one, and today my mother would be the first to agree. Make the right choice, Jack. Let him follow his path.”
Tightening his jaw, Jack reluctantly nodded, hiding a suspicious brightness in his brown eyes.

With a soft, reassuring “Hoo”, the Owl vanished.

“Oh my, how remarkable…” the Scottish doctor observed in a hushed voice. “I must assume everyone has such a magical creature to assist them in difficult times?”

“Um, yes, apparently so. I didn’t realize I had one until Daniel introduced us. I have to say, I’m just as glad… With my medical history and my mother’s condition, seeing things that couldn’t be there would have been a very bad sign for me.”

“Yes, well,” Director Vance said, thinking it was about time he took charge of this little sewing circle in his office. “General O’Neill, I don’t know how much of all this is classified… I know I would sure like a little background on what happened the night of the invasion that caused all this to happen…” When Gibbs gave him a stare, he said, “and so would my people. We’d be willing to sign whatever non-disclosure documents you think necessary. We all have high clearance levels.”

O’Neill sighed. “Yeah, fine. I’ll have my people send over copies of Dr. Reid’s report from that night. Then yes, you all get to sign seventy-odd pages of contract that promises you won’t breathe a word of certain subversive elements inside our own government being complicit in multiple counts of kidnapping, torture, illegal medical experimentation and mass murder. All the work of a clandestine organization known as the Trust, with tentacles into the highest levels of our government, military and financial sectors, not to mention international wings and… shall we say, connections that are literally out of this world. Their goal is to take over the World. Hard to do if the Wraith eat us all first. And the Wraith Invasion, landing like a bomb on their little operation in the Nevada Desert, blew their whole organization sky high. Between them trying to cauterize the damage, and us mopping up, there aren’t that many of them left loose. I had it figured that they were hunting Daniel down to keep him from talking about Gitmo West, but the lengths they’re going to now, chasing Dr. Reid, seems to be more than that. I’d have thought, for the few who are still out there, plan B would be to cut their losses and high-tail it out of Dodge before the rest of the Wraith Hives arrive. So what this is… I don’t know.”

“Shit,” Gibbs muttered.

“No kidding,” Jack agreed.

“The Wraith called Daniel the Destroyer of Worlds,” Spencer supplied. “He says that’s what the Ancients made him.”

Jack shrugged. “Fits. Getting hold of Daniel would be a pre-emptive strike for the Wraith. Still doesn’t explain why the Trust want him so bad. I’m hoping the guys in your holding might know. Director Vance, I’ll have some of my guys come and collect the prisoners in a bit.”

Gibbs’ team, DiNozzo, McGee and Bishop, immediately backed out of the blast-area, well aware what always happened when another agency attempted to take jurisdiction in one of their cases. Even Ducky straightened and took a step back.

“Wait a minute! I don’t remember agreeing to that,” Vance bristled, right on cue. “This was an assault on NCIS, an attempted kidnapping and assault on a person in our protective custody by suspects purporting to be Marines, and therefore well within our jurisdiction—“

Gibbs’ voice was just as loud. “Our arrest, our prisoners. Marines are ours. We haven’t even had a chance to interrogate them yet, to find out who they are, how they got in, what their goals were, who gave them their orders—“
“And in any other case I’d be glad to leave them in your hands, but—“ the HomeWorld Security
General maintained, his jaw set like iron.

Cruz and Reid exchanged glances, eyebrows lifted, as they waited to see who would win this tug of
war.

“We could always share,” Tony suggested mildly, willing to draw fire before his Boss popped an
embolism. “We’re pretty good at interrogations around here. Why don’t you send somebody down
who can back us up, and we can at least soften them up for you? We’ve got possession at the
moment, and that’s nine points of the law, or so we used to say in the schoolyard. It could take you
days to plow through all the red-tape paperwork required to take custody anyway.”

“And I’ve got these shiny Asgard transport beams.”

“And no legal right to violate JAG by taking them,” Gibbs fired right back.

O’Neill held up his hands and said, “Okay! Okay. I have lately been made aware that my people,
good as they are at saving planets, aren’t the ones with gnarly super powers when it comes to
criminal investigations. Not usually our thing. I admit you guys probably have more experience in
interrogation. So you can have first crack. I’ll get someone down here to help you figure what
questions need asking. But if you don’t make some progress, I have other options. Deal?”

Mollified, Vance nodded, chewing his toothpick into sawdust mush. “Deal.”

O’Neill grinned, and the NCIS crowd began to wonder if they’d been played by this sly, cunning
man with the deceptive bat-shit crazy mask. Tony, who knew masks, and how to work them to get
others to underestimate him, was a little envious.

“So, Dr. Reid,” O’Neill turned to the gawky young FBI agent, “since you’re the one and only
person who can actually point them at Daniel, that makes you target number one with a bullet. You
were pretty smart escaping them this time, but you’re right, they won’t stop coming at you. You
willing to come with me to Atlantis?”

Spencer grinned, then deferred shyly to his Section Chief. “Is that okay with you, Chief Cruz?”

Mateo Cruz lifted an eyebrow. “From the sounds of it, it’s the only option that doesn’t end with you
kidnapped, tortured, or with an eel in your head. I’ll let your team know where you are.”

“No need,” Jack declared lightly as he tapped on an ear-bud. “We got cell service from Atlantis.
Carter? We got two to beam up.”

“Whoa,” said Tony DiNozzo, after the bright wash of white light had faded on their retinas, leaving
holes where O’Neill and their Hamid had so recently been. “Way Sci-Fi.”

“Yeah,” breathed McGee reverently.

“My Goodness!” Ducky exclaimed. “I didn’t get a chance to ask what my Spirit Guide might be.”

“I didn’t get a chance to say good bye,” Bishop mourned. “Or talk to Dr. Reid about his papers on
serial killers. He’s practically the last word on stranger abductions and geographic profiling, and…”

“Enough!” Vance declared. In a moment more, a huge stack of stapled documents appeared in a
flash of light, right on his desk, and he sighed in resignation. “Okay, everybody take one report and
one NDA, and return them all, signed, within the hour. I’m guessing you’ll need the ground-work
before we tackle the guys in Holding. But until then, get out of my office. Some of us have work to
do. And we’ve got six guests downstairs who need the full-on Gibbs treatment before someone makes them vanish in a bright white light. Matt, you’re welcome to stay, but…”

Mateo Cruz lifted his hands in surrender with a chuckle. “Say no more, Leon. I’m gone. I have an anxious team to reassure, and a security mess of my own to clean up. But if I should find occasion in the next few days to really shaft that guy Cosgrove from Homeland…”

“You can rely on my full and enthusiastic support.” With a hand-shake and a grin, Cruz exited the office, and the MCRT members began sorting out their piles of paper.

Which, naturally, was when the phone rang. Vance picked up, barked out, “Vance,” then listened in more and more alarm. “What?! What the hell!... Anyone hurt?... Secure the damn scene. I’m sending Ducky down. But get EMT’s called in on the double. And alert all gates!”

He slammed the receiver down and grimaced, even as his people began to stiffen, ready for action. “That was Holding. They took snacks to the prisoners, and came up two short. Two of those bastards got away. One jumped a guard, stole his uniform and weapon, left him unconscious and stuck in a closet in his skivvies, then released one other, before they shot three of the other prisoners. By that time the alarms went off, and they made their escape. Ducky, the guard is down by Holding. See what’s wrong with him, then send him to hospital to be checked out. Then you can see about our three dead prisoners. Gibbs, you and your people still have a bunch of reading to do before you tackle our one remaining duckling. I’ll tighten security on Holding, get an alert out on our two missing guys, and…” he sighed, picking up a contact sheet on his desk, “tell O’Neill we lost two, and three more are dead. I can just imagine how that will go over.”

Gibbs was feeling pretty foul himself. “Better you than me, Leon.”

“Oh, get the hell out of here. I don’t need an audience for this.”

Tony tipped his chair back until the back rested against the corner of the interrogation room, totally engrossed in the tetris game he was playing on his cellphone. The theme song the game was playing was the soundtrack to the Godfather. To all appearances, he hadn’t even noticed the prisoner handcuffed to the chair and table across the room.

This was one of the assault team who had invaded interrogation room three with an alien puppet-master eel in a thermos container. Sergeant number one, the guy Tony had decked, had been murdered by the major with the scar on his chin, on his way out the door with the other major. So, of the six who invaded NCIS after Dr. Reid, the two majors had escaped, Major Scarface had killed three more, and only this guy was left. Sergeant number two, the one who had freaked as soon as he realized the eel was loose, and coming for him.

There was an empty chair also at the table, seemingly waiting for a third to enter at some point.

Bored after the hour he had already spent in here without even a cell phone game to distract him from slate grey walls and a mirror that only showed this little room, the prisoner heaved a sigh. “So what are you, my babysitter?”

Tony frowned a little, but didn’t even look up.

“I see,” the prisoner ventured again with a calculating look. “You’re the screw up, right? They had you looking after the Reid kid, and now you’re just supposed to keep me out of trouble till the real agents show up. Right?”
Tony frowned again, wincing and shifting his shoulders, as if the shot had hit home.

“Hey, it’s been hours. The least you can do is get me a magazine or something to fill in the time.”

Finally cracking, Tony’s chair finally hit the floor, all four legs, and he tore his attention from his game. “Like I owe you a damn thing, when you and your team almost got me eeled? Oh hell no.”

“Snaked.”

“What?”

“The symbiotes. We call ‘em snakes, not eels.”

“Not eels?”

“No. Snakes. It almost snaked you.”

“Hunh. Anyway, it’s against policy to bring a magazine in here.”

“Why?”

“Legend has it Agent Gibbs killed a guy in here with a rolled-up magazine once, so not allowed in interrogation any more… Sorry.”

“They think if your Gibbs can do it, so can I?”

Tony eyed him with a smirk. “They’re not worried about you, sparky. But the director is tired of covering for Gibbs when he gets… carried away. So no magazine, fountain pen, paper clip, or, in one memorable interview, a fuzzy slipper.”

“So, is Gibbs the guy who’s gonna interrogate me? You’re telling me stories about your big bad boss, to soften me up for him?”

Tony snorted. “Hell no. Gibbs has got better things to do. So you get me instead. Now shut up and let me play my game.”

Tony ignored him again, tipping back the chair and returning to his game.

Only a few minutes later, the prisoner was impatient enough to break the silence again. “No questions?”

Tony looked up, annoyed at being disturbed, then even more annoyed when the crash noise from his cell signaled that he had lost the game. He heaved a heavy sigh, looking the prisoner over in derision.

“You’ve got nothing to tell us.”

“How do you know?”

Tony smirked meanly. “You’re alive, aren’t you? From what I hear, every one of you guys who gets captured ends up dead within a day. That major who came in with you? He got away, and managed to kill all of your buddies on his way out. Well no, I lie, he sprang the other major, the one who came in the front door, instead of the back with you and your scarface major. You, a lousy non-com, wasn’t even worth a bullet to him. Not to mention, you work for the same bastards as those degenerates in Vegas who kidnapped little boys, raped and killed them. Your bosses killed all those guys they could reach to stop them talking. You’re still alive, so, ego, you’ve got nothing to tell us.”

Tony immediately re-booted his game, leaned his chair back into the corner, and it was as if the
prisoner wasn’t even there.

“Ergo,” groused the prisoner, his mouth twisting as if he’d sucked a lemon.

“Hunh?”

“Ergo, not ego. It’s ‘ergo you’ve got nothing’.”

“Oh, another language lesson now? What are you, the grammar police? Shut up, you. Gibbs is too busy to bother with you. Because you, my friend, are nothing but a flunky, you don’t know nothing. Sides…” and Tony’s smirk graduated into a full-blown malicious grin. “You squealed like a little girl when you thought that eel thing might get you. And you couldn’t get the better of that skinny kid, Hamid, or whoever the hell he is. You’re a walking joke. You don’t know nothin’ bout birthin’ no babies.”

The sergeant stared hard at the agent, his jaw working. “So… what’s this, then?”

“Shut up. Wait for your lawyer to get here.”

“What lawyer?”

“You didn’t call a lawyer? Hunh. One’s supposed to be on the way. Hunh… guess you know enough to be dangerous to them after all, then. Or maybe they don’t give a damn, and just want you gone. Good luck with that.”

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In observation, Colonel Samantha Carter commented, “Interesting interview technique.”

Gibbs glanced her way, prepared to bristle in defense of his Senior Field Agent, but let it go when it seemed the SGC Colonel was actually being sincere. He huffed and said, “DiNozzo’s the best.”

Carter grinned. “I can tell. We got a crash course in interviewing when we were in Vegas… keep the subject off guard. But I have to say… you’ve got some way to go to match Penelope Garcia… she had a battle-hardened black ops assassin in tears by the time she was finished, and it only took her minutes.”

Gibbs was in the observation room with Bishop and McGee at his side, while HomeWorld was represented by Colonel Carter, NID agent Malcolm Barrett, who had requested a seat at this show, and a monument in ebony with a gold emblem on his forehead, introduced as Master Teal’c of Chulak. Anyone who had even glanced at the declassification briefings the past few weeks knew this was one of the leaders of the Free Jaffa, and a card-carrying founding member of the SGC flagship team, SG-1. He hadn’t had anything to say since he arrived (in a flash of light, so very cool), but now he rather startled the NCIS team by speaking, his voice as powerful and larger-than-life as the rest of him, deep and rich with gravitas.

“I have viewed the tapes of Miss Garcia at work. I was most impressed. From my study of American television, I was already aware of the good cop/bad cop method of interrogation. It is the preferred strategy we used at the SGC for traitors to Earth, Goa’uld System Lords and other malefactors, or possessors of valuable intel they were reluctant to share with us. I, of course,’’ he said, raising an intimidating eyebrow at the weedy agent standing next to him and flexing his massive arms to crack his knuckles, “play the bad cop.”

McGee edged half a step to the side, away from the mountain of intimidation, until he bumped into Bishop.
“But,” the warrior conceded, “my viewing of the interrogation by Miss Garcia, revealed to me that it is possible to employ more subtle tactics with great efficacy. I am unclear, however, what your Very Special Agent DiNozzo is doing.”

Gibbs, who wouldn’t be intimidated by anything less than an army of such formidable alien warriors, and had a sneaking respect for this one, defender of freedom among the stars that he was, merely smiled up at him. “Watch and learn then, Master Teal’c.”

The alien gave a regal nod of the head. “Indeed.”

Finding his footing again, McGee stretched his head a little, till his neck bones cracked, and dared to say, “I once saw Tony get everything out of a Russian Mafia hit man with nothing but a tin of Christmas cookies, and the guy never even spoke a word.”

“I saw the video of that,” Bishop nodded. “It’s part of the interviewing course at FLETC.” She supplied for the benefit of their guests, “That’s the Federal Law Enforcement Training Course, for agents in all the alphabet agencies. The text book on interviewing includes a whole chapter on Tony.”

“A tin of Christmas cookies?” Agent Barrett asked, raising an eyebrow and glancing at Colonel Carter. The two of them were imagining Tony hitting the guy over the head with it.

Gibbs smirked, nodding. “Yeah. We couldn’t get authorisation to use the surveillance tapes of the time he got the Director of Mossad to spill his guts… and that time he was supposed to be the one being interviewed.”

McGee chimed back in with, “Then there’s the time we were held by a Somali terrorist leader, he was tortured, drugged and tied to a chair, and all he had to defend us both was his mouth…”

Sam chuckled and held her hands up in surrender. “Okay, I get it. He knows what he’s doing. But I still must say, I like Garcia’s style…”

Gibbs casually nodded to McGee, who took out his cell phone and made a call. In the interrogation room, Tony’s cell started to play Sinatra – ‘I Did It My Way’.

With another put-upon sigh, Tony once again came down on all four chair legs, and pressed the button on his cell.

“Yeah?... Yeah, about that, sergeant number two says he didn’t call a lawyer….” then he eyed the prisoner with a smirk. “Yeah, I’ll bet. Better have the guy frisked for weapons anyway, eels in thermoses, magazines, fountain pens, paper clips… and don’t forget the fuzzy slippers.”

Shutting off his cell and pocketing it, Tony got up, stretched his spine till it cracked, and said, “Well, that’s your lawyer. He’s at the front gate, they’ll frisk him and bring him right down. So I guess that’s it for you, sergeant number two. Sayonara. It’s been fun.”

“Wait!” protested the prisoner, rattling his cuffs. “You can’t let that guy get to me!”

“Yeah? Why not.” Tony didn’t even slow down on his way to the door.

“I do know something! Look, protect me, keep that guy away from me, and I’ll tell you everything.”

Tony hesitated just a moment, eyeing the sergeant with deep skepticism.
“It’ll make you look good to your superiors, you getting the scoop from me.”

Shaking his head and heaving another sigh with a roll of his eyes, Tony thumped back in his chair, folded his arms across his chest and glared. So yeah, he was overplaying a bit, but he’d already conditioned the prisoner to expect that from a lame and somewhat lazy time-marking screw up. “Okay, sergeant number two. Whadaya got that’ll be worth me sticking my neck out?”

“Those two majors. The one who led my team, don’t know what his name really is, he uses a different one every time I’ve seen him, we call him Scarface for that scar on his chin… the other one, though, he was in charge of Bunker Thirteen. Commanded Tango Unit at Area 51, and the Sierra Unit sweeper teams. His name was Major Vincent Hoskins, USMC, before Invasion Night. After that, he faked his death, turned up as Major William Matthews. Word is, they both get their orders straight from the Trust Leadership.”

Tony shook his head. “None of this is news to us, sparky. You gotta do better than that.”

“Okay! Okay. I heard them talking... they didn’t know I overheard them. Hoskins, Matthews, whoever, he was talking to a guy named Bradshaw. Getting orders. Reason we were sent on this mission, was to get the Reid kid, at all costs. The bosses need him bad.”

“Yeah, we could kinda tell, by the way you blew up your contacts at the FBI and Homeland, just to get a BOLO on Hamid. I gotta tell ya, that seems like a really stupid move on your part. Faking his identity as a terrorist wouldn’t have lasted more than another few minutes, with his FBI Section Chief upstairs ready to identify him.”

“We wouldn’t have needed more than a few minutes, not if we got the Goa’uld symbiote into him. Then he would have been ours, and volunteered every bit of intel we wanted.”

“The eel thing with the blue blood. The puppet-master eel that almost got both of us instead. Yeah, thanks for that, sparky. So what the hell did Hamid have that you wanted so bad?”

“Daniel Jackson. He knows where Daniel Jackson is.”

“Daniel Jackson. Daniel, like little blond kids in Vegas, Daniel? Or Daniel Jackson like Dr. Daniel Jackson, member of SG-1 and hero of the Known Universe, Daniel?”

“Both.”

Tony couldn’t resist glancing at the mirrored wall, hiding a smirk from the unravelling prisoner. “So what does a five year old down-sized linguist and archaeologist have that you guys need so bad?” When sergeant number two hesitated, Tony checked his watch. “You’ve got about two more minutes before your lawyer gets down here, sparky, and so far you’ve given me bupkiss.”

“A way off the planet!” the prisoner almost yelled. “The Wraith are coming, a hell of a lot more of them, and we don’t have any other way to escape before they get here and eat all of us.”

“How’s a kid supposed to save you?”

“The Lucians want him. The Lucian Alliance. They’ve got ships, they can give us transport off this rock, which is something we don’t have now, but they want Daniel Jackson first. Hell, everybody wants him, because the Wraith are offering a get-out-of-being-eaten deal to anyone who passes him over to them.”

Tony’s eyes hardened, imperceptibly. He quoted softly from *’The Magnificent Seven’*, the 1960
version. “We didn’t figure on being the only game in town,” as the Steve McQueen character said. The gun-fighting team had thought they’d only need to scare off the bandito gang from hassling the poor Mexican village they’d been hired to protect, until they learned the banditos were starving, with no other source of food. O’Neill had wondered why the Trust were hunting Daniel so hard, when HWS already knew everything about Gitmo West. But now, clearly, there was a lot more urgent reason. The parallel was apt.

“So, to get out of being eaten along with the rest of us poor slobs, you and your buddies are going to just… hand over a five year old kid? Hero of the Known Universe? To the Space Vampire Aliens. Nice one, sparky. Maybe I should let that lawyer get to you anyway.”

“No! I know more… you’ll want to know…”

“What? Know what? The only thing we might want to know right now is the same thing you do, where is Daniel Jackson. And you don’t have him. Hamid does. And Hamid isn’t talking to anyone. You must know Home World have already snapped him up, so you got no chance of getting to him now. So good luck with your escape plan, sparky. Hamid won, you lost.” Tony enjoyed gloating a little at that, turning up the heat on sergeant number two.

“The Trust has one more hand to play. You’re right, the only route to Jackson is through Reid. But Scarface and Matthews had a back-up plan. If the BOLO failed, for any reason, their next target is someone they can use to force Reid to give himself up to them. His mom. Diana Reid. She’s a sitting duck right now, in a loony bin in Vegas.”
Chapter Notes

I adore Jane Lynch, in any role she tackles.

~ *In a land of immigrants, one was not an alien but simply the latest arrival.* ~ Rudolf Arnheim ~

“Welcome to Atlantis,” the General smirked at Spencer as he swept an arm at the amazing crystal palace rising all around them.

‘Welcome, Doctor Spencer Reid of the Federal Bureau of Investigations Behavioral Analysis Unit,’ said a distinctly feminine voice… *in his head*!

And that was also a bad sign in his particular case. He checked all the faces around him, and saw several checking him out right back. One was a tall, gangly, slouchy man in black military uniform with an American flag patch on one shoulder and black hair that seemed to grow in tufts in different directions.

“That was Atlantis, Dr. Reid. She likes you,” the man declared, coming down the wide steps from a balcony level to join him and the general. The man snapped out a salute for O’Neill, then offered him a hand-shake. Spencer tucked his right hand under his arm and gave a little wave with the left, stepping back from the offered contact. This startled the man, who cocked his head to the side to listen to something Spencer couldn’t hear, then said, “Oh. Sorry about the handshake thing. She says you don’t like it. I’m Colonel John Sheppard, military commander of the city. And,” he glanced at the General. “Dr. Reid has the gene. In spades, apparently.”

O’Neill gave a sour look and sighed. “Yeah, I might have figured that one. Okay. I got places to go, people to roust and Trust members to boil in oil. So, Sheppard? Dr. Reid is now your responsibility. Don’t lose him. And don’t let him get eaten by anything. Everything I know about this kid says he’s almost as much of a trouble magnet as Daniel. So… fair warning. Consider him to be under protective custody, not to leave the city. The Trust will be hunting him pretty hard. We may have to send his BAU team up, too… maybe the CSIs who were with him on Invasion Night… not sure about that yet.”

Sheppard nodded understanding, though he winced a bit. “That Garcia woman too? You know that’s going to be… bad.”

“What’s wrong with Garcia?” Spencer demanded, bristling at the negative attitude.

“Nothing’s wrong with her,” O’Neill declared, scowling at Sheppard. “I want one of my own. I might even be able to poach her from the FBI, if you’re nice enough to her and impress her with all the shiny… stuff you got here. So be extra nice and welcoming. Or else.”

With that, O’Neill tapped something and said into the ether, “Okay, Steven. Send me back down. I got clean-up to do.” And he disappeared in a flash of light.
Spencer focused on Colonel Sheppard, unable to do more than curb his hostility. “What’s wrong with Garcia?”

“Nothing!” Sheppard raised his hands in defense. “But… our Chief Science Officer is a bit… tetchy about competition.”

Okay, Spencer could put that one together. “Your CSO would feel threatened by her? Garcia isn’t like that. And no way do you guys poach her. Try it, and you deal with me. And that will not end well for you. Just so you know.”

Rather than be alarmed, Sheppard just grinned and said, “I agree with Atlantis. I like you, Dr. Reid. How about a tour of our city?”

“I would like that very much, thank you. What was that about a gene?”

Before they more than took a few steps toward what seemed to be an exit off this staging area in front of what had to be a Stargate – and how awesome was that! – there was another flash of white light, and more people appeared abruptly where they had just stood. That seemed to be a potentially dangerous situation to Spencer, hoping the people managing the transporters around here had some kind of fail-safe protocols to prevent people materializing inside each other. Or floors or walls, for that matter.

A man and woman had just arrived, in green fatigues rather than uniforms, and different service patches than the Atlantis crew wore. Both were tall, the woman with black hair pinned in pig tails with big pink scrunchies (surely that wasn’t authorized official uniform, was it? Even in the obviously less formal ranks of the SGC?), the man with brown hair and blue eyes, looking alarmed and put out by the woman’s belligerent attitude.

“Vala, you can’t just demand—” he offered, even as he reached to try and grab her arm, and missed. She was already storming toward them.

“You! You’re Reid, right? You know where my Daniel is. I want him back. Right now!”

Sheppard did his best to intercept as Spencer could only blink and gape at the angry woman.

“Hey, Vala, slow down. Dr. Reid is a guest here—“

“In protective custody,” Spencer clarified, a little miffed about that.

“—and… do you even have authorization to be here?”

“Jack said this man knows where my Daniel is. I want him back.”

The two military people groaned in identical exasperation at a superior officer they couldn’t exactly swear at. Sheppard did his best with it. “I’m not sure what the situation is, but I’m sure—“

“So where is he? Why isn’t he already here, or with Jack? Why aren’t you giving him back?”

Spencer could see how truly upset the woman was, and her proprietary attitude toward Daniel was something of a mystery to him, but he had dealt with distraught relatives and loved ones for many years. While not always comfortable with it, he had learned from the best. JJ was fabulous at dealing with the bereaved or the worried. And in this case, the victim was actually as safe and sound as Spencer could make him.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know who you are, but you’re obviously a close friend of Daniel’s. My name is
Spencer Reid, and I care about him, too. Maybe we can take this discussion somewhere private, and I can explain the situation to you.” He checked with the two men, wondering if his assumptions were correct, that simply by being here, the woman had the necessary security clearance.

“Good idea!” Sheppard leapt on this notion.

In his head, that soft feminine voice spoke again. ‘This way, Dr. Reid,’ and he had the sense of climbing the stairs to the operations balcony, where there was a conference room waiting for them. And maybe not everyone was aware of that voice, because small LED-like lights in the floor seemed to be travelling in the same indicated path.

“Oh yeah, she likes you a lot,” Sheppard told him as he lead the way up the stairs.

Since introductions would seemingly have to wait, Spencer went ahead, the woman stomping angrily at his side, still highly upset.

Spencer took careful note of all the unexpected body language… this woman was not a product of Western culture, he was certain. And although her accent appeared to be British, or maybe from one of their former colonies, there were enough differences to make that identification uncertain. Her total lack of respect for certain conventions of female behavior made him wonder if she was from… a lot further away than South Africa, Australia or New Zealand.

When they arrived at the conference room, Sheppard, rather heartlessly, Spencer thought, abandoned him to the two newcomers.

“Just an FYI,” the so-far unidentified man offered as the room’s doors automatically shut, by no physical switch Spencer had observed, “I’m Colonel Cameron Mitchell. This is Vala Mal Doran. We’re Daniel’s team-mates, on SG1. And before you ask, no, we weren’t with him when he got… shrunk. That was another team who borrowed him when we weren’t looking, and they’re *still* on our shit list for that little stunt.”

Spencer nodded, as he settled himself in one of the conference room chairs. The woman flopped in the one next to him, but the man leaned against the now-invisible door, propping up the glass (or was it glass?) wall that abruptly turned a milky opaque. Their roles as Daniel’s team members accounted for some of their concern, at any rate. Whenever members of his own team, his own family, had gone missing or were in dire circumstances, he had been pretty distraught, too, and willing to go to any lengths to see them safe and home.

“I signed a seventy-two page non-disclosure document to promise I would not reveal what happened during my participation in the defense of Earth, the night of the Wraith Invasion. I am subject to some serious consequences if I break that contract.”

Col. Mitchell nodded. “Not a problem. We’ve both read your full report, Dr. Reid. And we’ve all pretty much assumed you weren’t entirely accurate in that report. The last cell in Gitmo West wasn’t empty, was it? You found Daniel there.”

Spencer sighed, a little relieved. “That makes this easier. But I can neither confirm nor deny.”

Mitchell nodded. “You and the CSI with you, Sanders, killed the Wraith, or at least, shot him, then approached to decapitate, as per protocol. Right? And as you were sawing off the head…”

“Yes yes,” Ms Mal Doran huffed impatiently. “The symbiote jumped out at you and you caught it —“

“I didn’t,” Spencer corrected, and waited for them to connect the dots.
Vala nodded. “Ah. Daniel did. He came out of hiding to save you from being taken by the Goa’uld.”

“I had no way of knowing the danger I was in. So I was very lucky I wasn’t taken, there and then. Apart from that last cell and what was in it, or not, everything else in my report is the truth. But you realize, the CSIs and I all recognized at once that bunker was not so much a prison as an interrogation and torture chamber, and no one who went in was intended to ever come out alive. We didn’t need to hear Daniel’s warnings to realize that very powerful, influential and ruthless people were behind that facility. So his safety became our primary concern. And we couldn’t trust any official entity from that point on.”

“Including us?” Mal Doran demanded, affronted. “We’re his team! He’s mine! Ours.”

“And he was only in that cell in the first place because the Trust was able to steal him away from General O’Neill,” Spencer stated, as gently as he could.

Col. Mitchell came to his support. “And they had the juice to get the White House itself to back off finding him, Vala. We think we have all the high level conspirators, but we can’t know for sure.”

Spencer looked the woman straight in the eye. “The FBI and Homeland Security databases were both hacked so that the Trust could get to me. That happened today. So I know the Trust are still out there, still highly connected, still desperate to get their hands on Daniel. He is safe, right now. I can absolutely promise you that. He is being well cared for, by people I trust with my life and his, getting the help he needs to deal with the symptoms of PTSD I observed in him the moment we rescued him. He has nightmares and night terrors. He still carried the scars and bruising from repeated beatings, whipping, electrical burn marks littering his chest, restraint marks on ankles and wrists, needle tracks in his arms from whatever drug cocktails they were giving him. He occasionally has waking flash-backs that torment him. He was held captive and tortured for months by people I have no trouble categorising as sadistic psychopaths, and his life had not been entirely sunshine and roses before that. I believe he was still suffering some emotional shock from whatever happened to reduce him to a child, and his reactions, physical and emotional if not intellectual, were all that of a five or six-year-old, not a grown man. Which made many of his adult memories highly disturbing, to me and to him. I seriously doubt he has forgotten them, so much as repressed them, consciously or not, for his own protection.”

The woman’s dark eyes filled with tears and she swallowed convulsively while struggling to speak beyond the lump in her throat.

“He’s safe?” she finally managed.

“Yes.” Spencer allowed no doubt to cloud his response.

“He’s well?”

“He will be. He’s getting the help he needs to get there.”

“He’ll come back, when it’s safe?”

“I’m certain he will. At that point, it will be his choice, not mine.”

She nodded several times, then with a gasping cry, she lunged into Spencer’s lap, clutched her arms around him, and wept on his shoulder. This was a highly unusual situation to Spencer, but he sighed and finally hugged her back, waiting out the emotional reaction. This had obviously been a long time coming.

Leaning negligently against the wall, Col. Mitchell merely smirked at him and mouthed, “Better you
than me, sunshine.”

Slowly, the woman seemed to calm, gradually developing a case of hiccups, but not loosening her hold on him. Spencer resigned himself to a longer period of physical contact before he could ease himself out of what would no doubt soon be an awkward situation. He could only hope that happened before Morgan arrived. Or Garcia, for that matter. No, his whole team would definitely get a kick out of this scene, and months of teasing material.

“Could you at least get us some coffee? Tea, might be better for...?” Spencer requested somewhat desperately, nodding toward the weeping woman in his arms. Tea was always soothing to distraught relatives. “Sweet, weak and milky.” JJ had taught him that.

The excuse was all Mitchell needed to bolt from the room.

“Did Daniel mention me to you?” the woman asked in a small voice. “Did he tell you how he secretly loves me to distraction? Or did when he was legal?”

Oh, Spencer did not need that image planted in his brain. “No, he didn’t, but that isn’t surprising. As I said, he’s repressing a lot. While he was in hostile hands, he would have wanted to protect those closest to him, by hiding away his memories and feelings.”

“So… he’s forgotten me? And that’s a sign he really cares?” the woman asked, doubtful. He could hardly blame her. But then, as he had hoped, she began constructing her own explanations for any perceived failure on Daniel’s part to acknowledge her. “You know, a few years back, something similar happened to me. Athena, that time, caught me, tortured me, gave me a bad case of amnesia... didn’t know who I was, didn’t remember... anything. But Daniel searched and searched until he found me. I guess... I guess I can wait for him a little longer. But he’s really safe?”

“He really is.”

Spencer really hoped the coffee and tea arrived before his team did. Or... even worse, his mother found out.

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Dr. Howard Norman frowned at the file on his desk. It was late, and he was still ploughing through the stack of paperwork that had accumulated. Only this morning, the last of their temporary Invasion patients had been moved out. A few had gone to regular hospitals as beds came available for ongoing treatment. Some had gone to temporary housing to await word on still-missing loved ones. The vast majority had been fit enough to be bussed out to other cities with a transportation infrastructure that would send them home. So Howard and his staff were finally attempting to resume routine functions.

Routine, in this case, included the still giddy mood of unusually happy patients. It was as if validation of the existence of aliens had relieved many of them of the need to ‘believe’ in their own delusions, and most had turned to other, more positive, or at least, far less harmful, fantasies. In most cases, it was angels. He wasn’t sure where that particular rumour started, he suspected the north wing, but it was spreading quickly, almost like a benign virus. Lately, many were claiming to have been visited by their ‘spirit guides’ as well, and they seemed to be unusually and extraordinarily content afterward.

But Bennington had struggled along with the rest of the city in the hectic chaos of those first weeks post-Invasion. With the massive numbers of over-flow patients and the difficulties of maintaining order with his over-worked and over-extended staff, not to mention the problems of getting even
minimal supplies of food, medicine and other necessities delivered, paperwork had been the last thing on anyone’s mind. Not that it hadn’t still needed to be completed, but no one was bothering to actually do any of it, with far more pressing problems on their hands.

Inevitably, some of their patients had failed to get their proper dosages of medication.

In the following weeks, as the numbers of temporary guests dropped, shipped out or relocated, the Bennington staff were still in triage mode, severely rationing their drug supply, dealing with the most urgent cases first. Only slowly were they re-settling their own long-term patients back into their customary routines and treatment schedules, as supply lines were re-established.

It was only then that Dr. Norman had noticed something very odd had been going on with Dr. Diana Reid.

He could confess to himself, if no one else, that Diana was his favorite patient. Intelligent, witty and wise, even her paranoid delusions were highly entertaining; elaborate, internally consistent, well-constructed conspiracy theories involving shadowy government agents, kept at bay through her son’s exalted position and skills. How her mental disorders had destroyed her life was desperately tragic. She had always responded well to treatment, however, until the added complication of incipient early-onset Alzheimer’s had thrown her into disorder once more. And how unfair was that, to add insult to injury already done to a fine, brilliant mind.

Many of their patients had come through the stress of the Invasion in unexpectedly positive ways, and Diana had been one. Working with the first aid crews on the spill-over cases they took in at Bennington had given her a certain quiet pride and sense of accomplishment.

But then he suddenly realized that it had been three weeks since Diana had been receiving her usual prescriptions. With absolutely no adverse effects. Not so much as a temper tantrum, panic attack or even blank memory moment, as far as anyone had been able to observe.

Before putting her back on her meds, he had ordered her tested… cases of remission in dementia patients occasionally did occur, often stemming from more of a positive emotional cause than most doctors wanted to admit, and continued medication was contra-indicated in such situations.

And now he was finally able to review the results of his testing. He could find absolutely no trace of the considerable neurological damage that reflected her early-onset dementia. None.

Her brain waves, hormonal levels, observable behavior… if he didn’t know better… he would have said she’d been cured. Of two incurable mental diseases. And how did that make any sense whatsoever?

Then there had been the two ‘police officers’ who had come in this morning, asking to see Diana, flashing ID that Dr. Norman suspected had been hastily put together. They said they needed to ask after the whereabouts of her son, Dr. Spencer Reid. That had set off a number of red flags for Dr. Norman, who was well aware of Dr. Reid’s position in the FBI, and had guessed that he had been involved in something… dangerous, on Invasion Night, given that it had required an Air Force General to visit him next day. So he had asked the men for their ID again, and picked up the phone to call Captain Jim Brass. He had known Jim for years, having done a few consults with regards to his daughter, a troubled girl who had occasionally needed recommendations and referrals for drug rehab. The moment he mentioned Jim’s name, the two ‘officers’ had vanished. He reported the incident to Jim, and then put in a call to Spencer’s FBI team, as a warning.

Jim had been alarmed, but oddly unsurprised by the incident, and had assigned a couple of ‘his guys’ to beef up the patchy security around Bennington, particularly the north wing, where Diana’s room
was located. Since the men had come with Jim himself, personally introduced, Howard was reassured, and agreed to the measure as reasonable, given the unusual circumstances.

Dr. Norman was beginning to suspect that there were a lot weirder things out there than alien space vampires. And given his job, he would never be able to say that out loud.

He had just closed Diana’s file and placed it in his ‘out’ box, with a sticky note recommendation to suspend any medication unless there was an adverse change in behavior, when Martha, the nurse on the night duty desk, rushed in.

“Doctor, the security cameras are down, the phone lines are out, and I just tried to check on Bob at the front gate, and he’s lying unconscious in the gate-house!”

“Damn it! Have someone look for the LVPD officers! Call 911 for Bob, and get Frank and Don to the north wing, stat!”

Howard vaulted to his feet, ready to run to the north wing himself, when there was the echo of gunfire.

Almost by miracle, even as he reached the lobby, two military officers suddenly appeared in a flash of white light... He had heard rumors about this, the Sci-Fi transporter beams of Home World Security. The pair were armed and ready, a man and a woman in black uniforms with US flag patches on one shoulder, some unfamiliar patch of a winged horse on the other.

“Major Evan Lorne!” the man announced. “I’m here to protect Dr. Diana Reid! Take me to her! Now!”

“North wing!” Howard pointed the way, “and we just heard gun-fire. Hurry!”

More shots were already ringing out as they ran down the corridor to the north wing.

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Diana was once again out on the pool patio in her customary deck chair, looking up at the northwestern sky. She had been haunting this chair whenever she was not needed to help with their refugees, since the Invasion. And now that the last of their temporary guests had been removed, Diana was able to spend most of her time out here. Dr. Norman had finally noticed that she wasn’t getting her meds. Rather than put her right back on them, her doctor had instead decided to test her and wait and see if she had any returning symptoms before drugging her out of her head again. She always had been impressed by Howard’s good sense.

Diana was pretty sure she was cured. And she was pretty sure her little angel had done the curing. She had been a little alarmed when she had suddenly found herself in a blue jungle, earlier that week, hallucinations outside the norms of accepted reality not being a good sign, but Ethan had been there with some friends, rather a lot of them. Both human and animal… and then he had introduced her to her ‘Spirit Guide’, the cutest little prairie squirrel. He had a spotted coat and a twitching button nose, was small enough to escape notice by hiding under her chair or around her ankles, common enough a sight in a Nevada suburb not to invite comment.

Ethan had been worried for her, the pet. “They might come after you, Diana. They want Spencer, but he’s been too smart for them, so they may try to get to you first, to try and force him to give himself up. Which he would, if you were in danger. So I just want you to know, to be careful. I think Jack will send help, someone from Atlantis, to get you. They’ll have a Pegasus patch on their shoulders. That will probably be Evan Lorne, or maybe Major Teldy. I don’t know Major Teldy
myself, but Evan’s okay. He might start out a bit stiff and military, but he’s really okay. He paints some wonderful seascapes. And you can trust him. Oh, and don’t tell anyone my name is Ethan now. They’ll call me Daniel.”

Diana nodded, understanding the need for circumspection. “You’re Daniel. Got it.”

Then, this afternoon, she had noticed that there were a couple of police officers patrolling around the north wing. She nodded to herself, and figured that if bad guys were looking for her, they would search her room first. Best she not be there.

With the poor over-stressed staff still reeling in the aftermath of the Invasion, no one had bothered with the standard curfews, at least not for the more stable patients, although they still did modified bed-checks. As long as Martha knew where she was, no one fussed unduly.

Then her spirit guide was hopping in her lap, nose twitching in alarm, and Diana got the distinct message that it was time to hide.

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The north wing was in an uproar. Lorne signaled Teldy to keep the doctor back. She was already calling for back-up. He scoped out the firefight going on at the end of the wing by the opened French doors to what seemed to be a rose garden. Two men in LVPD uniforms were hunkered down just inside the building, trading shots with unknowns outside. Screams and shouts came from the rooms, but since this was a mental institution, that hopefully didn’t count for a whole lot. He was going to assume the residents were okay for now. He backed to the doctor’s side.

“Is there another way out of here? We need to get behind these guys.”

The doctor opened a door on an empty room, and helped them get past the locked window to sneak outside into the bushes. Teldy ghosted beside him in the dark, and they swung around in an arc, easily determining the positions of two gunmen by their weapons fire. A couple of zat shots, and they were able to safely rush in and disarm the bad guys. Two men in ninja-black with ski masks over their faces, carrying the automatic rifles that were standard for Trust operatives. But Chuck in Atlantis ops reported that there had been four hostile life-signs at this location, up until a few moments ago…

“Two bogeys missing,” Lorne reported in a whisper to his partner. She nodded, and they moved out, silent, searching. Behind them, they heard the LVPD guys arresting the two they’d zip-tied, now staggering to their feet.

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“Mrs. Reid? Please come out. The government has sent assassins to kill you. We’re here to take you to safety.”

No, her squirrel didn’t think so. Diana kept quiet, down behind the acacia bushes at the corner of the Bennington property. She didn’t know how the man had been able to follow her here, in the dark. She no longer really believed people had tracking devices implanted with their small-pox vaccinations.

“Please, Mrs. Reid. Spencer sent me.”

That just made her spirit guide angry, whiskers bristling in offense. Diana reached out for some kind of defense… the gardeners must have left the shovel behind weeks ago, when anyone in Nevada still made the effort to be bothered about landscaping.
“Mrs. Reid, Diana, I’m part of a secret anti-government special ops unit and I’ve been assigned to acquire you and get you to a secure location. I know you’re down behind those bushes. I have tech with me that pin-points your location. You might as well come out.”

Diana let him get a few steps closer… “Okay, okay. I’m coming out. Don’t shoot me.”

“I won’t shoot you, Mrs. Reid. My orders are to take you in alive.”

“Yes, I’m sure they--”

And then she swung the shovel in mid-sentence, as Spencer had always advised, to catch an assailant off-guard, and belted the bastard across the face.

“—are.”

He went down like a ton of bricks. Satisfied, she kicked his rifle out of his hands even as he lay groaning, and marched away, dragging the weapon by its strap, and keeping a firm grip on the shovel.

The LVPD men were speaking into their radios, urgently asking for back-up, while Dr. Norman and Martha fretted by the pool.

“She was here when I last checked, in her usual lounger, less than an hour ago,” Martha was saying.

Diana was about to call out that she was fine and safe, when she was tackled from behind. A gloved hand wrapped around her mouth, a large male body held her pinned, and began to drag her away from the lights and people around the patio. So close to safety! She struggled in vain against the much stronger, and obviously well-trained grip of her attacker.

Then there was a bolt of blue electricity all around them both… she shuddered and lost consciousness…

“What did *what* to my mother?” Spencer demanded, frantic, as he rushed the man with the Canadian flag patch, working the console on the operations deck of the Atlantis control room.

Honestly, his day had not been going well, even before this latest affront. Chased by Virginia State police, arrested and interrogated by NCIS, attacked by Trust black ops with a view to infesting him with a Goa’uld symbiote, fighting said agents, virtually kidnapped by HomeWorld Security and arrested, again, although they were calling it protective custody, albeit in a really awesome cell called Atlantis, and, alarmingly, finding the flying city of the Ancients had an artificial intelligence that could talk to him in his head… fending off a lot of Daniel Jackson’s friends and former team-mates who all thought they could do a better job protecting the little boy than he could, and by the way, consoling a woman who seemed to have a romantic attachment to the grown version.

And then to be informed that his friends at NCIS had uncovered a plot to kidnap his mother… there had already been one half-hearted attempt by the Trust just this morning to get to his mother, easily thwarted by Dr. Norman. But by now, the Trust must have realized their plot to frame him as a terrorist had failed…

Col. Sheppard had been preparing to send two of his recon units to protect Dr. Diana Reid while they waited for some kind of red-tape permission via the IOA to bring her aboard Atlantis, when Dr.
Rodney McKay, working the control room scanners, had yelped out that there were naquadah readings on the grounds of Bennington. Apparently, that was very bad news.

Sheppard immediately called up his two best units, whatever that meant, to retrieve Diana Reid, the IOA be damned. One unit was all men, with Air Force devices, the other all women, in Marine devices. The two squad leaders quickly organized and briefed their people on the gateroom floor, and a white flash of the now-familiar transporter beam took them away.

After that, Chuck, the Canadian ops console officer, had kept in touch via Atlantis comms. Broadcast over the loudspeakers, Spencer, McKay, Sheppard, Mitchell, Vala and a hand-full of others had heard increasingly alarming news from Bennington.

The squads had been deployed to secure the perimeter, while the two leaders went inside to find Diana. Until McKay had announced that there was weapons fire detected nearby.

Gunfire? His mother missing? Two arrested, but two still loose? One more bad guy found, evidently suffering from a smashed in face and a concussion, but no sign of the last bad guy, or his mother? Then…

“You *zatted* my mother? Are you *insane*? She has mental health issues and early-onset demential! You could have done her untold damage! And by the way? I don’t even know what ‘zatted’ means, but I couldn’t care less, because it can’t be good!”

Spencer was just getting warmed up in his rant, when the now-familiar bright white light materialized a large group of people on the stargate deck. The two teams who had been sent down, plus one guest in their middle. She chatted excitedly away as she patted herself down. Spencer sighed out in relief as he hurried down the steps.

“Oh my! That tingles! Am I all here? Oh, Evan, where are the bad guys? Didn’t we bring them with us?”

“No, ma’am. We left them for Las Vegas Police. Captain Jim Brass has them all in hand.”

“Well good. We don’t want them to get away. The nerve! Attacking a helpless woman in mental health! They actually tried to work on my paranoid delusions, did you know? I wish I’d hit that guy harder! Wait till I tell Spencer. He’s going to be so proud of me, kicking bad-guy butts!”

“Oh ooh-rah!” approved a couple of the marine women huddled around his mother.


“Oh, Spencer, there you are! Evan, Anne, tell him. I kicked their butts, Spencer. Well, one of them, anyway. Slugged him with a shovel.”

“That she did,” Major Anne Teldy confirmed with a grin. “It’s an honor to know you, ma’am.”

“Thank you, Anne. Oh, Evan, will you be bringing my stuff up, too? You probably don’t need to get what I have in storage, it can stay in the locker for now, all I really need is in the bathroom, and a few changes of clothes for now…”

“Don’t worry, ma’am, we’ll take care of everything for you.”

“Thank you, dear boy. Don’t forget to let me see your seascapes! Daniel tells me they’re really good.”
The tough military man blushed as he attempted to clear his throat. “Of course, ma’am. Dr. Reid? I’ll leave Mrs. Reid with you.”

“Um, thank you, Major. Mom? You sure you’re okay?” He raced forward to catch her in a tight hug. He desperately needed the physical reassurance of having her safe and present, in his arms. She allowed it, for a moment anyway, hugging him back as urgently, then gently extracting herself.

“I’m fine, dear. Better than fine, actually, because… well, I didn’t want to tell you before I was sure, but I think I’ve been cured! And… oh. Hm. Maybe I spoke too soon. I seem to be hearing voices in my head again. I’m sorry, Spencer, I really thought I was better…”

“Oh. Well… you might still be right. Is the voice saying welcome to Atlantis? A female voice? Because a lot of people around here hear that. The city has a sentient artificial intelligence able to communicate telepathically to some of us with a certain genetic sequence, and…”

“Oh my! All this time, I thought you inherited mostly bad DNA from my side… we both have this special gene?”

“It seems we do.”

Outside the gates of Bennington, a man of indeterminate age, in a nondescript grey suit, with a scar on his chin, watched dispassionately from an old grey sedan. His night-goggles would have brought him notice, as nothing else about him would have, but although the vehicle was old, the windows were specially treated to be one-way glass, too dark for anyone outside to be able to see in.

All four of the team had been captured. Alive. Although, and he had to smirk at this, Major ‘Matthews’ was being taken out on a gurney, after the target had got the best of him with a shovel. A middle aged female mental case with Alzheimer’s, had bested a supposedly trained black ops operative. Yeah, he had never been all that impressed with the guy. Unwilling recruits were never the best, in his opinion. They lacked commitment.

As always, his next action would be to eliminate these security risks before they had a chance to break. Since it seemed LVPD was taking possession of all four, rather than HomeWorld…

But, even as he prepared to unobtrusively follow the paddy wagon to the LVPD lockup, he saw the tell-tale white flashes.

Damn. And the ambulance with the Major?

Another flash.

With a heavy sigh, he estimated his chances of getting to any of the targets… as nil.

That was it, then. He had no illusions of how loyal Major ‘Matthews’ was likely to be. Matthews would give up Bradshaw in a heart-beat. Bradshaw was a direct link to Stahl, Evans and Gant. Evans would already be on their radar… It was the General that cretin Kavanagh had contacted, which led to them neutralizing the Utah labs, so HWS probably already had Evans’ name on their priority suspect list. He might even have been arrested by now, after the NCIS debacle. And Evans was too good at back-room maneuvers to remain silent when he had the means and leverage to make deals for preferential treatment.

That was game over, then.
For the Trust, at least.

But he had some faith in Bradshaw. When HomeWorld came for him, he would not be at his offices. The man with the scar did happen to know where his boss would be found, however.

One more hand for him to play, then.

He turned on the ignition in the dilapidated grey sedan. And then, as an after-thought, he peeled off the fake scar that he had taken care to always have on his chin. The one 'permanent' identifying mark he had ever allowed anyone else to see.

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Making Friends and Influencing People

~ *To get to know someone so different from myself as an octopus, and to know that the individual recognized me and even enjoyed my company, was an enormous privilege. The octopuses I came to know were strong but gentle, and the suction of their suckers tasting my skin pulled me like an alien’s kiss.* ~ Sy Montgomery ~

Colonel John Sheppard, military commander of Atlantis, left the office of their Administrative Head and Civilian Expedition Leader, Richard Woolsey, and gave a heavy sigh. He didn’t know where everyone got the idea that his team couldn’t play well with others… that was practically the mission statement of a first-contact reconnaissance team, after all. And nobody in their right mind would even consider questioning Teyla Emmagan’s expertise as a diplomat. So, okay, he himself was inclined to lean a little bit too heavy on the smarmy charm he had learned growing up at his parents’ fancy upper-crust parties… and maybe McKay was right to call him on his ‘Kirk’ tendencies with the local daughters and sisters… but he really didn’t think he was the problem here.

Which left…

Yeah, okay, he had to grant that one.

Even after years as a member of the Atlantis Expedition, Specialist Ronon Dex was still little more than half feral. Seven years of his life, and formative years at that, had been spent as a Runner, fitted with a tracking device so a never-ending parade of Wraith squads could hunt him across the Pegasus Galaxy for sport. Or, as Sheppard suspected, as a combination training program and punishment for Wraith drones who disappointed their queens. Because any Wraith who got too close to Ronon never managed to return to their Hives. But knowing how inevitable it was that he would draw the enemy to cull any community he visited, the Runner had been determined to avoid almost all human contact, as far as he was able. That certainly hadn’t helped with his socialization. Combined with the unimaginable loss he had suffered when Sateda was culled to extinction… well. The guy had every right to a few issues. He had been doing better, had begun dating a few women around the city… but he still tended to… loom. And although John knew he could smile, he had even heard Ronon laugh on rare occasions… the man saved it for when no one outside his team could witness. Unreasonably tall, dark, spectacularly handsome (according to reliable females), with long heavy black dreadlocks, intense honey-colored eyes that could pierce right through you, and the preternatural grace of a born predator… well. The looming thing was… well.

And, wasn’t it a kick in the teeth that Ronon wasn’t even the worst of the problem?

Because that still left team member four. Dr. Meredith Rodney McKay. Chief Science Officer of the Atlantis Expedition. Smartest man in two galaxies. Savior of planets, stellar systems (the ones he didn’t blow up, anyway), galaxies and, last but not least, Atlantis, pretty much on a daily basis.

You’d think bringing Atlantis home to Earth, well out of the way of the Wraith, would have meant fewer daily crises… but, no. An Ancient, and really really old, alien city, that had been stuck on the bottom of an ocean for ten thousand years, after a half-assed job of moth-balling her, and that was after a couple thousand years of fighting the Wraith with little time for repairs or maintenance by the inhabitants who actually knew her systems… Well. Poor girl had been a mess when they found her.
The original Expedition had been heavy on theoretical astrophysicists and quantum mechanics, and real light on the plumbers, electricians and regular mechanics they actually needed. The city databases, what ones were still intact, had been so twisted and mangled it must have been a deliberate attempt by the last resident Lanteans to keep information unattainable, by anyone but themselves. Which meant a few system admins might have been useful, too. McKay had worked miracles just getting the city up and running, and keeping her afloat all this time. Sheppard didn’t think he’d gotten enough credit for that… even with the irascible scientist’s own less-than-modest insistence on claiming credit anyway.

Even after reliable contact with Earth had been established, and even finally bringing Atlantis home, and drafting all the help they possibly could from the HWS ranks, hadn’t much improved the mile long repair and maintenance schedules. They had barely explored even a tenth of their Manhattan-sized city, and every new tower they entered held millennia-old traps for the unwary. And since the Invasion, McKay and his entire staff were frantically trying to get the city ready for the inevitable battles to come, as well as work on a few projects to improve Earth’s chances for the next wave of Wraith they knew were on the way.

Rodney didn’t handle stress well. No, second thought, he did actually handle it well, it just included behavior that meant the people around him wouldn’t be able to handle it well. Even on a good day, he was loud, combative, defensive, prickly, totally intolerant of incompetence, laziness or mistakes… and if there was one thing McKay could not abide, it was out-and-out stupidity. (Actually not a bad thing, necessarily, John figured, because stupidity on Atlantis usually meant dead, or soon to be dead, along with varying magnitudes of collateral damage.) So why his ‘minions’ absolutely adored him… why his team-mates listened to his most acid-tongued rants and merely smiled fondly at him… why Dr. Radek Zelenka, his second in command, whose name it had taken Rodney *years* to remember… was prone to stoking the fire by deliberately provoking him, and then grinning like a loom when he succeeded… Woolsey still hadn’t realized that the science staff were more likely to worry and stress when Rodney went quiet or polite. Because that was surely a sign of the apocalypse.

But Rodney was already under enough pressure at the moment, John thought. The man had actually confessed to John, over a hockey game, Leafs versus Habs, and his third bottle of cold Molson’s Canadian beer, that he felt like the fate of the entire human race was on his shoulders. And he didn’t have a single star in his line-up to help him get one game closer to the Stanley Cup. Throw in having to deal with a bunch of strangers… one a computer guru who very well might be his equal, and the other a certified genius and former prodigy himself… well, their Administrative Head, Richard Woolsey, could be excused for taking John aside and trying to warn him to keep his ‘people’, meaning Rodney, in line.

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John decided a team lunch was in order, before the situation blew *totally* out of control.

He had already met Dr. Reid (the younger), and left him well distracted by that Mal Doran woman. And wouldn’t you know, the Reid kid had a bright shiny natural ATA gene… guaranteed to further amp up McKay’s not-so-secret insecurities with regard to his own mouse-gene. So John had caught Mitchell in the hall and the two had colluded on a plan to keep both Vala and Dr. Reid busy as long as possible, to give John a chance to prepare McKay. Then there’d been the emergency evac of Dr. Reid the elder (PhD in medieval literature? Really? At least McKay wouldn’t find that much of a threat, ATA gene or not), and enough disruption around that, McKay had barely noticed the intruders before he disappeared back into the labs. John had thought they’d have another few days before the entire BAU team arrived, but that was clearly wishful thinking, and totally unrealistic on his part, given the way their luck usually ran.
So. Lunch. Always the best way to disarm a loaded scientist.

“So,” John began with his most charming smile. “We’ve got guests for the foreseeable future, and more coming in some time this afternoon.”

Teyla gave a typically serene smile and regal nod of her head. “So I have heard. They bring children with them. I look forward to this, as does Torren. He is very excited.”

John blinked. “He is?”

“Yes, of course. Ronon has been telling him stories of the BAU exploits, catching murderers.”

That actually made John choke. “He... he has?” He stared at Ronon, who glanced briefly up from his single-minded pursuit of the last crumbs of his lemon meringue pie. John was certain it was Ronon’s favorite only because of how antsy it made McKay, even being near citrus.

“Read Rossi’s books,” the Satedan explained briefly. Rather too briefly.

“Which books?” McKay asked, as thunderstruck as John.

“All of ‘em. They’re cool. Full of details on profiling. Catching criminals. Don’t sweat it, Sheppard. I didn’t tell the kid about any of the sex crimes. Just the… you know… gory ones. Kids like that stuff.”

“Indeed they do,” Teyla admitted with a wince. “He is fascinated by Earth heroes. And I must admit, hearing the stories Ronon has told us, they fully qualify.”

While John was at a loss at this unexpected turn of events, McKay, with his typical laser focus, was determined to get answers.

“How did you even get onto this, Conan?”

“Teal’c.”

“Teal’c? He reads these books too?”

“Big fan. He watches all those interview shows on television. Rossi does a lot of them when he’s got a book out. I read the books by Max Ryan, too,” Ronon warmed to the subject, his normally glowering dead pan expression alight with enthusiasm. “Rossi, Ryan and Jason Gideon were founders of the BAU.”

John and Rodney exchanged stunned glances. Yeah, neither of them suspected this. Ronon, turning into a fan-boy… thanks to Master Teal’c of Chulak. Go figure.

“What?” Ronon challenged, a touch defensive. “Come on. Serial killers are cool. When they’re being caught and not actually hunting you, anyway.”

Okay, now John could see it. From the clearing of McKay’s brow, so could he.

“Hunh,” commented McKay. “Not that much difference between serial killers and the Wraith, I guess. And that Reid guy did locate Gitmo West by applying geographic profiling techniques… I wonder if there’s other stuff we could pick up from their methods…”

John almost jumped for joy. Here was an angle he hadn’t thought of, to ease the transition. “You know, that’s actually a thought worth pursuing, don’t you think?” he suggested brightly. Okay, maybe too brightly, because all three of his team were staring at him, askance, seeing right through
his attempt at manipulation.

McKay sighed. “Sheppard, if this is your idea of a good way to make me okay with another genius on my patch…”

“Now, Rodney…”

“Don’t bother. Woolsey ordered you to make me play nice, right? Because none of you trust me to know how to do that? Well, okay, you may be right. But I have a much better plan. I plan to avoid the boy genius, and his super hacker Black Queen side-kick, altogether. You can sic Conan the Librarian on them, if you want. He’ll enjoy hobnobbing with his heroes.”

With that, the least-Canadian Canadian in the known universe (fondness for hockey, curling and Canadian beer notwithstanding) got up with his empty tray, and marched it to the pick-up line before exiting, stage right.

John sighed. “Okay, I may have over-played that one.”

Ronon merely shrugged. “Brain the size of a planet, remember? You’ll never get one over on him, Sheppard. Don’t know why you still try.”

Teyla was forced to agree. “He’s been expecting something like this, John. He knows the General wants to recruit at least Ms Garcia to the project, in some capacity. Did you hear him? He’s already looked into her background, so he was clearly preparing for her arrival.”

John could only shake his head in resignation. “Oh yeah, this is going to be fun… Rodney, the doctors Reid and the Black Queen all on the city at the same time. Not to mention Vala, because when I hinted she might have duties elsewhere, she just gave me a *look*. And the entire Wraith fleet bearing down on us. This city just isn’t big enough.”

Teyla smiled and patted John’s arm. “Dr. Spencer Reid is Vala’s only link to Dr. Jackson. She isn’t going anywhere very far from him until Daniel is safely home with us.”

Ronon gave her a *look* of his own. “Safe?”


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When John had been called away to his military duties, Teyla considered Ronon with a long and level *look* all her own. “Do you wish to tell me, Ronon?”

The big Satedan tried out an innocent expression. “Tell you what?”

Yeah, he didn’t expect that one to get very far. He gave in within seconds. And only Teyla, in two galaxies, could make him cave like that, so fast and effortlessly.

“Been seeing that Kosha again.”

Teyla could almost hear the word capitalized in his tone. A kosha was a large predator that had once stalked the Satedan rain forests of their uninhabited equatorial islands. It was larger than a man, of feline descent, dark green with black stripes that made its natural camouflage in the heavily shaded undergrowth almost perfect. A solitary apex carnivore, it was an expert hunter. The mythology of Sateda, however, cast it often in the role of a protector of sacred hunting grounds and ancient initiation rites, that required young Satedans on the cusp of adulthood, male and female, to step onto
those islands and survive unaided for several days, to prove themselves worthy.

When Ronon had been rescued by the team, his tracker removed, it had been a difficult transition for him, for a lot of different reasons. Yes, he had a lot of grief and anger to deal with over the loss of Sateda and his own ordeal… what Earthers called PTSD was the least of it. But he had also had to learn to be part of a tribe again. And then there had been the unaccountable physical effects… rashes, sleeplessness, sights, sounds and smells sometimes spiking hard and fast, almost making him crumple where he stood. Kate Heightmeyer had said it was all part of PTSD, and Carson Beckett had prescribed a few medicines to relieve the acute symptoms. Not that they had been more than a placebo, but Ronon had been leery of taking them anyway. As Rodney might say, they were like treating a sucking chest wound with a couple aspirin.

But Teyla found Ronon’s situation familiar… she consulted her elders and they agreed, this sounded more like an emerging Protector coming into his own. It was said this happened to rare individuals who had been kept in isolation for a time, struggling to survive in conditions of looming peril. Most Pegasus initiation rites included such a test, in hopes that the youth undergoing them would ‘emerge’ as a Protector. Like those with Teyla’s ‘gift’ of sensing the Wraith, these individuals were highly valued. They were superb hunters, could give advance warning of darts overhead, or the Ring of the Ancestors coming alive, as well as a multitude of other benefits to their tribes. And emerging Protectors were in urgent need of the assistance of a complementary partner, empathic enough to guide them to the full use of their new gifts, and prevent them from becoming overwhelmed by them.

Teyla had stepped up, and it seemed as if her very presence at his side eased Ronon’s symptoms. He was quick to find a way to modulate his enhanced senses, and either control them, or employ them in the field. Just as well John had decided to bring the young Satedan onto their team. It meant she had no need to make any tricky explanations… she knew the Earthers well enough by then to tell the existence of Protectors and their Guides would not go over well, if believed at all.

One of the signs that a Protector had achieved the necessary balance with his talents was being able to sight his Spirit Guide. The appearance of this creature, usually some large predator of special significance to the person, was a sign of coming threat, danger, or a critical decision to be made, to keep them on the right path.

That Ronon was seeing his Kosha Spirit Guide was unfortunate, but not entirely unexpected, news.

“We are expecting the Wraith almost any day now…” she ventured.

“No. I think this is more. He wants me to be ready. I have a role to play. I think it’s you, Teyla.”

“Me. My ‘gift’. The Wraith DNA within me that allows me to sense their presence.”


“I’m not a Protector,” she objected.

“Nope. Doesn’t mean you don’t have one. Keep an eye out.”

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After the attack on Diana Reid, HomeWorld Security was taking no chances with anyone else presumed to be at risk from the remnants of the Trust, and had used their mandate of imminent threat to override any objections by their overly-paranoid International Oversight committee. That meant the three Las Vegas CSIs, and the entire BAU, including dependents, were all being brought up to
Atlantis, presently orbiting high above Earth’s atmosphere.

Extended family members and team-mates, past and present, were also being watched over, fitted with unobtrusive tracking devices. The BAU had enough sad prior experience with the monsters they hunted targeting them and their families that they were unwilling to be cavalier with anyone’s safety.

JJ Jareau’s parents, Jessica Brooks and her father, Derek Morgan’s mom and sisters, Hotch’s brother Sean, Tara Lewis’s father and brother, Dave Rossi’s two ex-wives, his daughter and her family, had all been informed of the danger, taken the trackers, and given the choice of security guards or temporary relocation somewhere planet-side, also with guards.

Kate Callahan and her family had accepted temporary relocation to one of the remote islands in the Hawaiian chain, easily defended and watched, treating it like an all-expenses paid vacation. Alex Blake was with her husband on a Doctors Without Borders assignment in the tiny, remote, central African kingdom of Wakanda, doing research for a paper on the effects of geographic isolation on the development of language. Contact had been sketchy, but they managed to get cell reception through to explain the situation. Dr. Blake reported she was safe enough where she was for the duration of the alert, and, oddly, to Spencer at least, chuckling at the idea she might need protection. She was, however, looking forward to Spencer’s promise to introduce her to Dr. Jackson, once it was all over. Emily Prentiss was actually leading a team of combined Interpol and HWS security forces to hunt down Trust members in Europe, and so was in constant contact, and in no extraordinary danger, beyond what was normal for her job. As for Elle Greenaway…

Elle had dropped off everyone’s radar after her resignation from the BAU and FBI, years ago, in spite of all their efforts to remain in touch. Spencer was actually a little pissed about that. He had thought they could at least remain friends… but he could also understand that, after the trauma she had suffered, Elle needed a clean start, and like Gideon, had needed to cut all ties in order to heal. HWS was finally able to run her down in Los Angeles, working at a shelter for battered women and their children. In the years she had worked there, three charges of assault had been brought against her… all dropped, since the complaints were made by men who were already supposed to be under court order to stay away from the shelter residents. When approached, Elle refused relocation, but accepted the tracker and the assignment of a couple of big SGC Marine guards to watch her back. The Marines had reported that they might actually feel sorry for any Trust goon who tried to take the woman on.

More SFs had been stationed with the Las Vegas CSI night shift. Grissom, Stokes and Sanders had no immediate family, and confessed to no current romantic entanglements, but parents, siblings and extended family were all offered relocation, trackers and protection anyway. Spencer had considered it a little bit odd that the three men he had met on Invasion Night had no close ties with anyone but their own team members… but then, how was he different? Their jobs seemed to demand they cut themselves off from most. Stable families were the exceptions, not the rule, even with his own team.

As for immediate family…

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Teyla remained on the upper balcony as the bright white Asgard beams brought, first, the BAU team and their families, and then the three CSIs, to the Stargate deck. She smiled indulgently, holding her excited son back, to give the visitors time to acclimatize to the wonders around them. The cathedral-like setting of the First Tower Control always came as a shock to first timers. It was no different now. But Teyla also watched for any tell-tale that others of the company heard the Atlantis AI in their heads, betraying that they, like the Reids, might possess the coveted ATA gene.
“Okay, yes,” Nick Stokes was the first to find his voice, “This protective custody thing is going to be oh so cool.”

His young friend, Greg Sanders, could only nod vehemently, still too stunned to vocalize.

When Teyla judged sufficient time had elapsed to give their visitors time to gather their wits, she led Torren down the stairs to greet them, Ronon ‘on her six’. He gave her a nudge and jerked his chin… to several wispy smoky presences gathering near the visitors.

Now, that was a shock. As far as she could tell, no one else was aware of the lurking presences. But she did just note that the more solid-seeming, but still invisible to most, desert owl she had been seeing around Dr. Spencer Reid, had joined them.

The two young boys, Henry LaMontagne and Jack Hotchner, were giddy with excitement, practically bouncing, each of them pulling irresistible at the parent who tried to hold them in check. But then, the parents were pretty excited, too.

Teyla and her son met them on the Stargate deck of the Atlantis Control Tower.

She bowed in respect and greeted, “I welcome you all to Atlantis. I am Teyla Emmagan, daughter of Tagan of Athos. That is in the Pegasus Galaxy.”

“Oh man!” Greg gasped. “You’re an alien? For real?”

Teyla laughed. “As is this, my son Torren, and my team-mate on AR-1, Ronon Dex. I apologise that our executive officers are unable to meet you at this time, but our defense planning on several vital projects have reached a critical stage, and they will meet us later, over dinner. I have been fully briefed on your participation in the Invasion Defense, Dr. Grissom, Mr. Stokes and Mr. Sanders, and I can only say I have the greatest respect for your courage. I have encountered and fought the Wraith myself, many times, have lived my whole life under their threat, and know what formidable enemies they are. And to you, members of the FBI BAU team, friends have told us much of your work, hunting and capturing the monsters of your world. My son, Torren, has been particularly eager to meet ‘real life super-heroes’.”

Jack Hotchner grinned up at his dad. That had always been his belief, too. That his dad and the team were super heroes fighting the good fight. He was quick to step forward and meet Torren. So was Henry. The three boys were instant friends, and it was Torren who volunteered to take them on his own special tour of his home city, to check out all the ‘cool places’, while his mom looked after the Adults, taking them on a far more staid and boring introduction to Atlantis. Assured that all would be safe – the Atlantis AI would guarantee it – parents gave the okay, and the kids ran off, reluctantly agreeing to meet again in the mess hall for dinner.

Hotch took the lead. “Thank you for welcoming us, Ms Emmagan. But I’m a little surprised not to see Dr. Reid here. I presume he’s safe?”

Teyla smiled. “He’s in the Infirmary right now, with his mother. Have no fear… there is nothing wrong with either of them. In fact, that’s why they are there. It seems Spencer’s mother has been cured of her mental afflictions, and our medical staff are just checking to ensure all is well with her. If you will come with me, we will join the Reids there.”

With a gesture, she guided them to the door leading to the outer corridor, where they would find a transport chamber. Several SFs fell into guard positions. This was not lost on any of the guests.

Teyla gravitated to JJ Jareau and Savannah Hayes, JJ carrying baby Michael, and Savannah
obviously anticipating approaching motherhood. Tara Lewis also kept close to the sisterhood. Meanwhile, Nick, Will LaMontagne and Derek Morgan were drawn to the big alien man… they were the muscle of their respective teams.

Hotch let his curiosity get the better of him as he asked, “You and Mr. Dex are from Pegasus, Ms Emmagan? Yet you came with Atlantis to Earth? That must have been a difficult adjustment for you and your family.”

Teyla sighed. She hadn’t wanted to get into this so soon… “There was little reason to stay, either for myself or Ronon. What few members of my people survive are all here aboard Atlantis. We have far stronger links to our team-mates and the Atlantis crew than other tribes of Pegasus. I’m afraid Ronon’s people, the Satedans, were all wiped out by the Wraith, many years ago.”

Several of their guests blanched at that. Ronon merely nodded at the hastily offered condolences. “Long time ago, now. We’ll have to see the same thing doesn’t happen to Earth.”

And that was a pretty chilling wake-up call, too.

“Aliens, so cool,” Greg murmured, assuming to himself.

Until the glaringly attired woman on stilt heels and with henna-red hair sidled up to him and agreed, “Yeah, tres cool. So you’re Greg? I’m Garcia.” She offered a hand to shake, which Greg gladly took. “Thanks for looking after my Boy Wonder on Invasion Night.”

Greg shook his head. “Other way around. He was way cool, with the decapitations and the marksmanship and all… even if he does like Four best.”

Garcia gurgled on a laugh. “Yeah, he knitted a scarf for the last convention we went to. Me, I’m eleven all the way.”

“Geronimo. I’m dedicated ten.”

“Allons-Y!”

Nick shook his head as the others looked at their very own aliens among them. “It’s like another language,” Nick complained.

“Tell it,” Derek agreed whole-heartedly. “Just wait till Pretty Boy gets into it with them.”

Ronon shrugged. “I like Doctor Number Nine, myself. He had a cool coat.”

That got the big actual alien a number of startled looks, and shut up the Doctor Who commentary.

Ronon, meanwhile, sauntered up casually to Dave Rossi, hands in his pockets. But the veteran profiler grinned. “Let me guess. You’ve read my books.”

Ronon almost… *almost* stumbled at that, then he laughed, out loud. “Yeah, you called me. Should have known better.”

“Go ahead, kid. Ask away.”

And a beautiful friendship was born.

Spencer was struggling, and struggling hard, not to hover. But he knew he was failing, given the
looks his mother shot him. He sighed heavily, even as the woman stitched to his side the past day chuckled at him.

“You’re going to have to let go at some time, darling boy,” Vala recommended, dragging him away. “There comes a time in every boy’s life when they have to just let their parents run their own lives. Have you even had a chance to look around the city, yet? Or even stand on a balcony and look at the view?”

“That’s the ticket, Vala, dear,” chuckled the Scottish doctor, Carson Beckett. “Take him out on the balcony. That should distract him enough. Now, dear Diana, let’s get you checked out.”

Spencer remained glum… until a set of doors on the hallway outside the Infirmary opened up, and Vala dragged him out…

Into a sea of stars.

And far, far below, the wide arc of Earth, deep beautiful blue with graceful swirls of white, slowly, so slowly, rotated beneath them.

“Oh my God…” breathed another voice, echoing his very thoughts, as Penelope Garcia was suddenly there beside him, reaching to clutch his arm… the one not already in Vala’s possession.

“We’re on orbit. I didn’t realise we would be in orbit… Stupid me. But we’re in space, Boy Wonder! In space!”


Vala nodded. “Knew you’d like it. You’re just like my Daniel. First time we visited, we could barely get him off the balcony, and she wasn’t even in orbit then… she was anchored on an alien ocean under two moons. Nothing quite so stunning as this.”

“Like fairy tale castles, sitting on a snow-flake,” Garcia breathed.

Vala only now took in the glory that was Penelope Garcia, in an outfit that, even for her, was eye-catching. She had gone with a vivid patterned dress in red and black checks, super-short hemline, with stockings printed in a lacy black design that matched the fingerless gloves she wore that reached half-way up her forearms. Her shoes, with stiletto heels of course, were fire-engine red, as were her painted nails and the frames of her rhinestone-studded glasses. The scrunchies that kept her pig-tails in place were also fire-engine red, clashing mightily with the henna in her hair. She had forgone the usual large plastic beads at throat and ears for dangling gold, a necklace and fish-hook earrings.

Vala’s dark eyes opened wide and she said, “Oh, I absolutely love that outfit!” Vala was obviously a little bit mortified to be caught in ordinary blue military fatigues, the usual daily dress at the SGC, although they alternated with a particularly unattractive dusky military green. Her only personal stamp was the big orange butterfly clips keeping her own pig-tails in bouncy order. “I prefer leather myself. I absolutely adore the way the men all fall about themselves when I wear black leather. And where did you get those adorable scrunchies?”

In minutes, scrunchies and butterflies had been traded, and a life-long friendship sealed. Spencer sighed, wondering if this was a good thing or not, but resigned as JJ moved up to take his elbow – Vala having forgotten his existence in a fashion discussion with Garcia.

“How are you holding up, Spence?” his best friend asked.

“Rather better now that everyone I know is safe. Safe-er. It’s a relative state these days, you know?”
JJ could only smile sadly at him. “Oh, I know. At our initial briefing, it was made clear to us that, once we came aboard this… this… city? Ship?”

“City. She thinks of herself as a city that flies, mostly.”

“Uh hunh. Okay. It was made clear to us that once we were aboard, we’d be here for the duration, until the last of the Trust was cleared out. So if the Wraith attack… this is where we’ll all be. I’m not so sure that’s a good thing. These towers look so… fragile.”

“Looks can be deceiving,” Spencer argued. “From the stories I’ve heard… I think we should be good. And, truthfully… if Atlantis falls to the Wraith, Earth will be mere hours behind her. So it’s more a question of where you’d rather make your last stand.”

“And if it wasn’t for the kids…”

“Have you met Teyla Emmagan?”

JJ nodded.

“You should talk to her about it. She’s got family on board. All of her family. You should ask her what her take is. She’s lived under the threat of the Wraith her whole life. Her entire people have spent thousands of years under the Wraith. I think her perspective is probably the best one. To fight for her family with everything she has. And we both can understand that. We all can.”

Vala approached and said, “Don’t underestimate this city, or the SGC. You have no idea what these people are capable of. Even my Daniel, even in his current… abbreviated state, is still a force to be reckoned with. And I know Sam Carter and Rodney McKay are working on ways to defeat the Wraith before they get anywhere near Earth. You’re all as safe here as you can be anywhere, believe me.”

Dr. Diana Reid, PhD in medieval literature, was only too used to being poked, prodded and run through tests by any number of medical professionals. The only difference here was the nature of the toys they were able to use. Little hand-held devices that beeped and twinkled with lights, cabinets like standing sun-tan beds… and all running diagnostics that no Earthly practitioners knew to do. The extremely young Dr. Keller – Diana couldn’t help but think of her as Dr. Barbie – and the charming Dr. Beckett, no, Carson, as he insisted she call him, conferred in whispers and puzzled frowns.

“If I’m dying, I’d rather not know, thank you very much,” Diana confessed, feeling a bit short-tempered.

“Sorry, luv,” Carson apologized. “It’s just that we canna figure out how it happened.”

Diana considered them seriously. “You’re both friends of Daniel, right?”

They both nodded. Carson added, “We dinna know him well, not as well as Vala and the rest of SG-1, but, I certainly count him as a friend.”

“Then, if I was to say he… glows? Sometimes? You wouldn’t think I was having a relapse?”

Carson did seem a tad alarmed. “Not at all, my dear. But I would wonder if Daniel himself were having dangerous issues with recurring… um… symptoms. As I’m sure General O’Neill would tell you, Daniel glowing is not a good sign.”
“Maybe not. But I think… I think it was Daniel who cured me.”

Carson and Dr. Keller exchanged telling glances. Then Carson abruptly shut down all of the machinery, and moved to a monitor which he worked at briefly. “All right. I think we can dispense with any more tests. And I’m deleting what we already have. I dinna think it’s a good idea to have such specific records in this particular case. We’ll chalk it up to spontaneous unexplained remission, shall we, Jennifer?”

“I absolutely concur, Carson. No doubt due to the psychological shock of an alien invasion?” The young woman deleted several notes she had made, and snapped shut her own Star-Trek-ish monitor device.

“Ach, that’s a good one. That’ll do nicely. So, my dear Dr. Reid, you’re free to go. Get plenty of rest, drink fluids, call me if you have headaches or feel at all out-of-sorts, and we’ll fix you up with a couple aspirin. All right?”

Diana was more than ready to take that as the gift it was, and hopped off the examination table. Only to be faced with a crowd of people… Spencer’s team-mates on the BAU, as well as a number of others. Including that wonderful alien woman, Teyla.

And their… friends.

Rather a lot of smoky, insubstantial friends. She felt in her pocket for the little desert squirrel. He chittered at her, poking a nose out of her pocket.

Teyla certainly saw him. So did the very big man with the glowering looks that were probably meant to scare… Diana wasn’t sure any of the others saw her little friend, but the two aliens did. As Diana could see the large green tiger pacing behind the big man in dreadlocks, and the very odd ghostly bird-like thing hovering at Teyla’s shoulder.

Diana gave a sigh. It ought to be alarming to her, she supposed, that she appeared to be having *more* hallucinations now that she was cured of her paranoid schizophrenia, rather than fewer.

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It was interesting, Spencer thought, watching all the developing interactions between the different teams. He had been expecting some of them – the almost instant bonding the women had all done over motherhood and family dynamics, for instance. JJ was over the moon with the facilities for child-care Teyla and the other Athosian women had created… as was Hotch, maybe not so strangely. And since Atlantis had returned to Earth, Woolsey and Sheppard had joined Teyla in a campaign to get families read in on the SGC so they could live on the city with husbands, wives, mothers and fathers. After Invasion Night and declassification, the IOA had even less excuse for their obstructionism in getting families moved on to the city-ship, and Teyla freely expressed her frustration on the slowly moving bureaucratic wrangling. JJ commiserated and Garcia volunteered to threaten IOA members with a hacker attack to get them moving.

Also expected was the testosterone-based alliances forged in the Atlantis gyms, with Ronon volunteering to teach Derek, Will, Nick, Greg and Hotch the finer points of hand-to-hand, Satedan style. And when the men had been properly humiliated, Teyla wandered in with two baton-size sticks, and wiped up the floor with Ronon. JJ, Tara and Vala eagerly joined Teyla on the mats. When Anne Teldy and her all-female Marine team arrived, the women handily succeeded in intimidating the hell out of everyone, including the watching male Marines.

Dave Rossi was leading nightly story-times, telling the kids somewhat white-washed versions of
their cases. Once word got out, almost everyone on Atlantis with a few hours free joined the audience, civilian, military and other. Hotch had also been conned into teaching a couple of classes at the Atlantis day-care, in profiling, Earth legal practices, and law enforcement. Part of that was telling the kids what various TV shows got wrong, from fire-arms handling to illegal search and seizures, and how long various forensic tests actually took.

Dr. Gil Grissom had found the xeno-biology labs an hour after he arrived, and had not been seen since, deep in study of the iratus bug research.

Spencer, Garcia and Greg were instant Dr. Who buddies, naturally enough, but Vala and Ronon both joined their lively discussions, as often as not, over mess hall coffee and snacks, as did a great number of the science staff. It took the whirlwind appearance of their CSO, Dr. McKay, to round the scientists up and hustle them back to work, grumbling resentfully about ‘flux capacitors’ and ‘wibbly-wobbly timey-whimy hand-wavy’ pseudo-science. That just made the big Satedan chuckle.

Spencer was just beginning to get a feeling about Ronon, actually… even if everyone did have a spirit guide, a lot of them struggling to manifest at this very moment on the City of the Ancients, there was something familiar about some of Ronon’s reactions… they reminded him vividly of Detective Jim Ellison. Was it so odd that an alien might possess Sentinel abilities? Evidently not. And from the looks of it, Teyla was his guide. He was uncertain how much, or how little, the Athsosian leader recognized of the wispy spirit creatures haunting them all, but she hadn’t seemed to notice her own winged thing, hovering above and just behind her head. And although the two teammates were obviously close, sibling close, Spencer was sure there was no sexual component to their relationship, as he was sure existed between his old friend Blair and the big detective he lived with.

So, after Spencer and the others had been on Atlantis for a couple of days, he thought it odd, at first, that he had still not officially met the Chief Science Officer. The only glimpses he had got, very brief at that, were when the man was rushing off to somewhere else, far from Spencer’s orbit. But then, when he reviewed what he had already heard about the man, from all sorts of sources, maybe it wasn’t so odd. Dr. M. Rodney McKay was purposely avoiding him.

Of course, the man was unbelievably busy right now, Spencer granted. He, and Colonel Doctor Samantha Carter, the two foremost scientific minds of HWS, were collaborating on several vital projects to protect Earth from the coming Wraith. Spencer knew of at least two. One was a planet-wide shield, based on the same one presently over Atlantis, designed to prevent not just ships and weaponry getting through to the atmosphere, but harmonized to block Wraith culling beams as well. The second was even more intriguing, and more like something wibbly-wobbly hand-wavy from a Dr. Who episode… a way of phase-shifting the entire planet into a parallel pocket dimension, invisible and untouchable by anyone outside. It was technology that apparently came from the Alterans, and had been prepared when the Ori were threatening the planet, though they hadn’t needed to employ it then. Both of these, and other defenses on the drawing boards, required unimaginable power sources to operate, however, as did Atlantis herself, spinning high above Earth in deep space.

So, yes, the man was busy. But still, he was avoiding being in the same room with Spencer for any but the briefest of moments, when shifty pale blue eyes had glanced at him, then shot away. And it seemed very wrong to Spencer that the Chief Science Officer of Atlantis should be running scared on his own damned city.

In this moment, Spencer realized he had a distinct choice. He could chose to deal with this man in one of two ways… continue to allow them to avoid each other, and any potential conflict,
altogether… or attempt to build a bridge. Although the first option might be easiest, Spencer far preferred the second.

He had always found it difficult to forge connections with his fellow human beings… they had always seemed so alien to him, even as a very young child, and almost all had been hostile. Even his own father had grown colder and more remote, until he removed himself from the family altogether. Spencer still had no way to make peace with that abandonment, except to wonder if he had contributed to the cause in some way, with his freakish abnormality. Cut out of the herd by his very intelligence, he had been the target of bullies, objectified, ridiculed, even abused, and, he had finally realized, much to his surprise, feared by those around him. Awkward and socially inept as he had been when he joined the BAU, he had learned, over the years, how to fit in, at least to some extent. He could well imagine that others like himself, people of advanced intellect, isolated by their extraordinary gifts, might share his experience. They, too, might feel at odds with others, insecure in their relationships, defensive and protective of their positions.

If Dr. McKay felt threatened by Garcia, he probably also feared that Dr. Reid might be a danger to his claim of superiority. More than one person had quoted to Spencer that McKay was ‘the smartest man in two galaxies’, most with sardonic sarcasm in their tones, along with stories of the man’s irascibility, hypochondria, citrus allergy, temper tantrums over incompetent subordinates, and Doranda, apparently his biggest failure. But more than a few spoke with indulgence and respect, mostly his team-mates and closest associates, of the many miracles he had ‘pulled out of his ass’ to save them all. And one or two referred to him with reverence.

And one of those reverent voices had been that of the Atlantis AI. Where there was a differing opinion between the eclectic mix of military and civilian expedition members and an alien artificial intelligence that was millions of years old and at least slightly telepathic… Spencer thought he knew which perspective he would chose to consider more valid. In the absence of personal experience, of course.

So he left his mother in the mess hall with his team-mates and Teyla Emmagan, chatting together like old friends, the mothers and women of the crowd fitting together as if they had been friends for years, and went in search of Dr. Rodney McKay.

‘This way, Dr. Reid,’ Atlantis guided him, surprisingly helpful. As far as he had heard, she was protective of her chief ‘maintainer’, and rarely gave up his location when he was unwilling to be found, for whatever reason. The sole exception, according to rumor, was Sheppard. Her ‘golden boy’, according to legend. And now him. Spencer suspected Atlantis had her own reasons for whatever she did… whether they would make sense to a mortal human, was anyone’s guess.

McKay was at one of the grounding stations with a toolkit at his side, an open panel in front of him that he had crawled half inside. Spencer knew that any sudden noise on his part would cause the scientist to jerk and bump portions of his anatomy… so he remained quiet, sat himself on the floor with legs folded, and waited. He pulled out an Atlantis pad and reviewed another file of information that appeared for him. It was a mission report from the first year of the Expedition, where these grounding stations had played a pivotal role in saving the city from a mega-hurricane, and had been used as a pawn in the game of some people who were trying to take over the city at the time. According to the AI, Dr. McKay and Dr. Zelenka had found a way to take any energy hit on the shield and channel it through the grounding stations directly into the city’s power grid. So the more an enemy fired on them, the stronger they would become. A brilliant idea, requiring only minor adjustments from the process by which those stations had been able to take raw lightning and turn that into usable energy to raise and support the shields.

Spencer looked up once he heard the scientist mutter to himself and extract himself from the
machinery.

“Dr. McKay. Hello. I'm Spencer Reid.”

Yes, the jump and lurch was totally predictable, but not now life-threatening. He wasn’t sure McKay was doing his back any favors, though, twisting around like that, but…

“What are you… why… Yes, I know who you are, Dr. Reid. You’re the guy with a perfectly good mind for math who decided to waste it on psychology and voodoo.”

Spencer smiled. He was irresistibly reminded of the Miami case, where he met Julio the Santeria shaman… “I don’t consider my time catching serial killers through the application of geographic profiling a waste, but I can certainly understand why you’d think so, doctor. To do my job successfully, I have to take the evidence left behind, find the patterns in their victim choice, their operating comfort zones, their methodology, to reconstruct their motivations and thought processes. But you must have to do something similar when confronted with an alien technology, correct? Where I’m at least dealing with other human beings, from my own culture, no matter how sick or twisted, you have to get into a totally alien mind-set. What you’ve accomplished here… I can’t even begin to imagine what it must have taken, to be able to put yourself enough into the perspective of an ancient and highly advanced alien culture… enough to be able to understand and master their technology, as you have.”

Only a trained profiler would have had any chance of catching and charting the rapid stutter of emotions across that mobile face. Wariness, curiosity, resignation, surprise, gratification, and finally, disgruntlement. All passing in a flash of images, quick as a strobe light.

“Yes well, not so hard, really. For anyone of even moderate intelligence. Which explains Kavanagh, actually… But all you really have to do is think like an ass-hole who would rather run from the problems they created and leave them for other poor schmucks to trip over.”

Spencer chuckled, until he realized… “You’re serious.”

“As a heart attack. Yes. They did it over and over… This city being a prime example. Poor thing… they abandoned her at the bottom of the ocean for ten thousand years, the bastards, when they were finally over-run by the Wraith, and they turned tail and fled for home. They didn’t even shut down her systems properly. So by the time we arrived… well. She had as many booby-traps waiting for us to spring them as she did viable tech. Like any civilization, they built on the progress of previous generations, dwarves sitting on the shoulders of giants, and after millions of years, you’d expect some pretty impressive stuff. But by our standards, at the very least, they were criminally reckless, with absolutely zero appreciation of safety protocols. I mean, is it so hard to slap a warning label on a lab that turned humans into walking suicide bombers? Exploding tumors for god’s sake! How could that make any sense at all? I’m not saying some of them weren’t brilliant scientists… One of the early ones, Amelius, invented the Stargates, after all… the single greatest invention of all time, of any race. But then, he also invented something called the Ark of Truth. You’ve heard of that?”

“It was a device used to de-program the Ori followers, correct?” Since he arrived in the city, Spencer had read as many SGC mission reports as he could, especially the ones including Daniel, but most were heavily redacted, to the point of being unreadable.

“Oh, if that were all. Millions of years ago, in another galaxy, not Milky Way and not Pegasus, an advanced race of humans, the first evolution, apparently, developed a schism. We don’t know what they called themselves before that, if anything… probably ‘the people’ or ‘the humans’, something like that, implying everyone else wasn’t. But of the two political camps, the one called themselves the Ori, Origin, and believed their advancements gave them the right to claim to be gods, and lord it
over the rest of the people in their galaxy. The second camp, the Others, the Alterans, thought that was morally repugnant crap. But they were the smaller camp, and rapidly lost ground. The conflict turned violent and nasty… and the Alterans all decided to leave, and let the Ori take over the home galaxy. Amelius came up with another idea, and actually built the Ark of Truth. It was designed to change people’s minds. To convince the Ori that they were wrong. Forcibly. So not so much de-programming as re-programming. The other Alterans were horrified and told him no way, that would make them just as bad as their wrong-headed cousins, they’d rather just leave and let the Ori have their little fiefdom. But when they fired up their ship, instead of just… destroying or dismantling the Ark, they left it behind, just sitting there, waiting for the next schmuck to come along. It might even have been the Ori, and wouldn’t that have been a disaster for all of us! And so the Alterans made their first whopping great mistake, running and leaving behind, not just a bunch of god-complex fascist idiots in control, but deadly tech as well, sitting there like a time-bomb.

“And they came to Earth. Settled, invented the Stargates and started spreading them around… after another few million years, created Atlantis… among other things… then a plague started spreading, killing them off. The idiotic stuff they came up for that problem… time machines that never really worked, just created time loops rather than actually moving you in time… the extermination device on Dakkara… I’m pretty sure one of them came up with the Quantum Mirrors, to jump to an alternate reality where there was no plague… believe me, finding out they could ‘Ascend’ was the least damaging escape they came up with. But they left all those failed experiments behind. Sitting there, just waiting. Not so much as a yellow caution tape around any of them. At the end, when it was die of plague or Ascend, those who were still unaffected took option three, turned tail and ran, again, loaded up Atlantis and flew her to Pegasus. And once again, started messing with stuff they should have left alone.

“While I can’t prove it... the files relating to the origins of the Wraith are all corrupted or deleted, wouldn’t you just know… I believe the Lanteans had some hand in it. Take a normal human, add iratus bug DNA, mix well… you get the Wraith. The others all want to think it was an accident… iratus feedings that left contaminated genetic material behind in the wounds, but we know when an iratus bug feeds on a human, they don’t stop till the victim is dead. So how would contaminated humans get a chance to pass on the mutagenic effects? So at the very least it was clumsiness, at worst… an experiment gone horribly wrong. And once the Wraith were spreading all over Pegasus like the locusts they are, the Lanteans came up with ever more desperate and lunatic ideas for fighting them… Ascension machines and exploding tumors being the least of it. I’m sure somebody, everybody, must have told you about Doranda?”

Spencer nodded solemnly. He had been warned, by several people, not to mention the name to McKay.

“They were desperate. They needed more power, and were willing to do whatever they had to in order to get it. So were we, when we discovered their half-completed experiment on Doranda. So don’t imagine I don’t understand where they were coming from. I do. All too well. But I also like to think I can learn from my own mistakes. Not leave them strewn behind me, ignoring the most elementary safety protocols, like I’m above any sort of basic housekeeping.”

Spencer nodded slowly. They were facing much the same crisis now, with the Wraith approaching ever nearer to their home planet.

“And you’d think the Ascended Alterans, being enlightened beings on a so-called higher plane of existence, would take some responsibility for the multiple extreme messes they created and left behind. But no. Non interference. We’re free to Ascend, if we can manage it on our own… that’s it. What they will do, however, is blatantly use us as patsies, manipulate us into stepping right into the middle of their messes and cleaning up for them! How is that non-interference?”
“I’m sorry… I was following up until then… What do you mean, manipulate us?”

“Well… you’ve met Daniel, right?”

“Um… yes.”

McKay threw up his hands. “There you go, then.”

“I’m still not following.”

“Daniel. Daniel Jackson, the guy who opened the Stargate, linguist, explorer, chief negotiator on the flag-ship team, trouble-magnet, dead more times than even makes sense, that guy who can’t walk across a room without putting his foot in a bucket, number one Alteran patsy and fall-guy. So he might have opened the Stargate on his own, but the first place he goes is Abydos, and runs smack into Ra, System Lord of System Lords. And he and O’Neill blow a nuclear device in his snakey face. He finds a temple full of Stargate addresses, and, hey presto, Earth is suddenly in the galactic and intergalactic exploration business. The Goa’uld, the Replicators, the Wraith, the Ori… in ten years we’ve met, and pretty much annihilated, all of them. The Asgard, the Nox, the Ascended, Atlantis… we’ve met them all. And all those Alteran booby-traps? It’s usually Daniel steps in them first. Until O’Neill wouldn’t let him go to Atlantis, so we became his surrogates out in Pegasus. It took us, what, a day? To trip over the Wraith. Oh yeah, that was all coincidence. Sure.”

Spencer swallowed with some difficulty. “Um…”

“Yeah, not a pretty picture, is it? And this latest trick… that alien device that down-sized him? Yeah, not buying that, not for a second. I’ve looked at all the data from that machine. We all have, trying to find a way to bring Daniel back to his normal size. Some alien race built that as a security feature on their top-secret military archive. Without the right password, you don’t survive to open the safe. It shouldn’t have regressed him to second childhood… it should have out and out vaporized him. That’s why the SGC wannabe scientists can’t get it ‘fixed’, or reverse the effect on the mice. It’s not broken. It flat out kills you, just as it’s supposed to.”

“But it didn’t kill Daniel.”

“Nope. Whether he used some latent Ascended whammy to get out of that one, or one of the Alterans got off their glowy duffs, I don’t know, but the universe, and that probably means the Ascended, have other plans for Daniel that don’t include him being dead. Why they need him to be a rug-rat, who the hell knows.”

“That’s a rather scary thought, Dr. McKay.”

The Canadian scientist eyed Spencer skeptically for a moment, but must have been reassured by what he saw in the earnest young profiler. Spencer was certainly hoping that was so.

“Well I certainly think so. But I can’t get anyone else to see it the same way.”

“Well, no. Most people I’ve met seem to think the Alterans are benevolent, if distant, and worthy of respect.” McKay snorted at that, and Spencer shrugged in grudging agreement, considering what McKay had just presented. “Denial can be a useful survival tool. One would hope advanced beings of pure energy wouldn’t be actively working *against* us, after all. And we did, at least, inherit the technology that might actually save us, in this case. It’s rather hard luck on Daniel, of course… He’s kind of a lightning rod for these situations, isn’t he?”

“He’s *THE* lightning rod, Dr. Reid. Better him than me… because usually it’s my team, or, rather, Sheppard, the self-sacrificing heroic idiot. And… you can call me Rodney.”
Spencer grinned, and deliberately offered a hand to shake. “Nice to meet you, Rodney. I’m Spencer.”
Desperate Measures

Chapter Notes

Ref to SG-1 episode 3-18-Shades of Grey (rogue NID sting), 8-12-Prometheus Unbound (Tenat & Jup, Lucian Alliance minions).

~ *When I was a kid, which was just after Edison invented moving pictures, there were films that involved aliens coming to Earth for bad purposes.* ~ Seth Shostak ~

Former Marine Colonel Robert Makepeace glowered at the two octopus-headed aliens who led the way for he and his partner Neumann through the ha’tak corridors. Tenat and Jup were idiots of the first order, and gullible idiots at that. But it was why he had picked them in the first place. Their avarice and lack of morals had gained them a place within the Lucian Alliance, and, god knows how, probably sheer attrition, they had worked themselves up to a kind of middle-management position.

Actually, it probably was attrition. After the largely successful Tau’ri campaign to eradicate them, the Lucians were struggling to hang onto what few territories and assets they still held. But space was big, territories far from the stargate network were many, so getting lost out of reach of the Tau’ri wasn’t all that difficult, as Makepeace knew from personal experience. Or he himself would not still be free.

In exchange for the promise of a chest of weapons-grade naquadah, the octopus-heads had agreed to bring them to an audience with the current Lucian Alliance leader, an ex-Jaffa First Prime named Pel’k, with the gold badge of Olokun on his forehead. Olokun and his whole empire was history, had been for years. There were no rumors to explain how Pel’k had escaped the general purge of his Lord, with enough jaffa fanatically loyal to him to run his mini fleet of two ha’taks, three al’kesh, and who knew what else. Makepeace could make a guess that desertion, running while the running was good, had played a part in that. Which might actually be a sign of Pel’k’s competence as a survivor.

Robert Makepeace knew survivors. He was one himself.

Makepeace, with Neumann and the rest of the rogue NID team members who had served NID Colonel Harry Maybourne in the early days of the SGC, had been caught in a sting performed by Jack O’Neill. Only Maybourne had managed to slip through the net. The rest had all been awaiting execution for treason, or whatever commuted sentence the lawyers and politicians came up with, since their arrest. A case could be made for them being patriots, putting the security and protection of the planet ahead of petty concerns, like theft from aliens too arrogant or smug to want to share their tech. That was, after all, the argument that had hooked Makepeace. The jury, so to speak, was still out on whether or not that argument would eventually prevail.

And then, Colonel Simmons, yet another in a line of NID leaders who had decided to dip his toes in
the dark rogue end of the pool, managed to get some of them out. The deal had been for he and those few others to form Zebra Unit, work on off-world ‘retrieval’ teams, in exchange for their ‘freedom’, pretty much the exact same activities that had put them behind bars in the first place. Stealing alien tech for Simmons and whoever he represented, a group back on Earth with somewhat hazy morals, who *claimed* to have the best interests of Earth at heart.

Makepeace had taken the deal, and was named CO of Zebra Unit. Not that he trusted Simmons, or anyone, not anymore, but it was the best deal he was likely to get. Simmons managed to smuggle them off planet Earth and set them up with a base of operations, before he himself went down in flames… taken host by a Goa’uld for fuck’s sake, from what Makepeace had heard. The idiot. He snidely wondered how anyone could tell any difference in Simmons, before and after he was Goa’ulded.

But that just went to show. No matter how competent you were, how experienced, how many times you’d dodged the proverbial bullet and lived to tell the tale, exploring the stars was dangerous work. His original unit of twenty had dwindled, so now, he and Neumann were the last survivors of the ‘non-regulation’ off-world Zebra Unit. They no longer reported to their rogue NID masters, but the guys who had inherited the business, the Trust. Different day, same garbage.

Exploring for the Trust meant no back-up, no real supply line. They had lost their one tel’tak a while ago, along with its crew. So, now, they had a vo’cume with which to keep lines of communication open with the home-world, a few laptops on naquadah rechargers, and a growing collection of acquired toys, awaiting some means of getting them back to Earth. Unlike Neumann’s old operation, they had no geeks out here to run a lab for study or backwards engineering. No loss, Makepeace thought. Ask him, the hordes of coddled civilians were part of what had made the SGC so soft.

He and Neumann had their own contacts and means of getting what they needed: food, weapons, information, tech. The Lucians weren’t the only ones scrambling in the wake of the Goa’uld Empire to pick up what salvage they could, or running from the damn Ori Priors. It was pretty much like the lawless Wild West out here. They took the odd bounty job, or ran the odd errand for the Lucians, just to keep their hands in. A couple of times they had spotted one of Jack O’Neill’s ‘narcs’, and selling that info had also netted them a distinct advantage in trust and good will.

But, the past year, all anyone was talking about was the Wraith. Some scoffed at the idea… a fleet of half-bug vampire aliens come to eat everyone? Just fear tactics. After all, who besides the Tau’ri had ever seen one?

Then, recently, in just the last few months, news came from a few devastated planets out there, whose survivors had run in terror, screaming for help and spreading tales of half-bug monsters who sucked the life out of many, leaving ancient-looking dried out husks behind, and culled their populations almost to extinction.

The six advance Wraith Hives had made a stop or two on their way to Earth, to spread the word (and enjoy a few in-flight snacks). There were two names they knew, two men they wanted. The Destroyers of Worlds. Anyone who gave them either would be left alone, immune, not invited to the coming feast. The Queens of the six Hives had left that telepathic message with the few they permitted to escape alive, and an all-too terrifying glimpse of what would be coming in their wake.

Rumors of the minor invasion of Earth were also making the rounds, and more and more were seriously considering the warnings coming out of the Tau’ri allies. Makepeace’s own bosses, stuck on the home-world, were increasingly frantic to score at least one ship that could evacuate them from Earth. He had no doubt they were using their vo’cume to try and contact anyone they could for an escape route. But they would only get the same answer Makepeace had got, with everyone who had
a ship to their name. The only ticket to safety for anyone was the one the Wraith were offering. Give
them the Destoyer of Worlds.

The two names? Sheppard and Jackson.

Sheppard had caused the Wraith all kinds of grief in Pegasus, and was commander of Atlantis, that
city feared even by the Wraith, so it was no wonder they wanted that fly-boy. Robert had only heard
rumors of him, brief mentions of him in reports from home. Another cut from the same cloth as
O’Neill, a space cowboy with an irreverent sense of humor, popular with aliens everywhere,
apparently.

But Jackson… Makepeace knew Dr. Daniel Jackson, only too well. For a brief time, he had actually
led the man’s team, SG-1. Makepeace was all too well aware of how many had looked at that
shaggy-haired four-eyed academic, that bleeding-heart liberal, and chosen to disregard the potential
threat from that incredible brain, and the obstinate set of that stubborn chin. Not to mention his
history of surviving… just about anything. Makepeace had always had a sneaking respect and liking
for the man…

But orders were orders, and survival was survival. They were absolute. They did not allow for any
lesser loyalty or motivation. Current orders? Talk the Lucians, or someone, anyone, into coming up
with transport for the Trust leadership to evacuate Earth, before the Wraith arrived. He and Neumann
were following their best lead for a ship. To strengthen their bargaining position, they had claimed to
be representatives of the legitimate Earth government. How would aliens know any better?

Thing about the Lucians was, they’d sell anything to anyone, for a price. And of late, the only
currency the Tau’ri might have to trade on was what the Wraith wanted. Makepeace didn’t actually
have that price in hand, but the Lucians didn’t have to know that. Under the orders his home-world
superior had issued, they could offer pretty much anything Earth had, in exchange for the essential
and urgently needed ship. They were to offer precious ores, gems, drugs, weapons, tech… and,
probably most enticing, limitless access to potential high-quality slaves. Bradshaw, his superior, had
confessed he had no way to reach Sheppard, secure on the unassailable Atlantis, but they had every
confidence of soon being able to lay hands on Jackson. Certainly by the time any transport arrived to
evacuate them. But since they might need to trade on that chip themselves, Makepeace was to keep it
in reserve for as long as possible.

Makepeace listened to Bradshaw’s smooth assurances, and had his doubts.

The Lucians might call themselves an Alliance, but they weren’t all that organized, or cohesive, as
Makepeace had found. After weeks of contacting one clan after another, any surviving O’Neill’s
purge with a ship to their name, Makepeace had found them all disillusioned by the promises
Bradshaw had made in the past, through him.

They had left Pel’k till last. The ex-First Prime had escaped the Tau’ri blitz on the Lucians by
employing only jaffa in his clan... and the obviously non-human, like Tenat and Jup. None of
O’Neill’s narcs could successfully play those undercover roles long-term. Pel’k was something of an
unknown even to Zebra Unit, having never dealt with him personally before. Although, in this case,
Makepeace reflected, that might just be a good thing.

He and Neumann had actually been hoping to get the drop on Tenat and Jup, a couple of dim
specimens from some alien race with disgusting tentacles growing out of their heads and bizarre
faces. But taking their ship and spacing the octopus-heads had been plan A. Unfortunately, the
intended victims had been just savvy enough to lock he and Neumann in their tel’tak hold for the
trip. Now that they were at Pel’k’s ha’tak, plan B was to actually negotiate a deal. If Pel’k didn’t
want to be reasonable, then plan C was to wait for Tenat and Jup to take them back to the drop point,
and steal their tel’tak then.

Pel’k was a different breed of criminal altogether, but at least he looked human, which Makepeace found reassuring, in spite of his obvious greater brain power. Sharp and smooth all at once. Standing in his pel’tac, he faced the Marines, looking them over with thinly veiled contempt that rubbed the bristling Neumann the wrong way. Makepeace gave his subordinate a warning glance to settle him down. At least two of Pel’k’s jaffa lieutenants, and a collection of thugs, stood on the fringes of the wide-open pel’tac, watching silently.

“So. Tau’ri. You come to us again. What for this time? More help with the Ori? That didn’t turn out so well for Netan.”

“The Ori are no threat to anybody right now, Pel’k. Their whole fleet left for home ages ago. Thanks to the Tau’ri, so, you’re welcome. You’ve heard the Wraith are coming?”

Pel’k snorted. “Life-sucking half-bug people? Really? You expect me to believe that? The rest of my Lucian allies may have swallowed such a child’s tale whole, but… not me.”

Better and better, thought Makepeace. Pel’k wouldn’t demand Sheppard or Jackson, then. “I don’t much care what you believe,” he flat out lied. “But… that’s not what we’re here for. We’re in the market for a ship.”

Pel’k blinked. Whatever he had expected to hear, it clearly wasn’t that. He stopped, obviously rearranging his ideas. Then he laughed. “You, the Tau’ri, with the Asgard-enhanced super-ships, not to mention the fabled Ancient city of Atlantis, want to buy a ship from *me*? Why, I wonder?”

“We happen to need some immediate transport, that’s all.”

“What kind of ship?”

“A tel’tak will do. It has to be fast, and come with weapons, shields and a cloak. Rings would be nice, but not essential.”

“Can you pay for it?”

“We have naquadah.”

“Pah, I have naquadah. All I could ever require. What else do you offer?”

“What else do you want?” Neumann shrugged.

Greed glinted in those black eyes. “Asgard tech would be nice. Someone with Asgard tech expertise would be nicer. Can you deliver Carter, or McKay?”

Makepeace grinned. “Dream on. Although… we have McKay’s number one apprentice, Kavanagh. We could let you have him, and a few items to get you started. How’s that sound?” Makepeace had to hand it to his superior, Bradshaw. The guy had called this one, dead on. And primed Makepeace with the right offer.

“I thought you Tau’ri didn’t believe in selling your people.”

“Yeah, well, we’re under new management, and Kavanagh is an annoying geek. Kavanagh is back on Earth right now, but we have some Asgard toys closer to hand. We can give you the tech now, and Kavanagh after delivery of the ship. How’s that sound?”
“I would want to inspect the… ‘toys’, first hand, and interview this Kavanagh, to ensure he has the expertise you say he does.”

“We can do that.”

“So you will take delivery of the ship… where? There are any number of neutral planets with stargates where we can meet you, to examine this Kavanagh.”

Makepeace and Neumann exchanged glances. “No, sorry… that’s not going to work for us. Tell you what. Send Tenat and Jup with the ship, we’ll bring them with us back to Earth, and they can do the interview, take Kavanagh back to you.”

Pel’k was studying them harder and harder.

“How do I know you are authorized to make this deal?”

Makepeace had the answer for this one, too. He pulled out the vo’cume, and turned it on. A hologram projection appeared over the pel’tac, and Bradshaw’s face was suddenly floating over their heads.

“Colonel Makepeace. Report.”

“Mr. Bradshaw, sir. I have the Lucian Alliance Leader, Pel’k, here with me. He wants Asgard tech and a scientist who understands it in exchange for a ship. He’s willing to take Kavanagh, if you assure him I have authority to make the deal.”

“Leader Pel’k, I am the acting head of the Stargate Command of Earth. I have complete confidence in Colonel Makepeace. He has my full authority to make this deal, as ratified by the President of the United States. Our… planetary commander.”

“I see. Thank you, Bradshaw.”

The vo’cume went dark, and Makepeace put it back in his tac vest.

“So. We have a deal?”

“Interesting. I do know about some high-ranking Tau’ri, attempting to make diplomatic contact with a number of neutral and non-aligned planets. They’re spreading stories of Wraith threats, expected to arrive almost any day now. They’ve even approached a number of my Lucian brothers, offering amnesty from their purges, in return for advance warning of any suspicious activity out on the Galactic fringe. These wouldn’t be your people, would they?”

Makepeace and Neumann traded looks…

And so missed the movement that would have telegraphed the zat blast that sent them to the deck of the ha’tak.

Tenat and Jup surged forward, staring at their leader, then down on the unconscious Tau’ri.

“I suppose you had your reasons?” Jo’ba, his trusted lieutenant, inquired dryly.

Pel’k signed for his thugs to drag the prisoners away.

“As ever, Jo’ba. The Tau’ri suddenly need access to one of my reconditioned Goa’uld salvage, and are willing to sell one of their own scientists, and give away priceless Asgard tech for a *tel’tak*? They come in small numbers, claim authorization on the highest level? It was not O’Neill staring out
from that vo’cume, my friend. No, the true leaders of the Tau’ri are out and about the Galaxy, talking of Wraith and Atlantis, while at home lesser beings are willing to sell their people to us for any form of transport they can get their hands on.”

“And all of this means?”

“It could be a number of things. These two could be more of O’Neill’s narcs, seeking to draw us into a trap. I think this unlikely, since Tau’ri narcs are far more subtle and devious, usually. Or… O’Neill’s enemies seek to escape Earth, but they have no access to his ships, Atlantis, or the chaapa’ai. Either they fear the Wraith coming, or O’Neill is close to capturing them. I wonder which it is?”

Tenat and Jup approached, listening avidly. Tenat said, “And what does *that* mean?”

Pel’k grinned with shark-like glee.

“Scare story or true threat, these haatakas are desperate to leave. But with such desperation… Netan found such traitors on the First World useful. Earth has riches of all kinds. With inside help, the First World can be ours for the taking! And we know the Tau’ri ships are spread thin at present. Our spies among the Free Jaffa tell us they are speeding to the Galactic Rim, supposedly to meet these… Wraith. With sufficient forces of our own, we can take them one by one, overwhelm and conquer them, until only Atlantis is left. Jo’ba, put out the call to gather our fleet. Don’t bother with the rest of the Lucians, I am sure they all are compromised, with O’Neill narcs in their ranks who would scuttle us at their first opportunity. But we need every ship we can beg, borrow or steal. Dur’ak. Contact our new Ori allies. If the Tau’ri are unaware that a few of their mother-ships remained behind in this galaxy, so much the better for us. What a shock that will be. Our friends will be most eager for an opportunity to take down the enemies of Origin who destroyed their gods and sent their Priors packing.”

“You trust them?” Jo’ba asked doubtfully.

“Of course not. If they could betray their leader Tomin and desert him to remain behind in this galaxy, they would more easily betray and desert us. But the Ori renegades have the only tech and the only ships that might be able to stand against Atlantis.”

Jo’ba hesitated. “There’s only three Ori ships, Pel’k, and they limp along, at best, without a proper Prior to command them. Their engineers have done their best, with our assistance, to cobble together manual overrides for navigation, weapons, other systems, but…”

“Their weapons work, that’s all that matters. Once we have destroyed the other Tau’ri ships at the Rim, and return to lay siege to the First World, we can force O’Neill to yield Atlantis as well.”

Tenat glanced after the thugs dragging the two Marines away. “And Makepeace and Neumann?”

“We squeeze them for every last drop of information they possess. Then, because I’m feeling particularly charitable at the moment, I will permit them to die.”

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On board the *Hammond*, Jack O’Neill let an airman bring in a comfy chair and set it up just beyond the bars of the very small cell. It was one of the brig cells they kept for their Lucian gang-busting activities, barely more than a cot, commode and sink. Inside, in neon orange prisoner scrubs, was a dejected-looking prisoner, with glaring white bandages taped across his broken nose, big dark bruises on both eyes and cheeks visible beyond the bandage. Oh yeah, he had heard of how Dr. Reid
Mater had dealt with her attempted kidnapper. Good on her.

“So. Major Vincent Hoskins, eleven-year Marine. You spent a month with the SGC a few years back, you were a lowly lieutenant then, on security. Nice cushy post – not much goes on at the level eleven security desk, but it gives you lots of access. I’m guessing you would have stayed longer, but your grandmother passed away and you were called to attend to family business back east. My condolences. Funny, though, because we traced both your grandmothers to retirement homes in Arizona. But then, your departure also coincided with a crack-down Hank Landry was doing on security leaks. Then you got promoted to the Joint Chiefs Staff at the Pentagon, running errands for General Brady. Who had an unfortunate accident with a straight razor days after the Attack of the Space Vampire Aliens. He was a pretty frequent visitor to Area 51, making site inspections of Gitmo West. You yourself did a pretty quick rise through the ranks to Major and got command of Tango Unit at Area 51, doing ‘miscellaneous sweeps’ of the desert. Hunh. Lots of desert to sweep out there. But we both know you were really CO of Bunker Thirteen. Right?”

O’Neill cocked his head to one side to study the dejected person inside the cell. He had already been stripped of his uniform and rank, and given neon-orange scrubs to wear, practically the only color in the place.

Hoskins glanced at the general. “I’ve already told you this.”

“Oh yeah. Gitmo West.”

Hoskins winced at the name.

“Yeah, yeah. Dumb name. Fits, though.”

“I’ve already offered to tell you anything you want to know—“

O’Neill gave a snort at that. “Son, you don’t know squat. You and I both know if you had anything that could damage anyone up the line, you’d be dead by now.”

“Then why are you here?”

O’Neill grinned wide. “To gloat.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. You and Brady and his good buddy NID Assistant Director Gaffney, were running a torture chamber, experimenting on Wraith and Goa’uld, and holding a five-year-old child for… I’ve reviewed the interrogation tapes of your ‘Subject-X’. And I’ve got people with stronger stomachs than mine going through the other assorted surveillance we got out of that hole in the ground.”

“I was following orders!”

“Really? That’s what you’re going with? It didn’t hold water at Nuremburg, why do you think it will work here? You were taking orders from a Goa’uld, son. Or more than one… Don’t tell me you didn’t know about Klein and his snake, because we have the video of you belting him face down on the table for one of your pet geeks to stick the symbiote down his neck. Just like you did for Captain Downs and Lieutenant Sanford, when they couldn’t stomach what you were doing there. Brady and Gaffney were apparently just garden-variety ass-holes, acting out of greed and lust for power, but at least one of the senators Brady answered to has already been de-snaked, and we’ve got a few more senators, congressmen, lobbyists, CEOs and generals in cells just as tiny as yours, waiting for MRIs. If they have a guest, we’ll de-snake and debrief them, and let them go with a warning. If they come
up clean… then they have no excuse, and they’ll never be heard from again. Just. Like. You.”

Hoskins shook his head. “But I helped you! I sent you what evidence I could—“

“What, you mean the day *after* the Wraith invaded Earth, looking for their two friends you were holding? And the same day as the mysterious crash of a C-150 that claimed the lives of every member of your unit who wasn’t already dead? Including yourself, Major Matthews. Sure sure. You were a *lot* of help there.”

“Then what… what…”

“What’s going to happen next? Well, I wanted to see for myself that your cell was small enough. In point of fact…” and he pulled out a cell phone. “Hey, Carter. Sure you haven’t got anything smaller than this? He’s actually got room to walk around. Can’t have that… No. Say cut it in half… yeah. You can put Evans in the other half when they’re finished with him. I want it so small they’d be embarrassed to wear it to the beach… you got it. Thanks.”

Hoskins paled. “Evans? You got him too?”

“Yeah. That I do have to thank you for. You were the one gave his name and contact info to Kavanagh, right? And Kavanagh, that little weasel, was practically guaranteed to blow any cover for anyone he could reach. Once we tripped over his name at Gitmo West, he was easy to back-track to Utah… We got all of his communication traffic… shame we didn’t get there in time to bust the lab you were running. Oh well. You had another Wraith in there, didn’t you? We got that much on trace scans. And an Ancient stasis chamber, so his buddies didn’t find him when they arrived. Oh yeah, Gitmo West was a treasure trove for us. Security cam footage and signatures of everyone entering and leaving your little bunker? Expense sheets? Really? You couldn’t get rid of any of that?” O’Neill blew a raspberry and shook his head.

The General got to his feet and shook down his pant legs. “Well. It was nice talking to ya. Take a little advice, and don’t make an enemy of Evans right off the bat. He’ll be the only company you’ll get for the rest of your miserable life.”

“But, wait! What about a lawyer? A trial? I’m entitled to a trial!”

O’Neill became thoughtful. “Ya think? As much of a trial as Daniel or any of your other prisoners got? Well. Might be fun, trying to get that one by the President. He’s a tad miffed with you and your buddies. He actually signed off on a couple of your bogus presidential orders, and he isn’t happy about being played for a fool, or betrayed by the people around him, who conspired to trick him, or downright lied, not to mention forging his signature when they didn’t think they could get it any other way. You made him an accomplice to torture, kidnapping, wrongful imprisonment… even murder. We also have the shots of you feeding transients to your Wraith. Like that’s ever going to win you brownie points. You think POTUS is going to forget any of that? Or let any other President ignore it? I don’t think so.

“So long, Hoskins. Enjoy your new digs.” Then he stopped, and in a move that he learned from the Colombo TV movies, turned back at the last moment. “Oh, unless of course… you can tell me where Bradshaw is? Stanley Bradshaw, your direct boss, the link between you and the Trust triumvirate? We got Evans dead to rights, and he’ll give us the others… unless you want to give them up first?”

And that was the last nail in Hoskins’ coffin. “He… he’s at his office in New York?” was the hopeful guess.

“Awooga!” Jack mimicked a buzzer. “Wrong answer.”
“Okay then, I don’t know. But I do know the Triumvirate. General Evans, Senator Stahl, and Charlotte Gant, CEO of GlobalTech.”

O’Neill’s eyes narrowed. “Hunh. Well, just as well we already have the other two arrested and under guard, then, isn’t it? And we crashed your bases in Somalia, Siberia and that bizarre little island in the Pacific. I hope you live a long, long time in your tiny space.”

As the General got up from his chair, a desperate Hoskins shouted out, “Did you get Scarface?”

“Who?”

“Marine Major with a scar on his chin. Master of disguise. Uses different names every time you see him, but he always has that damned scar on his chin.”

“Oh yeah, him. He led the other team that was after the Reid kid at NCIS. Stone cold killer. What about him?”

“He was there on look-out, at Bennington. He got away? And you don’t have Bradshaw? Then maybe I do have another idea where they’ll both be. Bradshaw has his own little escape plan. I thought I was the only one who knew… but I’ll bet you Scarface caught on, too. He’s too sharp to have missed it. If I’m going down, then so are they.”

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For such a relatively small area of prime real estate, it was amazing how lost one could get on Long Island, New York, and the region around the high-end village of Amagansett. Low hillocks, scrub bushes and dune grasses, shouldn’t be able to hide something as big and noticeable as a tel’tak. But Bradshaw had built a barn around his that looked from the outside as if it would double as a boat-house, one whole wall on hinges to swing away, and so it went totally unremarked in this billionaire’s playground.

He figured he had barely made it out of the GlobalTech offices before O’Neill’s HWS teams invaded the place. He and his executive assistant, Miss Smith, had driven in circuitous paths while still within the Manhattan city limits, to make sure they were clear of any tails. Then they had made their way out of the city via the Queensboro Bridge, and then north-eastward.

It took a couple of hours of very circumspect driving to arrive at his little hideaway at the north east end of the Island. Luckily, he had been planning for this since the night of the Invasion, when he had first guessed just how screwed they might be. The Wraith landing practically on top of the one place on the planet Bradshaw knew they could find fellow Wraith? Oh yeah, that one was a no-brainer. So he had been stocking provisions and loading up his secret transport ever since.

While he had toyed with the idea of bringing along a few well-chosen people – his latest mistress (already beginning to bore him with her non-stop demands), his grown children (ungrateful spoiled brats, all of them, no less demanding than his mistress), maybe Major Smith of the visible scar for security purposes… He had settled on only one. The tight bun of black hair, the ugly horn-rim glasses, the careful sour look of disdain, were all disguises as good as the Major’s best… Miss ‘Smith’ really was beautiful, once she shook loose her hair and took off those glasses. And one of the most frighteningly competent people Stanley Bradshaw had ever met.

While Miss Smith took her own few pieces of luggage to the barn, Stanley entered his cottage, and picked up the last few bags he had already packed.

But at the secondary entrance to the barn with its person-sized door, he hesitated.
Miss Smith wasn’t alone.

Stanley took a deep breath. “Well well. Major. You know, this is actually a good thing. I had planned on inviting you along, but thought you might have got… caught up in Vegas.”

The Major, now conspicuously without uniform… or scar, he couldn’t help but notice… eyed him a moment, then nodded.

“Matthews and the team failed in their objectives, sir. I was unable to reach them before HomeWorld took them.”

Bradshaw nodded. “So I guessed. Well? I assume you have everything loaded and ready to go? Then let’s not hang around. According to Zebra Unit, most of O’Neill’s fleet is at the Galactic Rim, waiting on the Wraith, so we should be clear. But just in case, this baby does have a cloak.”

Bradshaw led the way to the pel’tac, sitting at the navigator’s chair, went through the basic sequence for turning on and initializing systems, and fired up the engines. By that time, Scarface (without the scar) had swung open the big doors and returned, to take his seat at the weapons console. Oh yeah, Stanley was rather glad to have the man with him.

The little ship lifted effortlessly off the ground and hovered, ready to exit the barn…

When a splash of bright white light blinded all three of them, and the four members of SG-3 appeared, all armed to the teeth. One held a zat, and wasted no time in using it. So Bradshaw didn’t even feel the heavy ‘clunk!’ as his tel’tak collapsed back on the ground.

“Colonel Carter. Tel’tak, and prisoners, are secured. Prepared to beam.”

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Chapter Notes

Ref to CM episode 6-12-Corazon (Miami Voodoo case, shaman Julio).

About the only things that are unique to Earth are our biota and our culture. If aliens ever come here, they’d most likely be either biologists or music fans. Neither one has much reason to antagonize our armed forces.* ~ Seth Shostak ~

“Come on, Janine. Can’t you give me a break here? My cousin is only five years old, and… I’ve tried! If the Rainier day-care is full up, can you at least give me a referral to another?... You know how busy we are over here, we got witnesses and criminals and all kinds of people rushing in and out, my partner and I could get a call out any time, and our Captain is getting fed up… No, we all love the little guy, but it just isn’t appropriate, having him here underfoot!... Please. I’m desperate. I’m begging you, Janine…” Blair Sandburg sighed into the receiver, shutting his eyes closed. “Okay, okay. At least give me a call if you hear even a hint of something?... Thanks. Talk to you later.”

He thumped back into his chair and sent a sorrowful look Jim Ellison’s way. “Sorry, man. No go. We got him at least until the weekend.”

Jim shrugged philosophically. “Just as well, Chief. I’d rather have him under my eye anyway, all things considered.”

Yeah, all things… including a growing number of hazy ghostly spirit animals gathering around the little boy. Not to mention increasingly dire warnings from a dead Chopek shaman, and his own jaguar haunting the loft and the precinct, not taking its blue eyes off the lurking crow for an instant. The bird was always there, somewhere, overlooking the little boy, mostly perched on the highest point it could, above the large screen TV monitor, on top of Simon’s book shelves… No, on the whole, Jim preferred their young Ethan right where he could see him.

And, even though Blair had just tried to use their Captain’s disapproval as a negotiating chip, Simon had been surprisingly okay with letting Ethan take over the round table in his office. Complete with a laptop with access to the reporting system. Because, damn, the kid’s spelling and grammar was better than anyone else’s, including Blair’s. Letting the imp type up everyone’s back-log of notes had put a significant dent in the pile on each detective’s desk, making Ethan real popular with the entire squad. Connor had put her foot down and told people they were *not* to bring the tiny child coffee in thanks, unless it was decaffeinated, but the pile of thank-you chocolate was growing ever higher.

And then there were the kid’s language skills… if there was a language he didn’t know, they hadn’t come across it yet.

Last week there’d been a gang war in Chinatown that had the entire CPD scrambling. There had been shoot-outs in the streets to contain and arrest both the Dub C and the Flying Dragons gang members, EMTs protected to cart out the wounded and the bodies, and once hostilities were finally
quelled, uniforms to question witnesses, with perps, witnesses and surviving victims all ending up at
desks all over the building. And three quarters of the civilians spoke not one word of English. With
their translators and gang experts totally swamped, pulling in community and religious leaders for
support, everyone up in Major Crimes had been shocked when little three-and-a-half-foot Ethan had
emerged from Simon’s office, walked straight to an elderly couple who ran a grocery store right in
the middle of the disturbance, and were understandably upset and frustrated. He began chatting with
them in friendly fashion. Then he turned to a bewildered Simon.

“They want to know what happened to their grandson. He was running deliveries, and they don’t
know where he ended up. He’s a teenager, and they’re afraid he might have been mistaken for one
of the…” and here Ethan colored, “um… bad guys. They think you might have arrested him by
mistake.”

Simon clamped his jaw on his unlit cigar. “Brown!” he barked out. “Take down the information,
then get with Holding. See their kid gets brought up here, if we’ve got him.”

After that, Ethan circulated the other desks, and, gradually, things got sorted out.

Simon could only shake his head. Jim stepped up beside his boss, both staring at the five-year-old

However, it still went against the grain, to have a little child hanging around such a hectic and
potentially dangerous work-place. When they had learned the Rainier day-care was full-up, their
emergency plan B was to leave the little boy with their neighbor, Mrs. Brewster, a nice senior who
lived a couple of floors below the Loft with her two cats. She had welcomed the little boy the first
week they had him, totally charmed by his looks and manners. But she was away visiting her
grandchildren on the east coast, not due back for a couple of weeks. So it had been back to the
precinct, where Ethan promised to be good, and sit quietly at Simon’s round table, or if the Captain
had a meeting, to sit at Jim’s desk in the Major Crimes bull pen. He had amazing focus for a five-
year-old, working on files Blair gave him, or reading. He had begun sneaking the law enforcement
and legal text books on the shelves behind Simon’s desk… and Simon let him.

Ethan charmed everyone around him with his big eyes and brilliant smile. His empathy for anyone in
pain was as astonishing as it was disarming. Turn around and he was talking to a drug-addicted
underage prostitute, convincing her she should call her parents… a homeless man who saw a crime
but couldn’t remember clearly, talking to Ethan and suddenly remembering a crucial detail… a sullen
teen, unwilling witness to a crime, breaking down in tears to confess he’d been bullied at school and
was thinking of suicide, and naming the bullies he had seen rob and beat a senior. There was no
denyng how beautiful a child he was, but his disconcerting intelligence, rearing its head so
unexpectedly, made some nervous.

There was just an aura about him, even more easily seen on the Spirit Plane.

Jim sighed. “Well, we’ve done what we can to find him alternate day-care. We’ll just have to see
what shakes out. Go get him packed up. I just need to take this down to the desk sergeant, and then
we can go. You cooking tonight, or are we picking something up?”

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Jim had always been uneasy with the ‘woo-woo’ new-age spiritual, mystical stuff… it had been the
hardest thing for him to accept in his role as a sentinel. The senses? Hey, once he had Blair to help
him get a grip on them, those were awesome. And not just because of the advantages he had found
for doing his job as a detective. They made him feel more grounded, more solid, in his own mind.
Like a tree rooted to the very bones of the earth, the mountains looming to the east, the vastness of
the ocean in the west, tied to wind and rain and tides, the power of Nature, a very part of him, as he was a part of it. That was all good, in his opinion.

Not so much anything to do with the spirit plane. His jaguar and Blair’s wolf were okay, he supposed, those presences in his mind were links to instincts he knew were part of his elemental nature. Blood and bone, nose and ear and eye, tooth and claw and tongue, warning of threat, preparing for conflict, leading to safety and shelter and comfort, all solid, real and visceral.

But… whenever Blair went to commune on the spirit plane, even if he was there as well, it was like he could feel his Guide’s mind fade into the alpha rhythms of sleep, when he obviously was wide awake. It unsettled Jim, made him anxious. And much as he always wanted to be close to his Guide, he didn’t like being on the spirit plane at the same time Blair was there, because it left both their physical bodies unaware and vulnerable in the real world. Jim found that particularly hard to allow, so cut off from all his senses. He felt compelled to stand guard when Blair was so out of it and unprotected.

Bad enough when it was just Blair going walk-about on another plane of existence. But when their Ethan was there too? Yeah, no, Jim was going to stand guard in the real world, his jaguar by his side… and, apparently, according to Blair, by his too. Which was… yeah, a little cool. Ethan wasn’t the only one with the parlor tricks for being in two places at once.

So, after dinner, while Blair and Ethan sat lotus-style on the bed in the ‘cupboard under the stairs’, deep in alpha-rhythm trance, Jim reclined on the sofa, feet on the coffee table, beer in hand, Jag game on the TV, and set his senses on full alert, while the black jaguar prowled around the Loft.

The hardest part of teaching a five (six?) year old to reach the Spirit Plane, Blair reflected, should have been getting him to sit still long enough to meditate. Good thing Ethan wasn’t a normal five year old. He had taken to meditation like a duck to water. As with every other shaman skill he and Incacha had taught over the past weeks.

Blair had been surprised when other spirit guides began to show up. Not so surprised when other shamans entered the glade to sit in a growing circle, each of them paired with a spirit who had appeared first.

They came in all shapes, sizes, ages, ethnic backgrounds, male and female. Anthropologist Blair recognized the various tribal garb, tattoos, face-paint, tokens some of them bore, had a little more trouble identifying probable background when they wore Western clothing, T-shirts, jeans, blouses, running shoes... They came from all over the globe. Every continent, except, perhaps, Antarctica.

Incacha seemed to know and recognize quite a few, as he greeted them all stoically. So, some were dead… sorry, Ascended, like him?

As the days passed, and the heavy feeling of approaching danger loomed ever nearer, the crowd around them grew. From half to a dozen, to dozens, to… All of them focused on Ethan. The glade seemed at once, intimate with everyone close enough to hear and touch, yet big enough to accommodate all without any hint of crowding. It was an odd physical feature of a place that had no real geographic context. No wonder Jim was so uneasy here.

And, out in the jungle beyond the glade, there paced a growing number of other spirit animals. Big cats, wolves, bears, sharks, orcas, a few elephants, a rhinoceros, an ox or two, antlered moose and elk, a crocodile, what Blair was sure was a Komodo Dragon, every kind of winged raptor… All of them prowling the perimeter or soaring overhead, very obviously in guard. Jim’s panther checked
them all out, occasionally gave them a cuff of warning or correction, greeted others with wary respect. It didn’t take a genius to guess these were the guides of sentinels. Blair hadn’t believed there could be so many… After the problems he and Jim had encountered with just the very few unscrupulous people who had guessed and believed about Jim’s abilities, and most especially after Alex, Blair had deliberately stopped searching for more sentinels. They were safer if he didn’t know about them, although he wondered how many had suppressed their senses in self defense, or suffered with them, without the same help he had given Jim, to survive and control them.

Blair had to admit, he had been alarmed when the narwhal had appeared, cavorting above them, doing somersaults as if swimming in its native arctic sea, the twisted ivory tusk erupting from its nose nearly goring a couple of the taller shamans. Its human, an ancient woman with a happy dark and wrinkled face like a dried apple doll, with shining agate eyes and a toothless grin, was dressed in a parka an unlikely shade of neon orange. Hunters called it Silent Orange, highly visible to other human hunters, but all but invisible to most animals, able only to see shades of blue, green or grey. She had moved into the circle as if she owned it, nudging aside the tall Tutsi shaman, and the little Polynesian girl in the brightly patterned sarong.

Incacha had let Blair take the lead in the first lessons, but then he had taken over, to teach them both. Until, that is, Tootega arrived, just yesterday, the Inuit shaman with the narwhal spirit guide.

“I am oldest,” she told them all firmly. “Is my right. Also, I am strongest. Wisest. Most modest,” she added with a wink at Blair that made him laugh, only belatedly covering it up with a hand as Incacha glowered at him, as if to say don’t encourage her, “not to mention funniest. Eh little Yuka?”

Ethan was fascinated and charmed. Eagerly, he asked, “What does Yuka mean?”

Oh yeah, Tootega had known just what to say to capture the interest of a mini-linguist. “Means bright star, little one. You are our bright star. Here to learn many things, yes, and so you will. But here to teach even more. Because we have as much need as you, Yuka. Tell us what we need to know.”

The little face screwed up. “I don’t understand…”

“The enemy comes, Yuka. The Hunger from the stars. Tell us of the Hunger.”

Ethan thought a moment, then said, “We need Teyla. Teyla Emmagan. She has a connection to the Wraith.”

Incacha nodded, and closed his eyes, concentrating.

And then a space was made for a beautiful woman with dark red hair and honey-brown skin, in the grey and blue uniform of Atlantis. She blinked, then took in her surroundings… finally focusing on Ethan.

“Young Daniel. It is good to see you safe and well. We have all been most worried.” She bent her head toward him, and he met her, touching foreheads in what was evidently, to Blair, a traditional greeting. At her side was an odd creature… not quite mammal, not quite reptile, and although it had wings, bird didn’t quite say it, either… alien, however, did. When she noticed, she smiled in surprise, and reached out to caress its odd scaly head. “Oh my. A solen. I have not seen one since I was a child… they are impressive hunters, live in family flocks, and are valiant in defense of their clans.”

“Teyla! These are my friends, the shamans of Earth. We’re going to fight the Wraith, together. But we need you. Everybody, this is Teyla, leader of the Athosians, they’re from the Pegasus Galaxy. Years and years ago, the Wraith experimented on some of her ancestors, giving them a little bit of
Wraith DNA. Nobody knows why. But it means she can sense them when they’re near, and warn her people to run and hide from a culling.”

Teyla nodded, smiling at the little boy and petting his head. “I have used my gift in several different ways since then… I can sometimes connect to their hive minds, although there is considerable risk of my being overwhelmed in turn, and giving away more than I learn. But I choose to use any weapon I have at hand to fight the Wraith.”

Tootega grinned and nodded in respect. “You are very wise and very brave, little sister, valiant in defense of your clan. You are very welcome among us. But we have great need of your gift now. Show us your connection to the Hunger, and we will give you strength to resist its influence.”

Teyla frowned at that, but settled herself in a lotus, closed her almond-shaped eyes and sent her thoughts to the stars. Those around her did the same, connecting through their will, and through their spirit guides.

Blair groped a bit, trying to catch at the threads he felt spinning and braiding into stronger and stronger cords around him, and joined to them.

“There,” Teyla whispered. “I have found them.”

Blair frowned in consternation. “I can’t…”

“Hush,” Tootega told them all, lifting her face to the wheeling spirit stars in the vaulted dome over their heads. She reached forward, and in that weird way of the glade, was able to clasp Blair’s hands in her own. “Listen. Hear. As with the wind, the ice, the sea beneath the white, the bird on the air, the fish in the sea… They all speak to you. Hear them.”

Blair also stilled his unquiet mind, and listened…

And there it was. The ravenous Hunger had a voice. Many voices. Although maybe voice wasn’t the right word… though they could speak in sounds, they thought in another sense… they communicated one to another across a band of feeling and intent, of odor and impulse.

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Queen Three-Hive-Mother ached with the gnawing in her gut. Reaching to section after section of the storage holds, she found nothing but emptiness there, to match the emptiness within. This she shared with her sisters, “We have come to the end of long-term stores. No newer stores are safe to eat. Although we still have no way to discern which, we suspect all have been contaminated by Hoffan plague. To eat of them is to die.”

There was an awful horror to the tenor of her thoughts. When cell after cell of the larder had been opened and fed upon, only to have the feeder shrivel, howling in torment, to die within hours… It had echoed around each of her three Hives, infecting all with fear, only increasing the stress of brutal hunger pains. She had no choice but to dump any suspect food. These vivid and recent memories were spread among her sister-queens.

“It cannot be all,” objected Queen Destroyer-of-Sateda, recoiling from the pain for fear of it joining with her own hunger, and magnifying it. She warily contemplated how many of her own larders had been filled recently. “Surely some herds were untouched by the Hoffans. They cannot have reached all.” There was some urgency in her mind-voice, reaching across the expanse between the individual Hives to her sisters. It was easily guessed – she carried larders with new captives, and wished to think them safe.
“So had we thought,” said Queen Dwelling-Safely-In-Distance. “But when we tested by having drones eat of each herd we encountered, all died. We suspect it is the work of the Renegade, Not-Wraith-King. In hatred of us, he made certain every corner of the home spiral was tainted and unsafe for us.”

This was unwelcome news, and the sister-queens let their minds dwell angrily on the face of the abomination, who was once a Wraith son, but had been morphed into something… unclean, by the accursed new Lanteans. And although they had all heard his mind as he died, they yet cursed his name. Not-Wraith-King, a foul and treasonous name in and of itself.

And Not-Wraith-King had not been the only scourge to afflict the Hives in recent years. They had come, one after the other, decimating their numbers as nothing ever had, even before the First Lanteans had been driven out. All down to the new Lanteans, all since their coming.

The Hives should have remained in hibernation cycle for at least another hundred years, to let their herds replenish their numbers sufficiently to support full Wraith numbers. But they had been forced awake early, forced to defend themselves and their ranges from rival Hives. Then the Hoffan plague, Hives exploding, the Replicators attacking like a ghost of the First Lanteans, looking like food yet not, smelling of stone and plastic… Each of them had seriously reduced the numbers of Wraith, had effectively shut out hunting grounds and viable herds from the increasingly embattled Hives. When Atlantis had vanished from their spiral home, it had seemed like a gift… until it became plain the Hoffan plague had left a deadly legacy behind. Spiral home was home no longer.

But where to go? What hunting ground, what refuge? If they could but know where the new Lanteans had come from, all knew their home spiral was crammed with food… more than they could imagine… And then, another gift, a message from the next spiral over… Earth. Home of the new Lanteans. Home, now, of Atlantis. Such wealth of food, overflowing, there for the taking, and, apart from the Enemy’s city itself and its new Lantean crew, just one possible impediment to their hunger. So, with an advance force sent to deal with that, they prepared for exodus. All would go. All the Wraith, all of their Hives, united in a cause as never before, since the end of the War with the Enemy, when the accursed ones had finally been driven out, and Atlantis sunk beneath their knowledge, powerless to stop them. So it must prove again.

But the journey was long, and the void between spirals was vast. They were barely half-way into the trip, and there would be no chance of encountering food until they reached at least the outskirts of the next spiral.

Queen Newest-of-Granddaughters said, “We dumped all newer stores before venturing into the Void between galaxies.”

“As did we,” echoed many others.

“We did not,” scoffed Queen Reward-Worthy-of-Risk. “We have never marked our larders by duration or planet source. Why should we? Nor do we track which herds are in contact with other herds. It matters not to us, after all. We cycle oldest to newest, and that is sufficient to ensure food is not wasted to rot.”

Queen Newest-of-Granddaughters, feeling stung by the implied gloating, asked, “And how many sons have you lost to the plague?”

“I count it not. Sons are numberless and more can always be spawned.”

“Ah, then you have lost many. What do you eat yourself, sister?”
There was gloating from the others now as Queen Reward-Worthy-of-Risk, all too obviously having fed, and fed well, in recent days, refused to confess she had been mostly feeding upon her own sons of late. Some risks, after all, were not worth the taking.

And all the while, the Queens were too busy, too focused on other more urgent matters, far too hungry, not to mention too arrogant in their superiority, to realize their web of minds had been breached.

Although, breached wasn’t the right word, Blair thought. Invaded? No, nothing so intrusive. This was the quiet private conversation of adults, overheard by the ignored servant in the corner, the child lurking on the stairs, unremarked, and even if noticed, easily disregarded.

And although Teyla’s strong presence might cause a ripple, her own DNA familiar enough to catch their attention, she was so surrounded, so shielded by the shaman circle, that she wasn’t even a shadow here.

“Which of us has *safe* food remaining?” asked Queen Cunning-in-Battle.

Knowing their sister of old, no one replied. It would be to put themselves at risk of her attacks, once they exited the transport realm.

The Queen-of-Queens bestirred herself. “None will be foolish enough to admit, even if such remain. And I think very little safe food remains to any of us. I would advise we put as many sons as is possible into hibernation. Asleep, they will not need to be fed.”

“But Mother-of-All,” protested Three-Hive-Mother, “most of my sons are starving now. If they go into hibernation thus, they will waste away to death before they can wake again.” Only after feeding was it possible for sons to survive with reduced metabolism, for even at such a lowered rate, their bodies were biologically programmed to draw on internal reserves, whether they had them or not. When reserves were fully absorbed, they began digesting their own internal organs, flesh, blood and bone. More than one of the Queens could already feel it within themselves, the hunger acids chewing into their entrails, seeking out any cells with energy to yield up.

“Then we must fall to the least of our sons. Soldiers first, those youngest and already in stasis, for whom we have no current need.”

Queen Newest-of-Granddaughters suggested with a tentative air, unwilling to directly challenge, “No need now, perhaps, but when we reach the New Hunting Ground, will we not need all the sons that we can produce? It is said the food herds there number in the billions.”

Starvation-stress clawed at all their linked minds. So much food, no more than a thought away… and yet, separated by some distance yet.

Queen-of-Queens shook herself from the hunger-thoughts. “You have met the new Lanteans in battle. So have many of us. Many more who did are dead. Food though they may be, I do not underestimate their strength in battle. But they are few, even with Atlantis. Atlantis is only one, strong as it is. And we are many. Many enough that we still may overwhelm them when we come in our strength, strength in numbers, in Hives and sons, strength in having fed so we are not Starved-Mad and unprepared. A few of our sons sacrificed to maintain our strength is a necessity. Give the command to your Drones. Choose among the youngest for the feast.”
“Oh man,” Blair gasped as he tore his mind away from the Queens. “That is seriously unpleasant.” He turned his attention immediately to Ethan... to find the child still in the grip of the Wraith Hive-mind, and sweating, no doubt following as the creatures fell to cannibalism. “Ethan? Snap out of it, buddy. Ethan!”

With a scream of torment, the child opened shocked blue eyes, turned desperately to Blair, and collapsed, sobbing uncontrollably, in his lap.

Teyla leaned forward to stroke the shuddering shoulders of the little boy. “Breathe deeply, young Daniel. Quiet your mind. You know the steps to take. Center yourself and remember who you are... not who they are.” The beautiful alien woman with the calm, steady eyes looked up to Blair. “It takes a little time to shake off the influence of the Hives, but he will soon be well. His mind is strong.”

Tootega sighed and shook her head, patting the little boy’s shoulder kindly. “These Queens are strong as well, stronger than I anticipated. And they are many. But I think we are strong, too, and with your wisdom, Teyla Emmagan, we can make ourselves stronger. We also are many. But we will need all if we are to prevail.”

Umuhigi, the Tutsi shaman, shook his head. “They are like the termites of the hill,” he said. “One mind springing from their queen-mother. There will be drone mates and soldier-workers beneath her, but all will be slaves to her will, for the good of the colony.”

Mahina, the young Polynesian girl, suggested, “It's, like... an echo, here. It resonates on this plane. They exist in the physical world, but they can only communicate mind to mind on this plane. Think we can do something to disrupt that?”

“Good idea,” agreed an Australian aborigine, Jarli, a barn owl sitting on his shoulder, “Here in the dream-time they are vulnerable.”

“We will need other weapons,” declared a beautiful young man with light brown skin, black hair in dreadlocks and dark shining eyes. He strode in from the jungle, a big shaggy half-camel-half elephant thing ambling behind him. “You cannot kill them on this plane, and nothing less than death will stop them, or their Hunger.”

Little Ethan sat up abruptly, staring. Blinking. “Skarra?”

The youth grinned. “We could not let you go through this alone, my brother.”

“Kasuf? Shifu! But... you’re Ascended. I thought the rules say you can’t interfere.”

“Nor can we, on the Physical plane,” said Kasuf, in robes and headdress Blair couldn’t help but associate with ancient Egyptian tribes. On his shoulder perched a kind of falcon. “But here? We can at least advise.”

And another two figures joined the three Abydonians.

“Merlin? I didn’t think they’d let you Ascend.”

“Ah,” said the old man, laying a finger to his nose. This seriously disarranged and annoyed the small merlin perched on his shoulder. (Seriously? A spirit guide making a pun?) “I have a few tricks even the Ascended don’t know.”

“And one of them was to help me get out from under my guardians,” declared a woman, short of
stature with dark red hair. At her heel hopped a long-eared hare. “They don’t trust me not to at least try and help Earth in this crisis. Hmph. Ya think?”

“Janet!” Ethan all but screamed, vaulting out of Blair’s lap to the waiting arms of the laughing woman. “I’m sorry you died, Janet. I’m sorry. Was it my fault? I think it was my fault.”

“No, no, Daniel. Not your fault at all. Come on. Sit up. There’s some things we need to tell you. First of all. The Wraith Hives are about a week away from the Galaxy Rim. Once they arrive they will have to come out of hyperspace to feed, and they’ll be slow to move. Still, that’s not much time to prepare. The SGC will get wind of them soon, so don’t worry about that. Jack has been getting his ducks in a row since the Invasion, so they’re as ready as they can be. But they’ll need our help.”

“Umuhigi is exactly right about the Wraith having termite biology and social structure,” Merlin said, with a nod, “and so is this charming young lady here,” and the old man gave Mahina a roguish wink. “The Wraith use the Spirit Plane to communicate long distance. In their presence, and within each Hive, they use pheromones, just as termites do. But their minds resonate on this level. This is where their telepathic ability comes from, to mentally connect and command, at a distance, their living Hive-ships, drones and soldiers. Now, the drones can act independently of their Queens, and the older and stronger of them can even reach in to direct the actions of the soldiers under them, but the Hive-ships, and soldiers not directly under a strong and dominant drone, are totally dependent upon their Queen. They must feel the connection in their minds, or smell the pheromones and hormonal signals she exudes, or they are helpless and confused. This gives us an advantage. Maybe we can’t kill them outright on this plane, but we can surely keep the Queens distracted while other means are used.”

Blair worried about that. “We can’t kill them, psychically, here? What about them? Can they kill us, if we meet them head on?” The part of him that could reach this plane was his soul, or so he believed, and if his soul were destroyed… what would be left to return to his body? He had been drowned once, his body had… stopped, no breath, no heart-beat… it had taken Jim, seeking out his soul in this place to bring him back.

Merlin regarded him thoughtfully… then shrugged. “I don’t know, Dr. Sandburg. Our souls and consciousness are separate from our bodies while we are here… I suppose it is possible we could become so overwhelmed, so lost, we cannot find our way back.” He glanced out at the circling spirit animals out beyond the glade. “Luckily, I think we may depend on the help and strength of others, if it should come to a head-on fight. Something the Wraith Queens do not have. Separate the Queen’s mind from her ‘sons’, or kill her, and only drones, and those soldiers directly under a very old and strong drone, will be able to function at all.”

“And that gives us a plan?” asked one new voice… Quiet as the hush of his desert owl’s wings, Spencer had joined them. And, wide-eyed at his side with a desert squirrel in her lap, Diana Reid.

“It does indeed, Dr. Reid.”

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While Daniel took refuge with the Abydonians, Merlin and Janet Fraiser, Teyla, Incacha and Tootega led the congregated shamans in heated debate over ways and means. Meanwhile, Blair retreated a little with the Reids.

“Hey, Aunt Diana. You’re looking…”

“’Sane’ is the word you want, I think, Boo-Boo,” Diana told him with a smile, using her old nickname for him. “Young Ethan wanted to give me a gift.”
Blair kissed her cheek fondly. “Hell of a gift. I’ll thank him for you. So… what do you think of the show?” and he gestured to the immense-intimate-big-small glade around them.

Spencer blinked at it all. “I take it these are all shamans?”

“Pretty sure, those of us in the glade, yeah.”

Spencer searched through the many faces… the many, many faces, sure he would find one in particular… and there he was. Julio, the Santeria practitioner and healer he had met on a case in Miami a few years ago. Even as he found that enigmatic face in the crowd, Julio’s eyes turned to him, and he gave a nod in acknowledgment. Spencer smiled wryly, and raised his right wrist… he still wore the green and yellow beaded band Julio had once given him, in protection against the ‘ghosts in his head’.

“Then that means, mom and me…”

“Also shamans. So it would seem. Well, Auntie Di, you always did have gnarly psychic powers. You always know.”

“Oh, but,” she hesitated… “I always thought they were as much a feature of my psychosis as anything else. Hunh.”

“And we’re not actually trained for any of this,” Spencer was also doubtful of his place at this table.

Blair glanced around. “I think we can let others do the heavy lifting. There’s certainly enough of us here with expertise in enough different areas, that I think we can depend on the right answers coming through.”

Spencer eyed an elephant, pausing in its circuit with the other large and deadly predators out beyond the glade perimeter, when it turned to look him in the eye and raised its trunk to blow a loud trumpet greeting. At its side paced a huge tiger – striped in black, except it was a dark jungle green in color.

“And them?”

“I think they’re guides to sentinels.”

“There seems to be an awful lot of them… I thought they were pretty rare in the modern world?”

“Yeah, so did I. We probably won’t see them coming into the spirit plane themselves… sentinels get real antsy on this plane, separated from their senses. I get the sense most of them have a bond with one or more of these shamans. But I gotta think they’re doing their own versions of circling the wagons.”

“Then… our role?”

Blair considered him. “Well, how did this whole thing start, Parsifal? You took on a righteous quest, didn’t you?”

Spencer nodded. “To protect a little boy at desperate risk.”

Blair bumped him, shoulder to shoulder. “And you say you have no training at this. Man, you have nothing *but* training in serving and protecting the helpless from psycho killers. Am I right?”

Diana smiled, taking her son’s hand. “That’s my Parsifal.”
Pel’k lost all patience with his minions and pounded on the table as he vaulted to his feet. “Enough! Did you think this would be *easy*? That Asgard super-ships would be simple to locate, their defenses tissue paper for us to tear through? No. But we must find and defeat these ships, strip away these defenders before we dare approach the First World. They’ll have Atlantis. But even the city of the Ancients is but one defender. Once it is their last, their only, the Earth is ours.”

Jo’ba glowered at the others at the table, ever loyal, but several of the lesser lieutenants were looking increasingly mutinous. In what they thought had been a coup, they had managed to convince two ha’tak commanders from the Free Jaffa to re-align on their side. With what other resources and assets they could scrape together, they had gathered a fleet of seven ha’taks, thirteen al’kesh, several squads of support death gliders, and all three Ori renegade mother-ships left in the Milky Way. An impressive force, surely enough to take on the Tau’ri. Their Free Jaffa converts had led them to the Galactic Rim, where they knew the Tau’ri ships to be patrolling, with many other allied ships, watching for the first signs of the Wraith Fleet. And Pel’k had finally relented enough to grant that perhaps, just perhaps, there might be something to the rumors.

But they had been out here for some days, and all they had managed to find were one Serrakin and one Gadmir ship. The Serrakin had gone down, eventually, to their superior numbers, but they had taken out a ha’tak and five al’kesh with them. As for the alien and unknown Gadmir… The two ha’taks and four al’kesh that had encountered it had all… disappeared. Somehow.

Frustration at being unable to engage with their target enemy, and unsettled by their losses, now down to four ha’taks and four al’kesh, plus the Ori mother-ships, Pel’k was finding it difficult to motivate his fleet to continue their mission.

The ex-Free Jaffa captain, Dak’nor, with the gold badge of Heru’er adorning his forehead, was suspiciously neutral in the debate, watching Pel’k with narrowed eyes. Pel’k was already assessing his chances if Dak’nor should choose now to make his play for the leadership. Several of those gathered at this summit were lone wolves like Dak’nor, who might back him for now, and a later chance of their own at seizing power. But with Jo’ba behind him, Pel’k could count on the rest of his brethren, once the loyal troops of Olokun. Many of whom were here in this room right now, if fighting should break out.

As for the three Ori captains… all three stood together, still and silent, making assessments of their own, hating everyone in this room for the alien heathens and heretics they were, but willing to set their personal likes and dislikes aside for the sake of a greater good – revenge against the Tau’ri. They would support anyone who proved he could hold control of the fleet, but would not interfere with any internal strife among the Lucians. So, no threat to Pel’k there, but no help either should it come to it.

Pel’k took another glance, and saw his lieutenants all visibly smoothing their ruffled feathers… for now. Even Dak’nor was backing down. For now.

But a lowly jaffa whispered in Jo’ba’s ear, and Jo’ba cleared his throat.

“We may not have unlimited resources in this, Pel’k. Our battle against the Serrakin cruiser has seriously stressed all systems in our ships, and several have already drained their power cells. Our al’keshes have had to retreat for repairs to their engines and re-charge of their weapons banks.”

One of the Ori captains, Gabrien, nodded. “Our own power supplies to the weapons arrays are showing significant fatigue. We may have to reduce our attacks as we cycle our ships back to be re-fitted and re-charged.”

“Then do so.”
“And our food supplies?” Dak’nor challenged, but with significantly less heat.

“Have some of the death gliders go on a foraging party. There will be food enough for all once we have Earth.”

“And about that,” Dak’nor said. “All intelligence says the planet has billions of inhabitants. How are we to control such a large population? How to administrate? Our own numbers are barely in the hundreds, so even if we divide the planet mass…”

“A significant reduction in the population will make the matter far easier,” another Ori captain, Joshual, suggested. “Bomb all sources of advanced technology and all high-density population centers, and we will easily control the remainder, as slaves in the fields.”

Pel’k nodded. “That is truly one source of Earth’s untapped wealth, the slaves it will yield to us, once their power base is broken. Agreed. Anything else? Tenat, Jup, what of the two prisoners? Have they revealed any more secrets to the Tau’ri home-world defenses?”

The two minions glanced nervously at each other. “We are still working on that. They are… stubborn.”

“Well, work harder. We will need that intelligence sooner rather than later. Or do you need help? Perhaps Dak’nor can send some of his people to assist you.”

“No, no! We will break them soon.”

“Very well. Then, if that is all we have to discuss…”

The less he let them whine and complain, the longer he could keep them at it. But he was already anticipating a revolt attempt, sometime within the next week. Probably from Dak’nor, although he suspected Jo’ba knew as well as he did that only their own trained troops were organised, and loyal, enough to successfully mount an uprising against Pel’k’s own men.

And he needed every gun he could get, if there was any hope of taking the First World, and holding it, against any allies loyal enough to come to the Tau’ri aid. They needed to find those ships as soon as possible. The longer this dragged on, the harder it would be to keep control. The Lucian Alliance (this remnant iteration of it, at least) would be their own worst enemy, and defeat itself, long before they reached Earth.

One of Jo’ba’s tech minions on the controls looked up and announced, “We have detected a large fleet emerging out of hyperspace, just beyond the Rim, sir.”

“Is it Atlantis? Or O’Neill’s fleet?” That was his greatest fear, that O’Neill would arrive, in strength, before Pel’k had whittled down his fleet of super-ships. Pel’k was only too aware that the Asgard legacy ships, if they came in even three at a time, would grind them all into dust.

“No sir… I’ve never seen readings like these before… and the numbers of ships are… thousands of them sir, thousands, spreading even now to surround the system! Already, they are generating a communications interference net that is hampering our ship-to-ship comms. These readings… they resemble what the Tau’ri has been describing of the Wraith, sir!”

“Nonsense. The Wraith are a myth, a scare story to get us to back down…”

Other techs around the control room were barking out warnings. The Ori captains were taking messages from their own techs over the comms, and looking pale and worried.
Gabrien announced abruptly, “We must return to our ships. We are also reading mass numbers of aliens approaching. With our power channeled exclusively to weapons, we will need to reroute to shields before they arrive if…”

“Yes, yes! Go! Everyone, back to your ships. We must meet this threat head on, no matter who they are.”

Pel’k took command of his fleet and directed a wedge formation to strike the fore-front of the unknown alien fleet. But even he had failed to appreciate the size or power of the enemy. Yes, their technology was primitive seeming – the damn Hives read as organic, by Olokun’s accursed name! – no match for their superior weapons or able to pierce their shields… but they were numberless, and relentless. Their ‘darts’ were certainly faster and more manoeuvrable than even the death gliders, and had the strange beaming tech that could pierce any shield as if it weren’t there, to land enemies within their ships, and take any crew members they chose…

Ha’tak and Ori weapons scythed through the primitive ships like butter, and dozens of enemy ships split apart and disintegrated, spilling debris across space. But for every hive, cruiser or support vessel destroyed, there were a hundred more ready to close up the wall. With their weapons arrays and shields already stressed and under-powered from the attack on the Serrakin, the old and battered Alliance vessels began to falter, their shields weakening with intermittent power failures. One ha’tak and the two al’keshes made a run for escape, only to be boarded, and minutes later, slid to a halt in space, lying dark and dead, with no life-signs reading on board. Hundreds of lives… gone.

Too late, Pel’k realised this was not a battle he could win, head on. He screamed the order to retreat even as he ordered his own ship to seek out a hole to slip out of…

One Ori ship had not been able to get their Shield up, and had been ripped to shreds. Another had run out of weapons power, and was dead and deserted. The third stood and fought, but Pel’k could see it was also losing power. He watched appalled as its shield collapsed, and it too stopped, went dark, the scan revealing life signatures rapidly winking out, until it became a mere hulk, dead in space.

One Alliance ship after another fell before the onslaught, and still Pel’k could see no escape for himself. Then, there it was, one narrow corridor created by the desperate last-ditch wedge run by Dak’nor’s ship. Pel’k leaped into the void, ignoring the debris field hitting his dwindling shields.

But suddenly, his was the last and only Alliance ship left, of any size, and almost as an afterthought, the massive cloud of Wraith turned its full attention on him.

Inexplicably, his engines cut out, and he could hear screams echoing from every corridor of his ha’tak. And then with his personal retinue of guards closing ranks within the pel’tac, he saw a phalanx of the enemy, appearing at every door. Tall, thin, white-faced, long stringy white hair, long black coats swirling dramatically about their leather-sheathed legs, not even bothering with weapons in their long-fingered hands. Taking hit after hit from the guards’ weapons without it even slowing them down. Behind these came many more with bony masks, and these were the foot-soldiers with the weapons, but even his own men quailed before the monsters.

One Wraith noble stuck out a hand against Jo’ba’s chest, and the man screamed, and before Pel’k’s horrified eyes, shrivelled into a desiccated mummy before falling into dust. Then the noble stooped, and plucked a squirming, squeaking prim’tah from Jo’ba’s pouch, and stuck its head in his gaping rot-toothed mouth, waiting till it wormed its way into the offered host. The Wraith noble’s eyes flashed and it grinned...

Then it was nothing more nor less than a massacre... or perhaps a feast. Until only one jaffa remained
alive on the last Lucian Alliance ship.

And then another Wraith lord met Pel’k’s terror-widened eyes, and grinned.

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Introduction to Entomology

Chapter Notes

Ref to SG-1 episodes 3-14-Foothold (shape-shifting bug aliens), 4-16-2010 & 5-10-2001 (the Aschen), 2-3-Prisoners (SG-1 gets thrown into an off-world prison, Hadante, and meet the real ‘Destroyer of Worlds’, Linea), 8-18-Threads (Jack’s pet CIA agent…).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~ *I have noticed that even people who claim everything is predetermined and that we can do nothing to change it, look before they cross the road.* ~ Stephen Hawking, from Black Holes and Baby Universes and Other Essays ~

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“Dr. Reid!” cried out a voice over the general hubbub of the mess hall lunch crowd. Some heads turned to watch in curiosity, but most ignored the familiar sight of an Atlantis geek getting excited about something.

Spencer, however, was on high alert. With his mom and Teyla beside him, and Vala Mal Doran never more than an arm’s length away, Garcia across the table, they were all lingering over their coffee. He twisted around to see Dr. Gil Grissom striding across the hall toward them. Teyla politely made room for the newcomer she had not yet met… Dr. Grissom had found the biology labs, and had not left them since his arrival, as far as his concerned team-mate, Nick Stokes, had found. He and Greg Sanders had made it their job to deliver regular meals and remind Grissom to sleep… whether he did or not was unknown.

“Dr. Grissom. Please join us. And really, you should call me Spencer. We’re practically team-mates.”

“Spencer, right, fine,” Grissom dispensed with the pleasantries, too eager to get to what was really on his mind. “Look, can you hook me up with the Chief Science Officer? I need to talk to him. Like, now.”

Spencer blinked. “Dr. McKay? Sure, no problem. But why can’t you just go see him yourself?”

Grissom blinked. “Because everyone says he has no time for soft sciences or woo-woo voodoo biology. None of the guys in the zoology lab will go anywhere near him. They won’t even call him on their radio sets for me. But the scuttle-butt is that he actually likes you.”

“Oh, well, I’m glad to hear that, anyway… You want to find him now?”

“Yes, right now.”

Spencer nodded at the ladies, and got up to lead Grissom away to the nearest transport cabinet. He wasn’t really surprised when Vala joined them, linking arms with both Spencer and Grissom.
“And who are you, exactly, handsome?” she asked coyly.

Grissom blinked at her. “Oh, sorry. I’m Dr. Gil Grissom, Las Vegas Crime Scene Investigations.”

“Oh! You were there to save my Daniel from that awful bunker cell! I read the report. You, my darling, are on my list of favorite people. And why haven’t I met you before now?”

Grissom blinked some more. Spencer could totally understand. Vala took some getting used to for conventional Earth-born males. Not unlike her new BFF, Garcia.

“Uh… I’ve been busy?” he studied her like one of his crime scenes, the puzzle momentarily distracting him from his mission, whatever it was. Then he shook himself and refocused. “Did you know the Atlantis Expedition has never had an actual entomologist assigned to it? Even after the encounter with the Wraith?”

“Ento-what?” Vala asked.

“Expert in the study of insects,” Spencer supplied. Vala’s knowledge and appreciation of Earth culture was somewhat patchy. Pretty good if it was covered in blockbuster movies, reality or talk shows, not so good otherwise. “Dr. Grissom is one of the foremost experts. There’s a lot of value in forensics for those with such a background, since insect predation and life cycles can accurately determine time of death and other factors in a crime scene.”

Grissom gave a smirk and commented, “What he said.”

Vala nodded. “And since the Wraith are half iratus bug, having an entomologist take a look might have been useful?”

“Might?” Grissom shot back, wry and irritated.

Spencer was beginning to wonder if introducing Grissom and McKay was such a good idea after all. But if the CSI team lead had found something, anything, to help them…

The Atlantis AI was, once again, very helpful in taking them to their desired destination.

As it happened, most of the Atlantis staff were in a meeting, brainstorming ways of fighting off the coming invasion. The conference room in the Control Tower upper deck was full to capacity, all with laptops in front of them, display screens all around, reminiscent to Spencer, at least, of a case briefing. He missed not seeing Garcia at the front, wielding her remote control.

Dr. McKay was up there instead, pacing, agitated, a high note in his stress-thinned voice that spoke to Spencer of desperation. “Power! That’s the problem, that’s *always* the problem! The Shield works, of course it does, and we can even get it to cover an entire planet, with automatically oscillating harmonics that will stop the culling beams getting through, or anything else even the most advanced Ori weapons can throw at it. We can even get a dozen of them, more, up and running to cover our allies, Serrakis, Langara, a few others. We’ve already got the little ones running, on Dakara, Chulak, the Tok’ra colony on Egeriash, anywhere the colonies are in one spot, a valley, a city, even a continent, huddled around their stargate, so all they need is a dome… those can run on half a dozen naquadah generators. Not a problem. But the planet-sized ones? Even with twenty of the Mark VI generators powering them, they won’t, they can’t, last more than a few hours under heavy bombardment. With a fully charged ZPM? Maybe a few weeks. That at least would give us a fighting chance against a full-on Wraith attack. But, here’s the thing…”
“We don’t have any fully charged ZPMs to spare,” sighed Richard Woolsey.

“That *would* be the problem, yes. We need three to keep Atlantis flying, one to power the Weapons Chair, one for each of our BC-304’s, and we’ll need every single one of those we’ve got, fully armed and powered. Sam managed to get a couple of the depleted ZPMs linked up so it can power up the Shield we have in place over Earth right now, but by the most generous estimates, they’ll burn out in just over an hour of heavy bombardment. So the choice is, what, or who, do we sacrifice, when the Wraith finally do show up in our solar system? Which ship do we shut down so Earth is protected?”

Spencer felt that this was a good time to break in, with everyone absorbing this depressing news and eager for a change of topic. “Sorry to interrupt, everyone, but Dr. Grissom needed to consult with Dr. McKay,” Spencer began, prepared to make introductions.

To be short-circuited by McKay. “Consult with me? Why? You’re a Las Vegas cop, right?”

“Forensics expert, technically. And an entomologist. An expert in insects,” Grissom took over for himself. “Which is what the Wraith are, human DNA notwithstanding. Their behavior, morphology, biology, all say insect. And you’ve never had an actual entomologist take a look at your research on them. I’ve spent the last… well, since I got here, going over everything you have on them. And I think I know a way to destroy them.”

Although many had seemed impatient and offended at the interruption before this, that caught everyone’s attention. While everyone else was frozen, Colonel John Sheppard offered a chair and a laptop, already logged onto the Atlantis systems.

“Welcome to the party, then, Dr. Grissom. You have the floor.”

Spencer remembered that his Invasion night team-mate was the team lead and director of the Night Shift at the Las Vegas Crime Labs. He knew how to run a briefing, and was not in the least intimidated by this crowd. Vala and Spencer backed to a wall to prop it up, too curious to leave now, joined by Sheppard, who had yielded his chair.

At the head was Expedition Leader Richard Woolsey, a civilian political appointee of POTUS. Next to him was McKay, the CSO, around the table the various department heads and senior military. Among them, the ones Spencer had been introduced to, Dr. Keller and Dr. Carson Beckett (actually a clone, Spencer had been told!), the two majors who had led the rescue of his mom, Evan Lorne and Anne Teldy, the wild-haired Czech scientist, Dr. Radek Zelenka.

What Spencer hadn’t expected, was to see Ronon Dex in the corner, slouching and glowering, with a huge green tiger sprawled on the floor before him. A tiger no one else, apparently, could see. Spencer met the big man’s oddly light honey-colored eyes, and got a smirk. Not exactly an acknowledgement. Spencer, his mom and Teyla hadn’t told anyone of their visit to the spirit plane, but the profiler doubted the Athosian shaman kept any secrets from her sentinel.

There were other smoky shapes forming in the room… a polar bear behind McKay, a stag of some kind behind Dr. Beckett… reminding Spencer briefly of another Scottish medical man he had met recently, the gentle Ducky Mallard. And on Sheppard’s shoulder, an eagle, still too nebulous to tell if it was a golden, or a bald. Either might suit the man. Ronon saw them all, too.

Dr. Grissom had his own ghostly companion. A death’s head moth on his shoulder, or so Spencer guessed from the striking pattern on its flattened wings.

“Okay. I assume you all know a little about the Wraith already. Their genetic structure is only about
forty percent human… which shouldn’t even be possible, but what the hell would I know, when I only met aliens for the first time less than two months ago. But the research you’ve already done on them so far, from what I’ve seen, seems to concentrate on the human parts. Not the iratus. So I looked at what little you had on the iratus bug…”

Spencer felt Sheppard stiffen beside him, and looked at the military commander in concern. He had seen video clips of this man being fed on by a blue bug attached to his neck… and another even more disturbing, of him turning into something blue and inhuman.

“Every sample you’ve collected, from several different planets all over Pegasus, show these creatures are identical. Their DNA structure, 35 chromosome pairs, except for the 35th chromosome pair, which determines sex, queen, male drone or sexless soldier, is absolutely identical. No variation at all, not over planets, different nests and swarms, different time frames. And they are also identical to all of the samples in the Atlantis database, from tens of thousands of years ago. There is no living thing on Earth that resistant to random mutation, or that immune to even the occasional replication errors in cell division. These things do not change. They haven’t changed in thousands, maybe millions of years, and even isolated and under different environmental pressures, they remain unchanged. That just doesn’t happen on Earth. Variation in species, random mutations and evolutionary pressure… even cockroaches, *virtually* unchanged in almost 400 million years, have varied into thousands of sub-species over time. But, like cockroaches, the iratus is hardy over any terrain and environment.”

“Not to mention immortal,” McKay muttered.

“Actually, cockroaches aren’t,” Grissom corrected. “That’s an urban myth. They typically live one year, but can go a month of more without feeding, and portions of them can survive amputation, for a few hours. I don’t know about iratus, but I know from personal experience that the Wraith are dammed hard to kill. But if their food source is the life energy of other living beings, I would imagine that iratus colonies would have to have a plentiful supply nearby for them to survive.”

Ronon suddenly came out of his glower to contribute. Spencer was just as glad, because he was reluctant to talk about listening in on the Queens. “The Wraith left Pegasus because of the Hoffan plague. Nothing back home they can safely eat any more.” In spite of all of their adventures in Pegasus, and John Sheppard’s close encounters in particular, with iratus, and his weird non-friendship with the Wraith he called Todd, Ronon was the one among them with the most intimate knowledge of the enemy and their behavior. Everyone in the room (except, possibly, Dr. Grissom) knew and respected that. “They can put their drones and soldiers into hibernation, but even so, their bodies continue to draw on whatever internal resources they have… if not energy reserves from feeding, then their own internal organs. Some die in hibernation, having eaten themselves to death, if not properly fed before going into stasis.”

“Okay…” Grissom acknowledged, shifting uncomfortably. “Creepy, but okay. So. Species variation is actually a good thing. It means when an infectious disease hits, or an environmental catastrophe, at least some of a population will be different enough to escape or survive. So this tells us that very few diseases or catastrophes are serious enough to seriously dent the iratus populations.

“On Earth, insects can have anywhere from the male Jack Jumper ant with 1 chromosome, the lowest possible number in the animal kingdom, to the Atlas Blue butterfly with 448 to 452 chromosomes. Humans, by the by, have 46, 24 pairs, with the 24th being the sex determining pair, XX or XY. So much for human superiority. Now, however the Wraith may have originated, matching a human’s 24 with the iratus 35 chromosome pairs, should not have been possible, and even if it was, shouldn’t have proved fertile, or even if it was, bred true. I’ve seen reports speculating that the Wraith are a result of an iratus victim surviving with compromised mutated genetic structure,
but that’s… well, that’s absolute garbage. These things were deliberately designed in someone’s lab. I’m betting right downstairs in Atlantis, because I’ve seen the equipment for myself.”


“You know why,” Grissom retorted grimly. “A Wraith lives virtually forever, as long as it can feed. It’s virtually indestructible and regenerates almost instantly. And it does not change. No matter how much time is elapsed, it does not change. Not in itself, and not generation to generation. Whatever small amount of diversity you see between Wraith individuals, is due to their human DNA, not their iratus. Those are qualities a sufficiently desperate plague carrier might want for themselves, don’t you think? No matter the cost.”

Spencer felt sick to his stomach. “The Ancients made them. They were looking for immortality, a way to survive the plague that forced them to flee to Pegasus in the first place. The media kept calling the Wraith space vampires. And like our myths of the vampire… there’s a seductive allure about living forever. Even if it means losing your humanity, losing the light, and killing others to feed.”

Grissom gave a shudder, then went on with his briefing. “With so little variation and change, the telepathic links you’ve reported in the Wraith make a certain amount of sense. If there’s an alien Sci-Fi way to link minds, then being identical can only help. Telepathy is probably a perfectly natural side-effect. Now, let’s talk about the retro-virus you guys experimented with, to try and turn the Wraith human.”

Dr. Beckett cringed at that. Enough that even Dr. Grissom noticed the reaction, and he was a little clue resistant with the people around him, when they weren’t witnesses or perps, Spencer had noted. “I realize that it was another version of you who created the retro-virus, doctor. The difference has been explained to me. But the fact that you and your… other, were medical doctors and geneticists, and not entomologists, means you didn’t realize the implications of what you were trying to do.

“So. You’ve got a bug that is damn near a clone of every other bug in its species… sorry, but it’s true. With zero variation, they are all clones, perfect copies of the parent organism. In fact, from what I’ve seen, the sex-less soldiers are haploid, reproduced by parthenogenesis… the Queen spawns them with no male paternal contribution needed to fertilize her eggs. The few drones do have a paternal contribution, but they are rare. Queen eggs are even rarer, for obvious biological reasons. Queens are in direct competition with each other, so one only is spawned at a time, and only when the colony is under stress due to over-population or lack of resources, so that the colony can divide and the new Queen can take her swarm somewhere else to form a new colony with better resources and an improved chance at survival, allowed by the senior Queen because it also takes stress off the core swarm. These facts apply equally to both the iratus and the Wraith.

“What your retro-virus was designed to do was to suppress the iratus DNA, sixty percent of the creature’s genetic make-up, and by far the most stable and strongest portion. There was no way that could ever have worked, certainly not for very long. Iratus DNA is persistent, recovers quickly, replicates perfectly in all cells… you can’t just suppress it for long. But once you did, the human DNA re-asserted itself, and that *is* subject to mutation and copy errors in cell division. In fact, in an infected Wraith, the rate of change was exponentially higher, as the human cells went into massive meiosis, to try and keep down the iratus, and out-proliferate it. In normal humans, some might call that cancerous growth, out of control.

“So, when the iratus portion of your infected Wraith finally re-established itself, although it had not changed, the human portions definitely had. The creature it reverted to was no longer the same
Wraith. No un-infected Wraith would ever have recognized it, or acknowledged it as kin. It wasn’t. Not any more.”

Sheppard practically squirmed, as did Beckett and McKay. The military CO muttered, “Well, that certainly explains Michael.”

Grissom nodded. “Once he reverted, he was a hybrid, not a Wraith. Yes, the human DNA was stronger, but not enough to ever overcome the iratus.”

Those in the room who had taken part in the Michael experiment, to their great regret, contemplated their multiple failures. Ronon glowered even harder in his corner, while his tiger growled an ‘I told you so’ rumble.

“Now, here’s where all of this becomes important, and why you should have had an entomologist on board to tell you this stuff.

“The easiest, best, most ecologically efficient way to control any insect pest isn’t with pesticides or poisons, it’s with pheromone control. Interfere with their species recognition, their mating habits, their reproduction cycle, their hunting instinct and communication of food location, all dependent upon pheromone cues, and you can control their population. The iratus, and the Wraith, are no different from any terrestrial insect in these respects. Sure, a Wraith Queen may control her Hive and her swarm with telepathy, but the drones and soldiers under her? They communicate health, well-being, belonging, hierarchy, obedience, to hive and queen, with pheromones.

“Now, there’s one guy, his notes are in the Atlantis database on the iratus research, a scientist named Janus,” and Grissom totally ignored the groans coming from the military, and the perked interest in McKay and Zelenka, “who thinks he had a pheromone-based weapon that would work on the Wraith. Now, okay, his research wasn’t complete. He needed a mechanism for driving the iratus genetic structure back for a bit, just long enough for his own weapon to work… He never had a chance to quite work that one out. But you have that now. The retro-virus.

“Phase one, we create an aerosol version of the retro-virus, beam it on board the Hives with those nifty Star Trek beams you’ve got… even if it isn’t as effective or last as long as the original intravenous delivery… we only need it to work for a little while, to create a dis-connect between the Wraith and their normal biological operation.

“Phase two, before the iratus DNA has a chance to re-assert, we beam in the pheromone weapon on them. By the time their iratus nature is dominant once more, their biology has already been altered to hybrids of what they used to be, and Wraith are instinctively programmed to treat anything in the hive they don’t recognize as invader enemy, or food. The Janus weapon will give the command to attack every stranger enemy they encounter. With their whole behavior base totally screwed, and they’ll start destroying each other.

“And we’ll need a distraction… to keep the Hive Queen busy while the retro-virus and weapon do their thing… because she can still override any command in the Hive with her own pheromones, keep them from freaking out with her telepathic control.”

Spencer glanced at Ronon, who was beginning to smile, all feral and teeth, not unlike his tiger, chuffing at his feet.

“Think I may know of a way to do that,” the Satedan drawled. “Think Dr. Reid can help me on that. And Teyla, and Diana.”

“Wow,” Sheppard commented, with the beginning of a wide, shit-eating grin. “Well damn, sounds
like a plan. McKay, you’re going to have to eat every unkind thing you’ve ever said about biologists.”

Blinking wide-eyed in shock at the CSI, McKay could only nod. Until he shook himself and, like persistent iratus DNA, re-asserted himself as the boss of his kingdom. “All right, people. We obviously have a lot to do, and not a lot of time to do it. Radek? Carson? Let’s go see these Janus notes Dr. Grissom has found.”

Zelenka shook his head as he patted the CSI on the back, towing him along behind McKay. “I believe you should be honored. It was a year before he could remember my name…”

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Some days later…

The Aschen High Advisory Council sat in appalled silence, as a being who had only *looked* Aschen was divested of a small curious chest-pack device, and his form shimmered into another, quite different, resembling a seven-foot tall insect with two legs and chitinous carapace. It hissed and squeaked in its native tongue, and the guard slapped the device back in place, so he morphed back into the shape of one of their fleet captains.

“—dead! All of them!”

“Repeat your message,” one of the guards commanded, nudging him with a toe.

“The Qui!tlix swarms are dead, all of them! Only those few of us in covert infiltration teams remain… the ships appeared out of nowhere, out of the depths of void between galaxies. It is even as the Tau’ri warned. The Wraith are here!”

The Council exchanged wary gazes. “You are certain they are the Wraith?”

“It was the Wraith Queen of Queens herself who questioned our fleet commander. I know, because Our Mind is a Hive Mind, One Mind. It was the Wraith Queen of Queens who invaded his mind, stole all he knew of humans in this galaxy, and then attempted to feed upon him… such pain! But we are not their food, and so they have destroyed us as useless. Our technology is vastly superior to theirs, but they came and came and came! There is no end to them! Our home world is gone. Our colonies are gone. Only the one ship remains to us, but it is even now under siege, and when it is gone, we drones will die as well. Avenge us! Avenge us, or die yourselves!”

With that, the being screamed, and burst apart, into a scattering of hard shell shards and green ooze, its camouflage device left in a heap in the center of the mess.

The guard reported, “These beings had infested one of our ships, set up a kind of conversion lab, to put our crew in a hibernation of sorts, so they could walk about with these devices, pretending to be us. As far as we know, it was just that one ship infected… but, Councilors, we have lost contact with several ships and two colonies in the past few days. All of them in the fourth sector, the same region of space where we believe these… insect things infiltrated our ship.”

“Contact our Admirals—” one Councilor began, only to have an emergency communication interrupt, a hologram appearing in the center of Chambers.

“I, Admiral Vycodar of the third Fleet, send urgent word to the Council. We are under attack. A fleet of immense numbers has engaged us in the fifth sector. Our ships are vastly superior, but their numbers… I estimate well over a thousand base ships in this engagement alone, with limitless numbers of smaller fighter craft. We are overwhelmed. We will hold as long as we can, but we are at
best an annoyance. Their target is the colony of Jarro. They have already hit two other of our colonies in this sector, and no one is left. Not one life. I believe these to be the Wraith. We were warned. We did not listen. Even if we assemble all the fleets, we are no match for these numbers. If they need to feed upon human or near-human lives, our zero-population colonies hold too few to satisfy even a small number of them. They are headed straight for the heart of the Aschen Federation, and at this rate, they will be there in days. I can only suggest we evacuate. But I know not where we can go that would be safe."

There were shadows behind and around the Admiral, as the echoes of voices called fearfully for his command. He turned, his eyes widened in horror, and then the transmission ended abruptly. Attempts to re-establish failed.

“I cannot… I cannot believe our technology is so ineffectual! Summon the Fleet. Summon our armies, and our scientists. Everyone must unite to combat this threat!”

“And if the best we can do should fail?”

“Dial Earth, call for their help! They know of this enemy,” cried out one Councilor. “We still have the Tau’ri Ambassador, Joseph Faxon. They will not open their iris to us, but we can send him to their allies, the Tok’ra. Offer anything for their assistance. Returning their Ambassador alive and whole will be an earnest of our good faith. They know this threat. They have Atlantis, and Asgard ships. This is their problem and they must deal with it!”

“And in the meantime?”

The Council had no answers.

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Jack O’Neill clasped arms with Master Bra’tac, grinning at the venerable jaffa warrior. “How goes it, old man?”

“We live free, human. And with you?”

“Ah, so-so. We live free, but we’re expecting visitors any day now. You got your shield up and running? Any problems?”

“As with all SamanthaCarter’s inventions, it works better than hoped, and we have sufficient naquadah to supply back-up generators if the first should fail.”

“Carter will be glad to hear that. What about your patrols on the Rim? Got any word for us yet?”

Bra’tac shook his head. “We have all allies watching their skies. The Tok’ra are still proving elusive. The Lucian Alliance is all but gone, thanks to your work, and at our last report only Pel’k remains with any strength… haataka!”

Jack winced. “That bad, hunh?”

“Too many jaffa have been seduced by his promises of power. No better than the Goa’uld themselves. We hear daily of more worlds who have fallen for his blandishments, and more who have discovered, to their cost, how little his promises are worth. Other powers hold back, neutral, thinking that eventually, the time will come when Pel’k, flush with his own inflated arrogance, will take on Tau’ri, and then no one will have to worry about him again.”

Jack sighed. “Yeah, well, we should have taken out all of the Lucian Alliance when we realized they
were going to be a problem. Unfortunately, we kinda had our hands full with the Ori at the time. But we’ve put a good dent in them lately.”

“The Free Jaffa pledge our support, with the remainder, and with the Wraith. They are coming?”

“You know all about the advance invasion force in this galaxy a while ago. We defeated them, but that was just six hives with support vessels… If they come in full force, as we believe they will… How lucky have we ever been, old friend?”

Bra’tac clapped Jack hard on the back. “Lucky enough to still be alive, human!”

Before they reached the jaffa city, Rak’nor jogged up with several warriors, escorting a small party of Tok’ra. Malek was in the lead. Jack hadn’t seen the guy for years, but at the end, after Jacob Carter’s (and Selmak’s) death, he had been one of the more reasonable on the Tok’ra Council. And there was one more familiar face in the party that made Jack stop and stare.

“Ambassador Faxon?” he gasped. The man looked no different from the last Jack had seen of him, years ago, on an Aschen ship, attempting to negotiate a treaty with aliens who were slowly killing all of their allies with zero population growth, in order to inherit and control their territories.

Malek held up a hand, looking grave. “We must meet, Master Bra’tac, General O’Neill. The feared-of day has come. Wraith attack this Galaxy. And they have come in unheard-of numbers.”

“So, Stanley, bubula, how do you like your new temporary digs?” Lieutenant General Jack O’Neill (still with two ‘L’s) asked with a huge grin and jovial manner.

Just for this special occasion, Jack had the SGC brig tailored for their captive Trust terrorists. Everyone identified from the Bunker Thirteen surveillance and sign-in logs (everyone HWS had managed to get to first, anyway), everyone they could prove aided and abetted, including those who provided signatures and/or faked evidence (again, everyone HWS had managed to get to first), plus members of the sweeper teams they had found, after failed missions, at raided bases and labs, etc. (yeah, any HWS got to first, at least). Of the seven de-goa’ulded hosts they had taken into custody, including Ms Charlotte Gant, four seemed to have been Trust before their alien possession gig, so there was no getting out of it for them. And even the remaining three, Gant and two others, were on a pending list… pending more investigation, to see how deep their bad acts ran.

Ex-Senator Ulysses Stahl, ex-Congressman Jason Klein, ex-NID Assistant Director Benjamin Gaffney, ex-General Aubrey Evans, along with a bunch of other ex’s from government and Pentagon positions, ex-military personnel Vincent Hoskins (AKA William Matthews), Thomas Bruner (the guy in charge of the team kidnapping little kids in Las Vegas), and that guy NCIS turned over to them, what’s-his-name... Jack didn’t actually care. And the most recent additions to the company, Stanley Bradshaw, Major ‘Scarface’, and dear old Dr. Kavanagh, everyone’s least favourite geek. Oh yeah, they were all here. Waiting.

Oh yeah, and a woman calling herself ‘Miss Smith’… that had been something of a shock to Jack, when she was brought back with Bradshaw and Scarface.

“Oh, hey, Kerry. I see you got yourself a new job. Tired of working for the CIA? Did you bother to deliver them your resignation first? You were supposed to be hunting down Trust and Trust sympathizers for them, last I heard. Get a little confused about whose side you’re supposed to be on?”
Kerry Johnson stepped to the bars, to smirk at the General. “Still sore that I dumped your ass, Jack?”

“Hey, no, I don’t hold grudges, you should know that. I may be petty about traitors to Earth, but I don’t hold grudges. Teal’c, on the other hand…”

The big Jaffa cracked his knuckles as he glowered at the woman, and she prudently backed well out of the way.

There were forty three prisoners in a rather small barracks room… co-ed, with one commode out in the open, one sink, one (small) table with two bench seats, and forty two bunk beds supplied, because yes, Jack felt just that petty about the bastards whom were willing to betray the planet for personal gain.

No one was even pretending to try and keep the prisoners isolated, because no one really cared if they ‘got their stories straight’ or not, at this point. Thing was, everyone knew the cell was under total surveillance 24/7, full video and audio… and none of their guests were talking. At all. Well, past the first hour or so, when there had been a fair amount of the blame-game going around.

Master Teal’c of Chulak had stuck around, just for this, and loomed at Jack’s shoulder, while an SF brought in a comfy chair for the HWS general.

“So, guys, here’s the deal. For the first time in, like, the history of forever, the Congress and Senate of the United States of America, the White House, Judiciary, Pentagon and all the Secretaries, not to mention the entire IOA and the United Nations Security Council, have all agreed, unanimously, to let me have my wicked way with the lot of you. And that was *after* I told them my top four plans for dealing justice. And yes, hurling you one by one out of an airlock on one of our ships was number one. Number two was to use that stargate address for Hadante I keep in my back pocket for emergencies. Now, all of you being so well-informed by your moles, you all know about Hadante, right? Bunch of underground caves, only way in or out is the one-way-only stargate, the Taldor fills it up with murderers and rapists and what-not, with daily shipments of gruel they catch in a trough… and no matter how many prisoners they get in, there’s never any more or less gruel sent in? I’ll let you fill in the blanks on what might happen if they suddenly get forty-three new residents. You might have noticed that we’ve re-located you to the SGC… just to be handy to the gate. Option Number three, and my personal favorite, is to beam all of you to the first Wraith Hive ship to show up in our solar system. Now there’s justice, because you guys are the reason they know exactly where to come.”

“I am partial to that solution myself, O’Neill,” Teal’c observed in his low rumble, cracking his knuckles.

“Indeed,” Jack agreed readily.

Stanley Bradshaw moved to the front of the cell to face off against the HWS general. The man bore a smug grin.

“Come off it, O’Neill. You’re not going to do any of those things. Not a boy scout like you. So what’s the fourth option?”

“Oh, well, since you mentioned the Scouts, you’re going to like this one. We’re sending you all on a little camping expedition. The Goa’uld Heru’er had a mining operation set up on a nice little planet, until the naquadah veins tapped out, when he abandoned the site. Pyramid with jaffa barracks, little village next door for the slave labor… all torn down to the studs when he left, but hey, it’s shelter. Fresh water, fish in their ponds, game in the forests, large herds of grazing… things near by. A few feral chickens and goats running around. Oh, predators too, of course… thirty-six hour days, seven
hundred ninety nine day year, orbit’s a bit… eccentric, so long hot summers with drought conditions, and brutal long winters of extreme cold… but livable. Barely. Now, once we get you settled in, we’re going to take a page out of the Pegasus handbook, and remove the stargate, placing it in orbit. Instant space-gate. Easy for us to dial in and monitor your progress, but no way you’re leaving that way. You bunch of power-hungry bastards want to run a planet? Be my guest.”

When O’Neill prepared to get out of his chair, Bradshaw glanced back at his confederates, crowding in around him. “Wait a minute. What’s the catch?”

“Well, this is a negotiating ploy, right? You’re looking to get us to agree to something, confess, give something up… We get a commuted sentence if we go along, right?”

“Nope,” O’Neill denied cheerfully. “You got nothing left, any of you. And if, perchance, you did… well. We *might* be able to offer you a few things. You watch that ‘Survivor’ reality show? Fishing gear, blankets, flints for making fire… maybe a few donuts to take with you… it all depends entirely on my good will. And right now, you got nothing to bargain with.”

Jack really liked that Colombo move… just when your opponent thinks you’re leaving… he used it again, almost getting to the exit door at the guard post when he turned around and snapped his fingers. “Oh, but wait, maybe you do have something, Stan. When we broke into your nifty little hidden tel’tac… oh, didn’t the rest of you schmucks know he had a tel’tac hidden away at his cottage in the Hamptons? Yeah, nice little ship, hold full of ill-gotten loot. Including two fully charged ZPMs. Just out of curiosity, where did you get them, Stan?”

Bradshaw looked stubborn, even as he felt the hostile reactions bristling from those around him.

“Uh hunh. Well, we got no immediate plans for shipping you out to your new home. Too busy getting ready for the next invasion. So when it comes, you guys are going to be at risk, right next to the rest of us. Not to mention... Any of you people got relatives you’ll be leaving behind here on Earth? Yeah? Too bad.”

“Games,” Stahl complained. “Not through playing games, O’Neill?”

“Well, well, I got good news and bad news. First the good news. Two of our galactic enemies have bit the dust in the past two weeks. One was those insect guys who had the shape-shifting devices on their chests… you read about them, Stahl? Have your buddy there tell you, Major Smith… or should I say Major Hubert Drew? You worked for Colonel Simmons at one point, didn’t you, Hubert? In case you missed that briefing, Simmons stole a couple of those camouflage devices at one point to frame me for an assassination plot. Such as it was.” Jack sniffed, and there was a lurking gleam of amusement as Drew stiffened at the reminder of yet another failure to gain a significant toe-hold on the SGC. “Yeah, well, seems their home planet, colonies and entire fleet got taken out. In, like, three days. Not one of them left. So, good news. Oh, and the Aschen are gone too. All of them. Not just the home planet, but all of their colony worlds and ally planets are also deserted. Not one man, woman or child left on something like twenty star systems. And all this happened inside of two weeks. Not bad work. One, no two, less worries, hunh? Should make us all glad.

“Now for the bad news. It was one fleet took both these empires down, in the space of two weeks. Both had superior tech and impressive war-fleets of their own, but it didn’t do them a lick of good. Not when they were faced with overwhelming numbers. One fleet with thousands of ships. The Wraith are in the Milky Way Galaxy, gentlemen. Near as we can tell, they brought their *entire* fleet with them. Every single Wraith in Pegasus has now come here, and they’re fucking starving. They couldn’t eat the bugs, and the Aschen like – sorry, lik-*ed* - to keep their population numbers
down. So the Wraith have already begun spreading, like the locusts they are. Sounds like fun, doesn’t it? I gotta tell ya, Stan, you picked a real bad time to experiment with Goa’uld-ded Wraith. According to Kavanagh’s lab notes, the Goa’uld symbiote can’t take over the host body, but the Wraith does get the benefit of a stronger body, better healing, like they needed that, and increased ability to mind-whammy the humans around him. Ask Hoskins what happened when one of these guys broke out and dialed home.”

Bradshaw eyed the other man with suspicion. “You wouldn’t be trying to kid a kidder, would you, O’Neill?”

“Who, me? Why should I bother? There’s millions, maybe even billions of Wraith in that fleet, Stan, and every one of them will be starving for fresh meat. That’s us, by the way. And since they’ve already gorged their way through the Aschen, and they’ve got, like, these gnarly psychic powers for reading minds, they’ll know everything the Aschen did… exactly where all the biggest feeding grounds are in this neck of the woods. Now, sure, Earth has the biggest human population of any world in this galaxy, but why worry about that? There’s a couple of dozen planets between you and the Aschen territories, a couple of million people, maybe… one of those worlds is Langara by the by… That may be enough to slow them down. Which means we’ve got… oh… a couple of weeks. Maybe. Now, our tech gurus, led by Carter and McKay, have come up with a neato shield we can use to wrap the planet in. That should keep them at bay for a while. Lucky for you, don’t you think? Oh, you might want to do a little review of exactly what’s coming at us, by remembering that footage we have of John Sheppard being fed on, over and over again. Hubert, you kept a copy for your personal use, right?”

“Subtle, O’Neill,” Stan sighed. “So, is this just a heads up, or did you have something you wanted to talk about?”

Jack shrugged. “Already asked, and you didn’t want to play. Because that planetary shield I was telling you about? The only thing that will power it for more than an hour at a time? ZPMs. We either dismantle one of our few ships, the Outpost Weapons Chair, Atlantis… or we get more ZPMs from somewhere. Where, oh where, would that be?”

Stahl snarled and gave Bradshaw a whack to the back of the head. “I’ve got children and grandchildren on this fucking rock, you bastard. Tell him!”

“Zebra unit. Our off-world team. Such as it is, all two of them, and we lost contact with them a week ago. But they found a cache of them… Five more full ones, two partial… picked up from an Ancient site we think was their re-charging facility. Got them stashed at their base. We never managed to get them a ship to bring them home. But I’ve got the base stargate address for the base…and the re-charging facility.”

“And that, my friends, gets you a flint and fishing gear for your very own ‘Survivor’ episode. Maybe, if the rest of us ‘survive’ and I’m feeling generous, a dozen blankets you can fight over.”

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Sheppard was at the front of the hastily-convened meeting in the conference room, giving a report. “… and when SGC teams went to check out the off-world base the Trust Zebra team was using, they found all sorts of interesting items… including five full and two more half-full ZPMs. That means we have seven full ones altogether.”

This caused general jubilation all around.

Dr. McKay himself looked on the verge of swooning with relief. “Oh thank God. That means we
can fully power the Antarctic Outpost weapons chair, all the fleet, *and* us, along with the Shield Generator we set up around Earth, and a few left over to supply as many of our allies as we can before the Wraith get here. We have no idea if they’ll be making any… ‘fueling’ stops before they come straight for us.”

“Better than that, McKay,” Sheppard grinned at him. “for when we have the time… We have the address of the Alteran ZPM re-charging facility.”

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The massive fleet of the Wraith fell out of hyperspace just beyond the Oort cloud, the outer limit of the solar system, and began to spread out in a net that was both chaotic-seeming, and ordered. As huge as the fleet was, it was not big enough to surround the solar system, and that was not their intention. They knew from the food they had already harvested on the Rim that the Earth defenses were nowhere near large enough to keep them at bay. The intention of the Queen-of-Queens, undisputed leader of the Swarm, was to let their puny number of ships come to her, and let her sisters pick them apart, as a sort of appetizer. Only when every defender ship was destroyed, all their crews eaten, would she surround and lay siege to their tiny blue world. She would give them ample time to contemplate and fully appreciate their fate, maybe even allow them some little hope of a miraculous rescue, before she finally gave the word for her sisters and their sons to gorge their fill.

This was how Queen-Who-Destroyed-Sateda had done her work. It was a most satisfying strategy, and highly favored among her sisters.

Ah, the delicious spice of terror.

For now, they would create a wide net and slowly sweep in, dispersed enough to be able to overwhelm any defender attempting to approach. Only the few on the fringe of the net, youngest Queens of lowest rank, would be susceptible to attack by flanking enemy. The Queen-of-Queens had made certain to post Queen Newest-of-Granddaughters on this vulnerable verge. Young though she be, this one was too astute, and with but a little experience, a little confidence, or perhaps an unhealthy degree of desperation, might threaten the hierarchy, and challenge the Queen-of-Queens herself, one day. Best the young one not survive the early skirmishes in this, the last war the Wraith would ever need to fight.

For the rest, they would take their time, allow the opposition time to group and attack… for all the good it would do them. The waiting herds upon their target world would have much opportunity to dwell on the horrors to come. Days, or, better yet, weeks of delectable anticipation.

The Queen-of-Queens and her advisors had guessed that the humans would hold Atlantis herself in reserve until the last, hoping their other ships would soften the Wraith Fleet. That was what they hoped, at least, for only with a full fleet against that one last source of defense, would the Swarm dare to attack the great city of the Enemy.

When they finally approached Earth itself, they would lay siege in classic style, surrounding the planet, at least one hive ship visible from every spot on the small world’s surface. It would be an old-fashioned siege.

But the planet Earth had stood alone and self-sufficient (or thought they had) for all but the last ten or so years of its recorded history. It wasn’t as if the Wraith could starve them out. Quite the opposite, in fact. And the very few planets and ships they had run across so far hadn’t even begun to whet their enormous and pressing appetites.

The Queen-of-Queens gave permission, one ship at a time, for the Hives to disappear, bound for
other feeding grounds they had taken care to discover from the Aschen and the Lucians. There 
would not be time or opportunity for all to adequately feed or stuff their empty larders, but her 
chosen few would go into this battle fully strengthened. She would not confess, though she certainly 
thought it, that having the ranks of her sisters thinned out a bit would be all to the good. (There was 
no way she could know that her thoughts paralleled other less-than-honorable minds, among the 
despised food, and she had little notion of the concept, Darwinism in action.)

Once the Swarm was positioned and moving to her specifications, the Queen-of-Queens herself 
dropped out of the Swarm to tend to her own Hive’s needs. She aimed for a planet called Langara 
with a vanguard of ships in support, having high hopes of its teeming millions. According to 
intelligence, this was one of the more heavily populated worlds in this galaxy, after only Earth itself.

However, as she arrived, she found a small fleet in orbit, armed with strangely effective weapons, 
and invulnerable to her own weapons array. Their strange shields possessed harmonics her weapons 
and culling beams could not pierce. She disgorged her dart squadrons to strafe the planet’s 
atmosphere, to sweep up as much food into their buffers as possible… but not one, not even one dart 
went unchallenged by a variety of other small craft, and, it now seemed, there was some kind of 
force shield protecting the planet, just above the troposphere. Only now growing alarmed at the 
resistance, she gave the order to retreat, hoping to re-group and attack anew when she knew more of 
these oddly advanced space-crafts. But they soon closed in on her, and when, in desperation now, 
she attempted to engage these ships in battle, she found them turning on her…

The Queen-of-Queens was dead. Her Hive, and the support craft that had gone with her, were all 
shattered and dead, mere dust in space. The roar of her furious mind as she died thundered across the 
blue plane of the Wraith telepathic links. Another Queen rose to her vacated position, but a shudder 
was already working through the entire race. More hives were sent to avenge her, but they, too, were 
met with implacable resistance. If these were the ships of the missing Earth fleet (for they knew that 
the Lucian ships were enemies of Earth, not its expected guardians) then why were they not fighting 
for their own world? Why waste time with these lesser populations? Could it be they were… 
waiting?

Well, if Earth’s ships were not here to guard her, the Wraith could at least ensure they had no 
opportunity to break through the blockade to come to her aid.

The new Queen-of-Queens ordered a communication channel opened to the leadership of Earth, its 
radio bands bristling with attempts to contact. It took time to sort through all the clutter to find the one 
she desired.

“I am Henry Hayes, President of the United States of America. To whom am I speaking?”

The Queen-of-Queens sneered at such presumption. As if she cared what food wished to name itself. 
There was only one thing this creature had that she wanted.

“Where is Sheppard? Where is Daniel Jackson? Where are the Destroyers of Worlds?”

Chapter End Notes
To any real entomologists out there, my abject apologies for the wibbly-wobbly hand-wavy pseudo-science, but I freely confess I am a wuss who lacks the dedication and commitment to get a degree in bugs in order to come up with Gil Grissom’s brilliant insight into how to defeat the Wraith. In my defense… the Wraith aren’t ACTUALLY real (so we can all sleep sounder in our beds). I figure I can kill ‘em off any way I want, as long as it’s marginally credible. Also, thanks to 5kmtkb, who asked ‘who is Miss Smith, really?’ Coming down to the wire…
Chapter Notes

Ref to SG-1 episode 9-15-Ethon (Tegalas).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~ *Two possibilities exist: Either we are alone in the Universe or we are not. Both are equally terrifying.* ~ Arthur C. Clarke, as quoted in Visions : How Science Will Revolutionize the Twenty-First Century (1999) by Michio Kaku ~

No one was prepared for the sheer size of the Swarm approaching the First World. Any half-assed estimates they might have made from their knowledge of Wraith biology or the reports from Pegasus, had been hedged on the conservative side, as was now all too obvious, perhaps because no one dared to even imagine such an awful fleet bearing down on their own planet. But now the stories of the fall of the Lanteans, the panic that had driven them to sink their prized city and run for home… not to mention the fate of Sateda… they made so much more sense now…

The final count was five thousand nine hundred seventy two Hive mother-ships, with at least two cruisers for every hive, and just the cruisers could be counted on containing as many as a thousand Wraiths in each. Every hive and cruiser held their own dart squadrons.

The Atlantis long-range scanners, and those from the rest of the Tau’ri fleet, were piped to various war rooms around the planet, along with stats on numbers, sizes, estimated crew compliments and support craft… In the face of such an appallingly unequal situation, there wasn’t a single politician, military expert, or support staff in any of those rooms who didn’t flash momentarily on Han Solo’s testy snap, “Never quote me the odds!”

As the larger hives spread out in a web across space, seemingly chaotic but with a certain order and symmetry to it, it was clear their coordinated efforts were being controlled by one being… the Queen-of-Queens. Gil Grissom wasn’t the only one to recognize the structure of the net they were weaving as the product of an insect-based intelligence… form following function, as the lines and arcs of a web fashioned itself out of individual vessels. It was a moving net that would sweep closer and closer to wrap itself around the Earth.

It seemed to the people on the blue planet, third from the sun, that there was no force that could possibly withstand the united attack of the entire Wraith race.

Where was Atlantis? Where was their own fleet? Who would come and save them, like the final act of any good sci-fi movie epic?

Atlantis had been deployed to wait, hidden, for now, from both the Earth and the approaching Wraith. Her sensors kept watch, not just on the enemy swarm, but on the arrival of more and more
ships, also taking hidden positions in the shadows of Jupiter, Saturn, and on the far side of the Sun.

John Sheppard had to admit, General O’Neill had gathered an impressive fleet of allies. Master Bra’tac lead the Free Jaffa, which was a force all on its own, with more than a hundred ha’taks, each holding a full complement of death gliders, each piloted by expert jaffa warriors, all of them panting at the bit to test themselves against the darts. The Tok’ra had emerged from hiding to join the galaxy in this battle for survival, and they had amassed quite a few ships from salvage themselves. The Serrakin, the Galarans, the Enkarans, the Gadmir, and half a dozen other space-voyaging races, had at last joined the fight, seeing the devastation the Wraith had already caused in just a few short weeks. And, surprise, even a remnant of the Tollan race, under the leadership of Narim, appeared out of the shadows, willing to help as well, with three spaceships that, while small, read off the charts in power.

Ships had been arriving in the Solar System bit by bit over the past few days, although a few had been shadowing whatever Wraith vessels ducked out of the Swarm… off on feeding forays. None of those ugly black hives ever returned. That was the ally mandate. Even one Wraith hive unaccounted for meant, not only the death of some world or colony, but the seed that could repopulate the entire race, if left to its own devices. That was not acceptable, to anyone.

But once an unidentified source dialed in to the Earth Stargate, they knew the Wraith were preparing to begin the real attack. No one knew where the Wraith had managed to get the Earth stargate address… not important, might have come from any number of sources, including the missing members of the Trust off-world Zebra team. The important thing was that the Titanium iris over the SGC gate held firm, the satisfying thunks from of countless Wraith soldiers hitting it not even stressing the iris in the least. With the Atlantis gate disabled to allow the SGC to take precedence, the Wraith were unable to get any troops through their Shields.

General O’Neill and his Tau’ri ship captains had beamed aboard Atlantis for a last command meeting. Five BC-304 deep space carriers and one abandoned, salvaged and reconditioned Asgard mother-ship made up the Tau’ri fleet. The *Daedalus* was commanded by Colonel Steven Caldwell, the *Odyssey* by Colonel Paul Emerson. Colonel Sunniva Ivanova commanded the *Gagarin*, replacement for the *Korolev*, lost in the Ori war. Colonel Abraham Ellis led the *Apollo*, Colonel Samantha Carter, having completed the work on the Earth Shield, was back at the helm of the *Hammond*, and the Asgard mother-ship *Valhalla*, once commanded by Aegir, now had Colonel Cameron Mitchell in the command chair.

“Yeah, we’ve got a plan, such as it is,” Jack reported once the conference call with all of the ally ships was linked into the Atlantis Command Conference room on the big screen. John Sheppard had his own command staff at the table as well. Jack continued, “Everyone who has tried to meet the Wraith head on and at full strength has been soundly defeated, overwhelmed by sheer numbers. The bugs, the Lucians, the Aschen, even the Ancient Lanteans… So we’re not going to do that. Until Phase one is ready to go, we’re trying the old Divide and Conquer, chipping away at the outside of their fleet, hoping to get it whittled down to something more manageable. Every one of our ships has superior tech to the Wraith, when taken in limited numbers. So we’ve been attacking the small groups of hives as they leave the Swarm to go hunting food, and we’ve been successful. We’re planning a few hit-and-run raids on the outer fringes of their main force, to draw small groups away for ambush. But we don’t expect them to fall for that tactic for long. Delay delay delay, guys. We’re a distraction for the main plan.

“The thing is, if the Wraith decide to try the tactic of firing all weapons on the Shield non-stop, they’re gonna wear it away, sooner rather than later, even with the back-up ZPMs we have. That’s what we have to prevent. Without the Shield, we’re toast.”
Jack O’Neill reviewed the telemetry from System Sol, and could only shake his head. It made his gut hurt. A favorite author had once written as the advice of a famous military tactician, “If your enemy has superior numbers and is entrenched in an impregnable fortress, see that he stays there.” Good advice. And Earth would be safe enough as long as the Shield held…

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On the city of the Ancients, preparation was feverish. The non-combatants had all been given a choice, of sitting out this final battle on Atlantis, or being beamed back to secure locations on Earth. Well, as secure as anyone would be, unless or until the Shield fell… and that was the rub. Most elected to stay with Atlantis.

Volunteers had been welcomed to the Infirmary, as first aid, triage, or even as brute-force stretcher bearers to handle the all-too-likely injuries. Savannah Hayes, as a doctor with plentiful Emergency Room experience, was given a place on the triage teams. Nick Stokes, Greg Sanders, Will LaMontagne and Aaron Hotchner were all drafted for the stretcher and fire brigades. Not that they expected actual fires, but any structural damage to the delicate towers might require teams to dig out the wounded caught beneath the rubble. Dave Rossi had been spending a lot of time with the military teams since he arrived, so was enough up to speed to be able to volunteer with the rail gun crews.

JJ, Garcia and Tara Lewis were all assisting with the Athosian elders, to corral and tend the children and youths too young to serve in other capacities. The best-protected areas were in the lower floors of the Control Tower, including the mess hall, where the kids were congregating. Torren, Jack and Henry were helping with the babies, including little Michael LaMontagne. This was important work, and the three boys were proud to be entrusted with it.

As the unofficial count-down progressed, Derek Morgan appeared briefly at the door of the infirmary, to snag his fiancé. “You take care, momma, right?”

Savannah smiled at him as he gave the round curve of her belly a fond pat. “We’ll be just fine. You watch out for yourself, Derek Morgan, and don’t worry about us.”

“Easy for you to say…” and with a last urgent kiss, he was gone to his own self-appointed battle station. He joined Teyla Emmagan at the nearest transporter chamber. He gave her a nod. “Say your good-byes?” he asked.

Teyla sighed. “Regretfully. We have been through too many sieges and too many battles just like this for him to be overly concerned this time.”

“That’s a good sign, right?”

Teyla smiled. “Assuredly. I believe my son was too caught up in his lessons in changing diapers to give much attention to me.”

Derek chuckled. “Maybe he can give me a lesson or two, when this is over.”

Teyla nodded. “When this is over.”

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Teyla had prepared a room in the Atlantis Command Tower, private, not too far from the Chair control room, lined with cushions and candles. In the centre, she gracefully sat herself in lotus, and beckoned her fellow shamans to join her, Diana on one side, Spencer on the other, all three holding hands. They closed their eyes, raised their heads to the stars only they could see, and sank into meditation. The solen, desert owl and desert squirrel faded out as well.
Vala, who would not be kept out, propped up a wall to one side, adjusting the comm link in her ear, listening in on the Atlantis command channels. She had dropped the bazooka-like weapon on the floor in front of her, but held a more reasonable hand weapon in a comfortable and experienced manner, unusually grim and serious, ready for anything.

In a shadow at the door stood Derek Morgan. Never in a million years would he confess that he had been having weird dreams, lately... of himself, inhabiting the huge grey shape of a bull elephant, circling a blue-tinted jungle glade full of wise men and women... including the Reids and Teyla. At his side was a big green tiger. Green? The color off because of the blue light in his dream? Oh yeah, he was going with that. Except that the big cat had the feel of Ronon Dex. And in the waking world, Dex kept eyeing him... and just before the battle was due to begin, had taken Derek aside.

“I gotta go protect Sheppard. The guy is a bit suicidal when it comes to running at the Wraith. I need to keep him safe and whole for this. So you watch our Guides. Right?”

There was only one answer to that request. “You got it, man. With my life.”

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In a loft apartment in Cascade, Washington, a similar scene was playing out.

When the Wraith Swarm had made itself known to all the peoples of Earth, panic had been rife... but then, gradually, people started to calm down. Everywhere, it seemed, men, women, young and old, in villages, towns and cities, came forward and spoke of confidence, of courage, of faith. Leaders with shadowy presences behind them, at their sides, or perched on their shoulders, reassured the populations that there was a Shield above their heads, and a fleet of heroes, led by the great and powerful city of Atlantis, protecting them. Many of these wise men and women had companions standing with them, men and women with sharp-eyed knowing looks, testing the air with flaring nostrils, watchful and alert.

Telecasts from various centers showed these leaders coming forward, speaking of calm.

Captain Simon Banks merely nodded grimly. If you’d had a front-row seat for watching a sentinel and guide in action for years, there was no missing other such pairs. He, like most of the planet, took the day off, making sure the Major Crimes squad was well represented, Joel Taggert in command, and went to assist his lead detective.

Jim hadn’t been at all surprised to see his captain and best friend show up at the loft.

“Sandburg’s at the center of this thing, right?”

Jim shrugged. “Him, and Ethan.”

“Yeah, that much I guessed. Well, anything you need, you got it.”

Jim sighed in relief. In the ‘cupboard under the stairs’, candles were lit, and Blair and Ethan were already deep in mental alpha rhythms.

“I think I need to be with them. Wherever the hell they are. But there’s no way I want to leave us all unprotected while I go ‘communing’ with them...”

There might have been a time when such a statement gave Simon a physical pain. But now... maybe, with all the alien stuff upstaging the sentinel crap, he was becoming inured to it all.

He settled himself on the sofa, picked up the TV remote, and settled his firearm on his lap.
“Go do what you gotta do, Jim. I’ll hold the fort against any vampire aliens that might show up. Oh… you got beer in the fridge?”

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Gil Grissom, and every biologist they had to spare from the Infirmary, were down in the manufacturing sectors of Atlantis, racing to produce as much retro-virus, and as much of the Janus Pheromone Weapon (people used to the military fondness for acronyms were calling it JPW for short, then some wag had decided JPOW sounded better…) as possible. Whatever amounts they had thought they might need had been blown out of the water by the actual numbers of Wraith they faced.

Although the first suggestion had been to beam each canister aboard the Wraith ships, that idea was just crazy-talk, and had died an early death. So now, the canisters were being loaded on drones. Each ‘delivery’ drone could be individually targeted, and deployed simultaneously, to preserve the element of surprise as long as possible, and make it all the more difficult for the queens to mount any kind of counter-measure.

But there weren’t enough drones, either. Not for defense, offense, as well as the Phase 1 & 2 parts of the battle plan. And each of the two hundred puddle jumpers each needed their own complement of drones as well.

Luckily, with the extra fully charged ZPMs they had gained, more sections of Atlantis had come alive and reported in. That included these manufacturing sections under a tower in the east pier. Equipment that hadn’t been used in ten thousand years had needed a bit of cleaning, oiling and basic maintenance to get it up to speed… well, more than a bit… but it was all now running full bore, watched by anxious engineers and biologists. Numbers of drones mounted on the display screens… but would they be enough? Enough for the plan and the fight to come?

Gil watched anxiously as sentient city assembled his delivery drones. Prioritization had made arming the city and jumpers priority one, but now they were finally at capacity, so the Phase 1 retro-virus drones were now being loaded. They’d need two for each hive, one for each cruiser, some extras to be on the safe side… then they could finally begin to run off the JPOW drones.

Would there be enough time? They had enough of the JPOW pheromone ready in their canisters, they only needed a delivery drone to carry them. And those numbers were still far too low. Two hundred, three hundred, four… and then, for the third time in the past hour, one of the manufacturing arms jammed up, and production ground to a halt. Again.

And as the engineering crews, led by Radek Zelenka, got into the guts of the machinery to get it working once more, time was ticking down…

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‘And here you are, beaming into the Ancient Outpost at the bottom of the world with a damn invading space fleet of Marilyn Manson vampire aliens over your head, *again*,’ O’Neill reflected with a sigh. ‘Hope you don’t end up stuck in stasis again, because there’s no Asgard to thaw you out, this time.’

He sorely missed having Daniel, Teal’c, Sam, even Vala or Mitchell, at his back. That would have been a good feeling. SG-1, back in the saddle again. He just wished he’d been able to make that happen.

Reynolds and SG-3 were his back up on this run, along with the Ancient Outpost crew of geeks and...
Ancient tech specialists. He’d even raided the SGC for Sgt. Siler, since some of the systems they would need might not be ready for operation after being frozen at the bottom of the world for whobesides-Daniel-knew-how-many millions of years.

After the attack of the super hives, when Atlantis had first returned to Earth, the Antarctic base had been abandoned, the Weapons Chair carted to the Nevada desert. The UN had been unimpressed that the IOA had ignored several international agreements on maintaining the Antarctic as a no-weapons zone, and insisted on compliance. The Chair had required extensive repairs after being ground zero for Wraith attacks… not just once, but twice now. That also wasn’t going down well with most people. Jack wasn’t surprised when the UN decided it was safer to have such an important and vital component of Earth’s defense (and biggest damn target) in as remote and neutral a place as possible. Like, for instance, where the Ancients had built it in the first place.

The Outpost seemed a little on the chilly side to Jack, but then, it always did. Probably just his imagination, considering how much glacier ice sat above his head. It also had a slightly musty smell. It had been shut down and abandoned for years, only re-opened a few months ago, so no surprise there. But the three ZPM slots had all been filled for days, the geeks had been all over the entire base, finding all kinds of new systems opening up, not initialized, not yet ready for action, not yet, but waiting. Sgt. Siler and his engineers had been all over the machinery with oil cans and wrenches, making sure it was all going to work once the ‘on’ switches were finally thrown. Including, and especially, the drone manufacturing facility, a few more floors below them. All it needed was the energy from the fully charged and loaded power plant bays, and a strong ATA carrier to initialize and activate.

Jack and SG-3 trotted straight for the Chair room. Bill Lee was ready for them with his tech crew. The moment Jack entered, the whole room lit up, air started circulating, columns in the walls began to bubble away, monitors scrolling vast amounts of data lit up on all the walls.

Only the chair remained still, dark and waiting.

Everyone looked at Jack.

“Yeah yeah,” he sighed, and dropped into the Chair. It linked with him immediately, joyously, welcoming him back after his long absence, asking for instructions.

“Yeah, see all those alien ships up there?” he asked, and the systems immediately brought up the holographic heads-up scan of the Wraith Swarm. “Yeah well, we’re gonna take ‘em all out. Every last one.”

Numbers appeared offering apologetic inventory of drones left in the silos.

“Yeah, I know. Apparently, we got it covered.”

Bill passed his hands over the walls, until he located what he was looking for. After making sure the chair and ZPMs were running hot and five-by-five, he made a quick check to monitor the other equipment now available. The little scientist whistled, low and impressed.

“Yeah, I know,” Jack grinned. “Star Trek replicator time. Let’s get them initiated and spitting out drones. We ready, Bill?”

Bill nodded, bringing up the inventory and instructions for churning out drones. “We need to alter the construction just a little, to supply the codes they’ll need to get past McKay’s Shield. He already sent me the instructions. Apparently, Atlantis has some of these replication systems, too.”
He soon had the deep underground manufacturing apparatus running at full steam. In the Chair, Jack saw with satisfaction the drone numbers climbing exponentially.

“Okay, campers,” Jack announced. “Get me a line to the Pentagon War Room. We’re ready to rock and roll.”

SG-3 circulated on patrol, never letting down their guard. Dr. Lee paced the room, monitoring to make sure everything was running. And Jack, at the centre of everything, concentrated on what the Chair was telling him.

Just like old times, he thought.

“You know, there are times when I kinda miss the Goa’uld…”

Colonel Castleman reported over his link to the Pentagon War Room from the SGC control room, “Our gate is locked up, sirs. Incoming wormhole established by the Wraith, but iris is holding. Multiple hits detected. They’re sending darts and troops against us, sirs.” In the background came the echoing clang of some of those hits.

In a specially-designed super-reinforced concrete bunker far beneath the Pentagon, was a warehouse sized space set up like NASA mission control, or, ironically, the Crystal Palace of NORAD under Cheyenne Mountain, with huge monitors on all the walls, banks of console stations set in rings, facing out, and a table in the middle for the leadership, all with their own laptop links to monitor their assigned posts. The remnants of the JCS sat with Henry Hayes, the main agency directors and Department Secretaries. Director Tom Morrow of Homeland, Director Walter Skinner of the FBI, the CIA Director, among others, all had their stations for watching the unfolding battle.

General Hank Landry, subbing for General O’Neill at the Home World Security desk, offered to the table, “Standard operating procedure for a Wraith attack. Keep the target planet’s stargate locked to prevent escapes. But that means they’ve got at least a small force on another world somewhere, dialling in, with at least one dart squadron and troops. Probably at least one hive ship in orbit. Colonel Castleman, can you get a fix on where that wormhole is coming from?”

Castelman was on one of the big monitors, manning the SGC control room. “Sir. We’ll have an address in… well, now actually. The address is Tegalas.”

On another big console direct from the Ancient Outpost, Jack O’Neill’s voice grumbled, “Tegalas. Post-apocalyptic war and superpowers of deep seeded political differences… cheerfully went Origin the second they got the chance… they’re the bastards took out Prometheus and thirty nine good men and women, including Colonel Pendergast. That damned planet has always been trouble. I thought they blew themselves up already. If the Wraith are there…”

Henry Hayes decided, “We’ll have to deal with that problem later. At least we know where to find them. Can we send in a jumper or something to keep an eye on them?”

Aboard Atlantis, and tied into another of the big monitors, Richard Woolsey said, “We’re already on it, Mr. President. A cloaked jumper has been despatched, and will keep them under surveillance.”

Beyond the ranks of consoles, glass doors revealed yet another hive of activity, an anteroom where the elevator doors opened, and a reception room where the world’s press were permitted limited access to the various links, and several military liaisons offering commentary and explanations – mostly for why they weren’t allowed total access. More screens reflected what was being transmitted
to the world at large on the various networks. Balancing the desire to keep the planet’s population from panicking with the absolute necessity to keep military secrets secret, it had been decided that selected security feeds would be broadcast to the world. It wasn’t like every man, woman and child on Earth couldn’t look up from any window and see the nature of the present crisis. There were some spots where the sun was blotted out because of the swarming Wraith ships above, including where the Shield satellites were positioned.

Caldwell, Emerson, Ellis, Mitchell and Ivanova all reported in to Colonel Carter aboard the *Hammond*, in command of the Tau’ri Fleet, with their allies in vanguard. They formed up in various rendezvous spots around the solar system, preparing to flank and surround the Swarm. Abraham Ellis, aboard *Apollo*, was with the Tok’ra and Galarans. Steven Caldwell on *Daedalus* was with the Serrakin and Gadmir. The remainder of the Free Jaffa and Narim in command of the small but powerful and highly advanced Tollan fleet, were backing the Russian ship *Gagarin*. Bratac and the lead wing of the Free Jaffa forces joined Mitchell and the *Valhalla*. The remainder of the allied ships formed up on the *Hammond*.

And everyone was awaiting the centre-piece of the attack plan, the arrival of Atlantis.

All the contingency and alternate plans had been settled, everyone had their assignments… and it all hinged on Atlantis taking the brunt of the Wraith attack. In the eyes of the Wraith, Atlantis would be the only serious threat to them. They wouldn’t realize their mistake until it was, hopefully, too late for them to retreat or escape.

John Sheppard met Rodney McKay’s blue eyes, and smiled. A nod from each of them, and John left the CSO in command of the Tower Control, Ronon at his shoulder as he went for the Chair Room, with Lorne and Teldy at his side. If necessary, the three of them would take turns in the coming battle. The Atlantis Expedition military forces were at their stations, ready for anything. All non-combatants were as secure as they could make them, and volunteer teams trained and ready to leap into action.

John sat himself down in the Chair, welcomed by a determined AI, surrounded, filled, buoyed by his city. He sank deeper into her embrace, merging with her, until he felt the city as part of himself, his heart, lungs, skin, his limbs, his senses reaching out, preparing to fight. Yet there on the edges of his consciousness, burning like a flame, he could feel Rodney, too, reaching out to him, holding him, grounding him.

‘We ready to do this?’ he asked, not wholly aware of who he was asking.

But back came the answer, from his team-mate and his city, “Oh, yeah.”

He accessed the city-wide comms.

“All right, everyone. This is the big one. This is what we’ve worked and trained and prepared for. The entire Wraith race is sitting there waiting for us to come and kick their asses, and by God, that’s exactly what we’re going to do. For the Lanteans, for Pegasus, for Earth. Let’s go get ’em!”

He could hear it, feel it, flooding the city with an enthusiastic rebel yell from every soul in his city, and in the joyous anticipation of the city herself. At long last, a scourge would end, and Atlantis would be vindicated, her long lonely vigil over.
Atlantis had been waiting, under cloak, in the outer reaches of the Oort Cloud, the furthest point away from where the Wraith had entered the system. But now it was time to come out of hiding. The flying city immediately hit cruising speed for the inner solar system.

The Wraith Queen-of-Queens knew the instant they de-cloaked. The AI could feel that distant awareness catching their scent and turning. And John could hear her scream her defiance.

He left it to Rodney to contact the rest of their forces, on Earth and in space. But he was pretty sure everyone already knew. There was no mistaking the sudden change in Wraith strategy. Fully half their swarm tore off to face the City of the Ancients, even as the remainder spread out, re-deploying for maximum coverage over Earth.

John gave the command to open a comm channel to the Wraith Fleet.

“T’m Colonel John Sheppard, in command of Atlantis. I believe you wanted a word with me?”

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Chapter End Notes

Just one more chapter to go...
Shaman Circle

Chapter Notes

Refs to Criminal Minds episodes 2-15-Revelations (Tobias Hankel), 4-18-Omnivore to 5-9-100 (George Foyet). Refs to SG-1 episode 10-10-The Quest, part 1 (Merlin’s Cave). Refs to Atlantis episodes 2-18-Michael and beyond.

~ *My armor is like tenfold shields, my teeth are swords, my claws spears, the shock of my tail a thunderbolt, my wings a hurricane, and my breath death!* ~ J.R.R. Tolkien, The Hobbit ~

Meanwhile on the Spirit Plane…

More and more shamans assembled all the time, as they found quiet, private, sacred places to be in the real world, to meditate and enter their blue jungle glade.

Teyla, in their centre, found the voices of Hunger once again. In a moment, a wide, flat, desolate blue-tinged expanse opened up around her. There, congregating before her, were the Wraith queens, forming a wedge behind the Queen-of-Queens. They seemed distracted, however, watching, listening, to something on the waking plane, not yet aware of her.

Standing, just before her, was the little boy, young Daniel Jackson, his crow on his right shoulder. Teyla put a gentle hand on his empty left shoulder, holding him protectively to her side. More and more of her companions soon joined them. Blair and Spencer, Diana, Incacha… an army of shamans to meet the enemy.

Apart from Incacha and a few of the other deceased shamans, the Ascended had declined to join this battle. Some under resentful protest. But it seemed even the Ascended had to answer to a higher authority, Merlin, Janet Fraiser and the Abydonians among them. When they tried to interfere with the Chophek Shaman, however, the small elder grew irate.

“I am shaman! This place is mine. This jungle is mine. This world is mine. These people are mine, every one. Mine to nurture, to teach, to protect. You have lost your people, your worlds, your great city, all because you would not stand and fight for it. When you have earned your place and your titles with your duty and courage and wisdom, then come back and tell me what I can and cannot do! Go away and leave us, now, if you will not join us.”

“What he said,” Janet challenged, and stood by Teyla. Merlin and the Abydonians joined in as well.

Although the Ascended did withdraw then, chastened, they didn’t go far. Watching, out of sight and sense of the Wraith.

It seemed that the Wraith queens were oblivious of the watchers. Right now, they were too focused on the food before them.

“I’m Daniel Jackson,” shouted the boy across the desert plain to the queens. “I believe you wanted a
word with me?"

That brought the full-bore of the Queen-of-Queen’s attention onto them. With a scream, she faced Daniel, and his growing crowd of supporters.

“Where did all of these come from?” she demanded. “You are all nothing but food… how have you come here, to our communication realm, where we alone hold sway?” Then she seemed to recognize Teyla. “Ah, you we understand, little sister. You are an abomination created long ago by a foolish scientist… you are one of the Tainted. No matter… we will soon devour you all!”

And then the not-quite-human figure of the Queen began to morph. It grew, turned a shining blue, hard-shell carapace and scales reflecting like jewels, sprouting more insect legs, and growing larger and larger… twice the size of its humanoid form. Behind her, the other queens also changed, much faster, a wave of glittering inhuman blue moving back over the sea of creatures.

And then the Queen-of-Queens scuttled toward them, crab-like.

“You are Daniel Jackson? You are the Destroyer of Worlds.”

“Only ones that need Destroying. Only ones that don’t give me a choice,” replied the solemn child.

Spencer knew Ethan would have to at least attempt to make some kind of peace, however futile that effort might be. And the FBI profiler fully understood. He faced the same issue every time he and his team squared off against an unsub. Even Tobias Hankel, who had killed, had taken him prisoner and tortured him, drew only deep sadness and empathy from the profiler for the pain and illness in him. He could honestly say, there had only been one time when he hadn’t sincerely wanted to save the murderer, rapist, child abductor, he faced. George Foyet, the Boston Reaper, had deliberately destroyed every piece of good will anyone on the team might have wanted to extend him, even if they could. So yes, he knew Ethan would offer even the Wraith a chance at redemption.

Even knowing they would never take it.

“I have the means to destroy you, all of you,” Ethan told the Queen-of-Queens. “I will use it, to save my planet, my people. But I won’t have to, if you accept my offer.”

“What offer, food?” the Queen-of-Queens scoffed.

“We have a retro-virus. You know of it. It created Michael. You call him Not-Wraith-King. It will not make you human, it will only drive back the Iratus Bug genetics for a little time, and then your blended natures will recover. But when it does, you will find you cannot feed like you do now, by sucking the energy from your human victims. You will be just a little bit more human, enough so you are able to eat as humans do, you can feed on animals and plants.

“We offer you this choice. Take the retro-virus willingly, and we will find you a planet to call your own. It will have food you can grow or hunt for yourselves, you can colonize it as you want, but you won’t have ships, there will be no stargate, so you can’t terrorize others any more. You can’t kill humans any more. You can’t exterminate our entire race, keeping only a select few for breeding, like cattle, as you did in Pegasus. But you will be able to live, to survive, free to create any society you desire, maybe even find contentment and happiness one day. This I offer you, if you will agree to take the retro-virus and leave us in peace.

“Otherwise, I *will* destroy your world, your hives, and all of you with it.”

It was a good offer, and more than fair. If the fight hadn’t looked so unequal, if there hadn’t been so much doubt that one small human food could indeed wield so much power… if the concept of being
made even a little more human hadn’t been so repugnant to a species who never changed, who lived by pheromone identification of its own swarm members… if Not-Wraith-King had not been so obviously tainted and corrupted in their minds…

Even so, the stronger imperatives of self-preservation reared in several of the youngest and lowest ranked queens, relegated to the outskirts of the Swarm, and staring in the face the inevitability of their being the first to fall in battle...

Queen Newest-of-Granddaughters led a sizeable group who now stepped forward on the blue plain, morphing suddenly back to humanoid form. “I would hear more of your offer. I even would agree to be first among my sisters to take this retro-virus, and settle upon your offered world.”

Being first would give her widest choice for prime possession of this new world. This Queen was quick to think of the advantages of taking this offer, having no doubt it was truly meant.

Even as Ethan smiled and stepped forward with his hand out, the Giant Iratus Queen-of-Queens screamed and fell upon Newest-of-Granddaughters, mandibles opening wide to snap around the head of the young renegade Queen and cut it off, to bounce obscenely across the blue sands. Others of the loyal old guard also scuttled forward on insect legs to bite off the heads of the other youngest queens.

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On the waking plane, the allies observed several ships on the outskirts of the Swarm slowly tilting sideways and drifting… as though the different craft had lost control, for some reason. Some of these wandering hives banged into others, splitting apart. One seemed to fall toward Earth, to run up against the Shield, and shatter like safety glass into black pebbles of debris. It was a mystery… then some of the other hives fired on the wobbling ships not already destroyed.

Hunh. Well, that made a dozen or so they didn’t have to contend with themselves.

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“That is our answer to your offer, Destroyer! You will only live to destroy us if we don’t destroy you first!”

Ethan nodded. “Very well. It’s your choice.”

The Queen-of-Queens gave a scream, gestured to hold back her sisters, wanting to take the glory of this kill all for herself.

But as she scuttled closer on her crab-like legs, Spencer stepped into her path.

He hadn’t been aware, before he saw the queens take the shapes of their inner self-images, that the Spirit Plane was quite as… malleable as it was. Perception was all, apparently. So as he stood before Ethan, he formed himself a set of shining armor, a shield with little gold crosses all over it, and a sword with a glittering edge to it. Parsifal he would be. On Invasion Night, he had often wished he had a sword for de-capitation of the downed enemy aliens. Would have been so much easier. The weapon he held high in both hands was as strong, light and as sharp as his imagination could make it, the next best thing to a light-saber.

He was well aware that the giant insect bearing down on him wouldn’t see him as much of a threat. Until she was in range, and one swipe of his sword took off her head… leaving her sundered body floundering on the dusty ground, legs curling under her in a reflex like a dead spider, until her form vanished altogether from the plain.
The Wraith queens froze in horror, then anger, then screeching to the distant spirit stars.

Spencer wasn’t sure if the waking-realm Queen-of-Queens had died or not, but she was certainly out for the count.

The queens quickly formed up in a wedge, and began to charge at the assembled Shaman Circle. But by this time, others had taken a leaf from Spencer’s book, armored and armed themselves, and fought back the furious queens.

But there were so many of the giant bugs… Too many.

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From the Ancient Outpost, Jack O’Neill sent out wave after wave of drones, targeting the hives in the outer orbits. And every one burrowed deep into a hive ship to rupture living hulls.

The four wings of the Earth Alliance Fleet converged on the Wraith swarm, intent on clearing more segments of the shell of the Wraith blockade.

And Atlantis dared the Wraith to come for her, a delicate snowflake with crystal spires under a shining dome of protection.

Wave after wave of dart squadrons dashed themselves on the dome, so confident that their beams could pierce the protection, that they couldn’t imagine failure. But no beams broke through the harmonics that Rodney McKay had adjusted to shut them out. What happened to the troops in those beams, no one could say. They never materialized on the city’s decks.

The larger cruisers arrived after the darts, and now the missile drones deployed, along with the puddle jumpers, and the canons on each pier shot out with glittering tails of tracer lights.

The hive mother-ships themselves remained unmoving, as if frozen, although their weapons arrays were all set to bombard Earth below and Atlantis and the allied fleet against them. Dart squadrons flooded out of their hangar decks to join the fray. But it all had the feel of an automatic response, an auto-pilot, slow or unable to react to any change in the battle plan they faced. Puzzled as they were by this apparent distraction among the Wraith, the allied commanders would take what they could get.

It was Sheppard who ordered the launch of their Phase 1 delivery drones, to target their hives and cruisers, sitting there like complacent ducks, just waiting to be shot.

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Over every part of the Planetary Shield, Wraith energy weapons splashed in blossoms of red, gold and white, the shield itself turning milky as it absorbed and strengthened with every hit. The entire population of Earth looked up in fear, then in wonder, then in awe at the protection above them.

So too did the inhabitants of the great city of Atlantis, from the balconies, the streets, the halls and gantries. The energy explosions against the dome were the more brilliant, for the darkness of space beyond. Well, what space could be seen beyond the wall of Wraith hives, cruisers and darts that crowded around them, blotting out even the distant sun.

As heavy and determined as the attack against them was, the city was jostled from its geo-positioned anchor from time to time. In the mess hall, dishes clattered, some crashed to the floor, even as the volunteer staff raced to get everything battened down.
Some of the younger children began to cry in fright at one earthquake-like shudder of the city around them. Garcia was quick to tell them stories of growing up in California, where tremors like this were nothing… barely a two on the Richter Scale, and nothing to fear. JJ chimed in with a story about a tornado chaser the BAU had been hunting one time...

“Just think,” Tara Lewis added, “What stories you’re all going to tell, about the end of the Wraith, and living on the Fabled City of Atlantis.”

Engrossed in the stories, the children calmed and ignored the distant echoes of battle.

Spencer tried to keep aware of Ethan, to make sure the little boy was safely behind him. Blair, Teyla and his mom where near too, also with swords, fending off the somewhat awkward iratus bugs. As big as they were, as intimidating and threatening, they weren’t actually all that nimble. There was only so much scuttling they could do, forward or back, before they needed to step away to wheel themselves about into a turn. They could step on their prey, and they had one claw-like appendage at the end of one leg to grab victims to pull toward their sucking or slashing mandibles, but still, once cut off by a sword, the creatures disappeared. As far as Spencer could tell, they didn’t return.

But still, as many as there were crowding in, it was hard to keep track of the chaos of battle, and, inevitably, Spencer left his flank unguarded for a critical moment. A queen moved in, claw clacking eagerly, to attack his unguarded side. She seized him around the waist, encountering shining armor every bit as resistant as her own carapace, and attempted to squeeze as she tugged him toward her mouth.

“Get away from him, you bitch!” screamed his mother’s distinctive voice.

Spencer blinked at the quote from one of his favorite movies… and glanced around, momentarily distracted, to find his mother was no longer content with her Joan-of-Arc persona.

Bennington wasn’t big on horror or alien sci-fi movies in their common room DVD collections… counter-productive as they were to patients with various mental issues… but they did favor Disney.

So maybe it shouldn’t have been such a surprise to find his mother enacting a scene from ‘Sleeping Beauty’. A Queen in her own right, Diana was turning into Maleficent’s dragon, all black and red and fire, towering over the Iratus. One swipe of the spiked tail, and the Iratus dropped Spencer and turned to defend itself from a wave of fire. It cooked in its own hard shell, curling up and disappearing.

Spencer lay a moment, stunned and gasping, watching his mother turn to the next Iratus queen, and the rest, strafing them with vivid jets of cartoon fire. But, hey, it was working, every bit as deadly and destructive as genuine fire, so…

“Wow!” Blair commented, coming to help him to his feet. Blair also had shining armor on him, choosing a red cross for the front of his shield.

Others of their forces had noticed and decided they liked Diana’s shape-shifting efforts better than her son’s. And it was amazing to Blair, how *many* Earth cultures had their own dragon myths. From Komodos to Chinese silk embroidered, to every kind of fanciful wall hanging, painting, story illustration… not to mention movies. Harry Potter was well represented, of course. So was the Hobbit trilogy, variations of Smaug himself, along with one patterned from the older pencil illustration JRR had himself made for the Worm… all carefully correcting for the one vulnerable missing scale on their breasts. Teyla chose the dragon form most familiar to her, from one of the
video games her son played, given to him by his Uncle John.

Even Ethan began to morph, into a fully-grown dragon of a somewhat less-well-known form, although it was strikingly similar to the one Merlin himself took on.

Then Mahina, the little Polynesian girl, turned into one dragon form more familiar to TV watchers everywhere.

Blair blinked. “Really?” he protested. “Your mother lets you watch ‘Game of Thrones’?”

“Sure. Doesn’t everyone?” Then, with a shrieking cry of “Kaleesi!” she erupted into the air, sailing over the Queens and spewing fire over them all.

Well, that was apparently true enough, as, one by one, those who weren’t as familiar with other legends, took up that one, and joined Mahina in her amazingly effective strafing runs, soon turning the entire battlefield into a sea of fire.

Even the distant watching Ascended could only shake their nebulous heads in amazement, absolutely astounded by the dragon attack.

Blair, standing next to Spencer for a momentary breather, saw where his friend’s attention had focused, and only chuckled. “They have a remarkable lack of imagination for beings of omnipotent knowledge, don’t they?” he observed somewhat caustically.

Spencer shrugged. “As do the Wraith. I would guess they have no myths and no scary monsters they’ve ever feared… except perhaps for the Ancients who made them, the Enemy, and it would never occur to them to turn into that.”

One by one, the queens seemed to rouse themselves in their hive command thrones, blinking dizzily as they attempted to shake the feeling of fire eating them away, or heat cooking them in their shells.

Only to find their hives in disarray, drones and soldiers alike gasping and writhing in torment as their bodies seemed to change… unable, or unwilling, to return to the communication realm, they were unaware that their sisters were encountering the same thing… a sickness sweeping over their ships, changing the very biology of their sons, changing their very identifying smell. No longer ‘son’, but ‘not-Wraith’, ‘stranger’ and with it the corrupted taint of ‘danger’. The brighter queens immediately realized, this had to be the retro-virus. Having refused the offer to take it voluntarily, the humans were forcing it on the hives, somehow.

Still reeling from their ‘death’ on the communication realm, they were finding it difficult to take control of their suffering sons, to stop them from falling on each other. No longer identifying fathers, brothers, sons, their drones and soldiers were seeing only more threat within their very hulls. The only exceptions seemed to be those few sons who had been fortunate enough to take on Goa’uld symbiotes. There were only one or two on board a very few hives… Pel’k’s jaffa had numbered less than a hundred, and far fewer held symbiotes old enough to survive implantation. But those dozen or so hives, including that of the Queen-of-Queens, found it easier to maintain control, sending their augmented drone sons to quell any disorder and override any confusion.

Otherwise, the queens struggled to bring themselves enough to their senses to create and issue the pheromone command that would force recognition on their sons. But they were being changed themselves, fast losing their grips on the biological functions that allowed them to flood the hive with
their chemical orders.

And all of this made the queens even slower to realize that their inattention to the battle around them was having serious consequences.

It wasn’t just Atlantis that sent wave after wave of the tiny gold glowing missiles at them, cutting into their hive sheathes like arrows of destruction. Torrents of the things were vaulting up from the frozen southern polar ice cap of the world below. And this did not even account for the ships of all kinds with deadly weapons of their own, and shields seemingly impervious to the Wraith weaponry and culling beams.

Only slowly did it occur to the Wraith that they were being cut to ribbons from below, above and on all sides, and everything they threw at Atlantis or Earth below crashed like broken waves on their shields. Slower than that came the cringing warnings to the queens from their favored drone advisors, that perhaps, retreat in order to re-group…? Those daring such messages ended up dead on the floors, spilling millennia-old blood. But sometime after that it became clear even to the starvation-stressed and arrogant queens that they had no defense against their enemies, and even their own far greater numbers were not inexhaustible. And even slower still did the realisation come that this may yet be their final stand.

Desperate for direction, they once again risked the now-deadly communication realm, hoping for guidance and assistance from their Queen-of-Queens. Surely she must have some insight.

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It was a classic cross-fire maneuver. No matter what their numbers, the Wraith were caught between Earth defenses below, and the space fleets and Atlantis from above. There was nowhere for them to hide from the merciless onslaught, and their own weapons were ineffective against any of the Earth-tech shields. No matter how they battered against them, McKay’s shields held, over Earth, over Atlantis, over the Earth ships. A few early casualties among their allies made Colonel Carter order the quick retreat of the Enkarans and Galarans. No other ships held the same vulnerabilities, even after hours of bombardment by the Wraith. Their beaming technology couldn’t get past any of the shields either, to land troops inside any guarded perimeter. So the enemy hung between walls of fire, starving, within tantalizing sight of the richest food source they had ever imagined, unable to reach it.

But still, it was by no means a fore-gone conclusion. There were simply too damn many of the Wraith, and god help the Milky Way Galaxy if the Swarm decided their best plan was to break out and scatter… there were nowhere *near* enough ships in the allied fleets to chase them all, to stop them before they fell on other human colonies like wolves on a flock of lambs, colonies without ships of their own, maybe with nothing more than a stargate for escape, if that.

Just one queen escaping to re-create her race, and the Milky Way might never be free of them, no population would be safe. They might yet all be driven to the status of food for the Wraith.

The enemy *had* to be contained, *had* to be kept in place and destroyed. Not one single ship could be allowed to escape their trap. It had to end. Here and now.

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On the desolate blue battle plain, some queens were returning to the fight, although they attempted to make themselves even larger, more fearsome, and were certainly more wary of approaching the Circle of Shamans. They did not know the strange winged fire-breathing creatures that attacked them here, and had no idea how to resist. Even the ones who remained looking like food held weapons in their hands that cleaved the queens to pieces, and shields that turned away their own offensive body
parts. Now rather than angry battle-cries, they called out in torment for their Queen-of-Queens.

“What is happening to us? The food has infected us all with retro-virus… we change and will never be the same! We die, die in unheard-of numbers, and moment by moment, more hives are lost to the enemy! Even this, our own communication realm, is no longer safe to us! What are we to do, Queen-of-Queens? Tell us! Command us that we may survive!”

The Queen-of-Queens was reluctant to return here, after being so soundly defeated by mere food. She still felt the unsettling shock of being sundered in two. But the urgent calls of her sisters compelled her to return.

“The retro-virus may overwhelm our sons, change them beyond recall, but not us. We will return to what we were, return completely Wraith, as we once were. It will take only a little time. Then, once we are done with this war, we will eradicate the virus-tainted ones and build our race anew. So what needs to be done now is to turn on these puny shields and break through them. I have seen the energy drain of the shield on the planet, and it is immense, too immense to sustain for long. They have maybe a dozen such power sources to replace the first, and they will be driven to use them all to defend the planet. What will Atlantis be without these power sources? What will those lesser ships out there be? Yes, more of us may die, but we only need to outlast them for a little, and we are still many. That is our plan, sisters. Drain all their batteries and their shields will fall, one by one, and they will be helpless against us.”

It was a good plan. They might even be able to remain on this communication plain to co-ordinate their efforts, if they could fend off the…

Another strafing run of fire, and then, unexpectedly, one of shocking ice, as one dragon with glowing blue eyes decided it needed a turn.

It was more than the Wraith Queens could stand, and once again, they fell out of the Spirit Plane.

Blair and Spencer stood side-by-side, the only ones in their army to retain human form, far preferring their shining armor, swords and shields. Blair shook his head. “Really? You turned into a zombie white-walker dragon?”

The dragon in question chuckled with Tootega’s voice. “I well know the power of ice.”

For whatever reason, the Wraith Queens feared the ice more than the fire, and fled before her, most vanishing before the blue fire even reached them, not daring to return.

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John Sheppard heard the sudden call from Dr. Grissom in the bowels of the manufacturing tower. “Colonel Sheppard! We’re ready to deploy Phase 2, on your command!”

“Oh thank god…” Sheppard breathed, shutting his eyes tight… his inner eyes as well. He had begun to suspect that they were mere moments away from the Wraith attempting to cut and run, with fully half of the Swarm still functional and flight-capable. “This is John Sheppard. Phase 2, deploy. Now!”

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The storm of delivery drones gushed from the Atlantis silos, sailed past the sparkling dome, blossoming with the pyrotechnics of Wraith weaponry. The small squid-like creatures, surely at least half alive, each had their own individual mission, and pursued it with mechanical glee.
By-passing the Wraith shields as if they weren’t even there, burrowing into the living hulls of the hives, finding interior space and ventilation, then bursting their cargo canisters of aerosol pheromones…

The command in that bio-chemical substance drove effortlessly into the compromised genetic structures of the Wraith; Queen, drones and soldiers all alike, taking hold and ingrained even as the iratus DNA sped to reclaim all cell structures. In the Queens it was somewhat less successful, only because the Queens, the originating template, were the strongest, the best fed and the most resistant to the retro-virus in the first place. They also had more awareness, to counteract the external demands they did not recognize as their own will. A defense none of their drone or soldier sons would have. And even the goa’ulded sons, unaffected by the virus, were powerless to disobey the natural bio-commands.

So when they felt the biological imperative rise up, part of their re-asserted natural instinct, but now reinforced with a queen’s urgency thickening the very air around them, to seek out every life around them, and if they could not definitely be determined to be kin, they must be enemy… hive invaders *must* be immediately destroyed…

Even their Queen was unidentifiable on the hormonal level, with her iratus DNA struggling to re-assert.

Hive after hive stalled and stopped. Scanners detected fewer and fewer numbers aboard hives and cruisers alike. Dart pilots, confused and troubled, sought out the mental connections to their queens or drone generals, only to find silence. Some, returning to their hangars, were overwhelmed by the pheromone imperative… and not recognizing any of the crew, lashed out immediately.

The heavy barrage of weapons fire, from the Atlantis and Outpost drones, from the Tau’ri and ally ships, continued to beat the Wraith into space-debris.

Without the Queens to control their hives, the big ships soon crashed into each other, or simply stopped, hanging dead in space, the organic fabric of the hulls already beginning to shrivel and decay. Without weapons, the allied forces cut them to ribbons. Drones, soldiers, darts, all ships, became disoriented, easy prey.

Atlantis and her jumpers remained in the fray. Lorne took over for John when he began to flag and even the city AI warned him he need not do it all himself. Rodney remained in the control room, overseeing the battle, with Radek soon joining him, ready to deal with any issues. There were none.

Conservative estimates gave Wraith losses as half their total numbers. It still wasn’t enough. It would never be enough until every last one of them was dust in space.

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Only the very strongest and oldest of the Queens were able to hang on to command of their vessels. None of the cruisers remained operative – none of them had queens aboard to over-ride the JPOW. All of them wallowed dead in space. Those in lower orbits were already being pulled by irresistible gravity, to crash against the planet shield.

At last, with barely a tenth part of one last tenth of her fleet remaining, the Queen-of-Queens had to admit failure. They needed to escape, re-group, find at least a temporary feeding ground to replenish themselves, replace the corrupted sons with new spawn, and find some way to break the impregnable Earth defense.

But it was already too late. The enemy fleets were already closing in, sealing off any escape route
the Lucian Alliance had fallen to them. Recalling their methods, she attempted their wedge movement, ordering the remaining hives to form around her, giving her own ship the maximum protection. If only one hive should survive, it would be hers, to re-build the race anew. With Atlantis battling on the other side of the blue world, she hoped to successfully force her way out past the more conventional ships.

It was Rodney McKay who noticed the change in tactics, instantly running the numbers in his head.

“General O’Neill! There’s a wedge-shape of, about, a hundred hive ships, attempting to break out of the cordon. Atlantis can’t reach her from our position, and neither can any of our fleet. Can you target your drones on the ship in the middle? Here, are you receiving my transmission? I’ve highlighted the ship you need to target. It’s the ship getting the maximum protection. That’ll be the one with the Queen-of-Queens.”

“Got it, McKay. Thanks,” Jack answered quickly, seeing it through the eyes of his HUD. One mental blast, and he sent thousands of drones into the ball of hives. Outer ships blasted apart, then the next layer, diving deeper and deeper into the cloud, searching out its heart…

Every surviving Wraith felt their Queen-of-Queens scream out her rage in her dying moment. If they hadn’t been in such disarray, their numbers so reduced, the hours of battle not so draining on the last of their reserves in their mal-nourished states… if they hadn’t been so stressed by being cut off from their communications network, and confused by the conflicting demands of their own bodies, turned against them… they might have been able to reform around a new Queen-of-Queens. But those of first rank were all dead, second rank in tatters, only the younger and more volatile Queens left, and suddenly, it was every hive for itself, and a panicked stampede to get as far from Earth as possible in all possible haste. But this strategy of desperation only served to send them straight into the mouths of more weapons.

“Way to go McKay!” Landry cried out, jumping from his seat in the Pentagon War Room, and punching the air with a fist. He would have been severely embarrassed, if every other man and woman in the War Room weren’t doing exactly the same thing.

“It was just a simple game-theory algorithm Dr. Charles Epps has used with the FBI to determine—”

“Yeah yeah,” Jack cut him off with a chuckle. One geek was much like another. “You were right, it worked, drinks are on me!”

The Wraith ships were all moving too fast and would soon be out of range for the Ancient Outpost Weapons Chair. And there were too many Wraith ships left, still, for one-on-one confrontations, so now it became a free-for-all route to try and stop the remaining enemy escaping into hyperspace. They had to be caught before they got out of the Solar System.

Earth and Atlantis drones were sent in heavy barrages, each targeting its own hive, while the rest of the fleet chased down darts, the X-302s and jumpers vying with Free Jaffa death gliders to defeat the most enemy. It was an enthusiastic competition.

One by one, the last Wraith ships fell. The sheer volume of debris from the Swarm was hard to estimate, and a lot of it was even now crashing against the Planetary Shield and frying. Darts were hunted down and burst, or fell into the heavy gravity orbits of Saturn and Jupiter, or pitched into the sun.

But then, there was only one hive left, and, desperate, already knowing she was doomed, the queen flew straight at Atlantis. John faced her with a grim smile, and took extra satisfaction in firing ten drones at her hive.
She screamed out her impotent fury, and she died.

With the Ancient Outpost guarding the south pole of the planet, it had made sense to Atlantis that she land at the north pole. She carefully sent a super-heated blast of air to melt just a small pocket of water so she could land, floating her undercarriage on the little lake, and allowing the ice to close back in around her. She could drill down to the salt water far below, and establish her supply life-lines that way.

Gently as a snow-flake, she settled on the rippling aqua lake, and powered down her star-drive.

“Well, that was easy-peasy,” Jack O’Neill commented. Until he tried to stand up from the Outpost Weapons Chair, and almost landed flat on his backside. Colonel Reynolds raced to help him up, then the embarrassed general waved him off, still a bit wobbly.

He activated his comm. “Carter. You finished up there?”

“Just gathering my squadron now, General. No appreciable damage, nothing we can’t fix in flight.”

“You got a few moments to go check on Tegalas? There’s at least a few Wraith there, keeping the Earth stargate locked up.”

“On my way, sir.”

As far as the Earth-based defenses were concerned, the battle was over. The Pentagon War Room collected damage and casualty reports… astounded they had been so light on the defender side, when the initial estimates had looked so overwhelmingly grim. Although some X-302 fighters had been lost in the countless dog-fights, along with death-gliders and other small attack craft from their allies, casualties had been light… less than ten percent. None of the larger mother-ships, ha’taks, X-304s, or their one Asgard ship, had been lost. And Atlantis still remained, gleaming and whole. Dented a bit, sure, but still space-worthy.

Only the Enkarans and Galarans had lost major ships, one a-piece, until the allied fleet had realized they were vulnerable and got the rest of their people out of the line of fire, to run support and reconnaissance from safely behind defender lines.

Humans were inclined to pat themselves on the back for their success, but John Sheppard knew that the Wraith Queens had been their own worst enemies in this last war. Arrogant, dismissive that ‘food’ could withstand them, with almost twenty-thousand years of experience in humans playing the victims and falling before them… even the growing resistance from the new Lanteans hadn’t taught them that new battle strategies and weaponry might be required. If they had scattered, cut and run, earlier in the battle, or had used concerted and coordinated efforts to break through the planetary shield, Earth would have fallen, and with her, the Milky Way Galaxy would have turned into another Pegasus. Nothing but captive and helpless herds for the hungry Wraith.

John had no idea what Teyla and the Reids had done to ‘distract’ the Wraith, they’d been remarkably vague about it, but it had worked, beyond all estimation.
Colonel Sam Carter, on the bridge of the *Hammond*, had dragged Colonel Cameron Mitchell along with her, needing at least one other ship as back-up, to ensure they could box in any Wraith forces they found, and the *Valhalla* was tailor made for the job. Besides, both she and Cameron had history with Tegalas... as General O’Neill night say, they had been a pain in the mikta since SG-1 first made contact with the planet.

Sure enough, as they slid, silent and cloaked, into the outer orbits of the Tegalan system, their scanner detected one Wraith hive, two cruisers and a squadron of darts, all hovering over a small patch of destruction on the one inhabited world. What used to be the Rand Protectorate, and the location of the stargate, was nothing more than a crater in the ground. But stargates, they knew, were virtually indestructible, from meteor strikes, bombs... dropping them into a sun might work to destroy one...

The Wraith had apparently dug up this one, got it running again to dial up Earth and try to batter their iris with darts and ground troops, none of which had got through.

There, at the bottom of the radioactive crater, was a landed cruiser, a bunch of landed darts, and a couple thousand Wraith drones and soldiers. There was also a pen of humans... a couple of hundred, although dwindling fast. Elsewhere on the planet surface there were hot-spots that indicated recent habitation, but no human life signs. The Wraith had, it seemed, collected all the surviving Tegalans, and either brought them here, to be handier as food, or already loaded them into larders on one of the three ships.

Oh, this would not do. Even Tegalans deserved better than this. Sam contacted Cameron, and they came up with a plan.

“This is Colonel Samantha Carter, commanding the Tau’ri ship *Hammond*. You are the last Wraith who remain alive. Surrender immediately, turn over your human captives, and I will offer you the same deal we offered your Queen-of-Queens. We will dose you with our retro-virus, which will enable your people to feed on animals and plants, and provide a world where you can live free. No one will interfere or bother you. You won’t have ships or a stargate to trouble other worlds, but you can live in peace. Otherwise, we will destroy you.”

The only answer from the Wraith was an attack.

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Queen Destroyer-of-Sateda listened to food giving orders, offering deals... and she sneered in contempt. The Wraith race destroyed? All but her hive? It couldn’t possibly be!

She gave her commands to mount an all-out attack on the two presumptuous ships.

Meanwhile, she surged onto the communication realm... to find nothing but desolation, bits and pieces of insect leg or carapace glittering in the blue sands of an empty plain. Empty but for an army of creatures she had never before seen, nor imagined. And in the forefront, two humans in shiny armor, holding archaic swords.

One of the flying reptilian creatures settled on the sand and turned into a small human.

“Sam offered you a deal. You should take it,” the small food told her solemnly.

“Never! How can this be, that you have destroyed all? They must have been fools and not-Wraith themselves! I am Queen Destroyer-of-Sateda! I am the conqueror of millions! I will conquer *you*, Destroyer of Worlds!”
But even as she approached, imagining a big Wraith stunner gun in her hands, the flocks of winged monsters gathered behind the small food, and around them came creatures that bristled with challenge. These were predators all, though she only recognized one.

The large green feline was a kosha of Sateda, a sacred protector. Numberless Satedans had cried out for these apex predators to come to their aid, even as they shriveled in her hands. It had done them no good.

Snarling, she faced this cat, and met it as it charged her.

The kosha loomed twice its natural size, the fury of an entire race distilled into one force of nature… and it bowled over the queen and with one bite, snapped off her head. Then, with teeth and claws, it began to systematically rip out her guts.

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Carter was grimly satisfied. The hive split like a melon under her weaponry. Cameron dealt with the orbiting cruiser, and they both carefully strafed the cruiser landed in the crater, hoping not to injure any of the captive humans. Their combined X-302 squadrons made quick work of the darts, until they were able to land and deal with the Wraith troops on the ground. Without their last queen, their hive, their ships, they lost what will to fight they possessed, letting sheer hunger take them over. It made them a disorganized rabble, and easily quelled.

There were barely forty Tegalans surviving, men, women and children in the pens, surrounded by the withered and desiccated corpses of those already fed upon. They were so weary, devastated and shocky that they could barely answer questions. Sam beamed them to her infirmary, and after a last scan to ensure all humans had been rescued and all Wraith dead…

She left the last grave-yard of the Wraith.

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The shamans left Ronon to enjoy his work. One by one, they, somewhat reluctantly, resumed human form, and gathered to sit quietly, rest and regain composure.

For the first time in human history, the shamans of Earth had united to defeat a common foe, and had won. Some of them, they knew, would be revealed to their tribes for the powers they were. Some, guides to sentinels, would need to decide their future course, when their sentinels chafed at the restrictions of remaining hidden when they were clearly needed in the world. There were more than enough issues and decisions to be made in the coming days, in the aftermath of this battle for the world.

One thing was certain… the shamans would never again be alone. There would forever be sisters and brothers here to counsel, commiserate, support.

“The one thing we won’t get is thanks, I suppose,” Diana Reid sighed. “They won’t even know what we did. If we try to tell them, then we’ll *all* end up in Mental Health. And anyway, how do you thank a bunch of shamans for keeping the queens occupied on the spirit plane?”

Spencer glanced at his mom in wonder and delight. “I dunno, mom… but… I think you just saved the planet… with an idea you caged from Disney.”

Blair practically giggled. “Well done, auntie Di!”

“An inspiration worthy of the gods themselves!” Tootega agreed. And, unnervingly, she made her
eyes glow blue, before she laughed uproariously at the reactions around her.

And the light-hearted laughter – a stress reaction, Spencer decided, well enough familiar with the urge, but no less appreciated for all that – rippled out over the Shaman Circle.

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In Teyla’s meditation room on Atlantis, the shamans awoke from their trance.

Teyla, Spencer and Diana all took deep calming breaths, and then looked at each other, smiles on their faces. Ronon was already knocking on the door, to be allowed in by Derek Morgan. The big Satedan had *such* a big grin on his face.

Teyla regarded him fondly. “It will not bring your people back, Ronon… but at least they are now avenged. And no more will fall to the Wraith scourge.”

Ronon shrugged. “Your ‘gift’ won’t be much use any more.”

“I am glad to no longer have need of it. As for your manifest gifts… and yours, Agent Morgan. You do know what you are, do you not? What Spencer is to you?”

“I don’t think he does,” Spencer cut in before his puzzled team-mate could answer. “He’s nearly there, but not quite yet. My friend, Blair Sandburg, is something of an expert in what he calls ‘sentinels’ and ‘guides’. Since I imagine I’m going to be calling on him soon, I’ll take Derek with me, and we can have a good talk then.”

Teyla nodded gracefully, allowing that this was something Spencer could handle on his own, even though Ronon tossed her a skeptical look.

Vala stood from her position by the open window to the balcony and faced Spencer. “And what about my Daniel? You haven’t forgotten him in all the excitement, have you? I still want him back. Child, man, I don’t care, as long as we get him back in one piece, not dead or glowing or anything.”

“I think we can manage that, as soon as General O’Neill verifies all the Trust are accounted for, and shipped off to their desert island in space,” Spencer agreed. “In fact, Vala… why don’t you call him and check on that? Then you can come with Teyla, Ronon, Derek and me, and we can all go together to collect him.”

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It was bath-time at 852 Prospect in Cascade, Washington. When they emerged from their trances, Ethan had complained of cold, and hadn’t been able to stop shivering, even with a blanket wrapped around his little shoulders. Blair recommended a hot bath. After settling the little boy, giggling, in the centre of a mountain of soap bubbles, Blair went out to take comfort in a hug from his sentinel, and to thank Simon for standing watch.

“So. You got it covered?” Simon asked them both, not even bothering to define what all ‘it’ was supposed to encompass.

Jim shrugged. “The Wraith are gone. We got a call about Ethan. His guardian thinks it should be safe for the kid to come out of hiding, now.”

Simon frowned.

Blair grinned. “Aw… you’re gonna miss the little guy, aren’t you, Simon?”
“I’m sure as hell gonna miss his spelling. We all will.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Jim agreed whole-heartedly. If there was anything he hated more than a disorganized kitchen, a dirty floor or the woo-woo spiritual stuff, it was paperwork. Not that he had to do much of his own, since Blair had joined him.

“Umm… guys?” called out a surprisingly adult male voice from their bathroom.

All three men turned to stare in amazement as a six-foot man with short-cut sandy hair, vivid blue eyes and a towel clutched around his waist, hovered at the opened door of the bathroom.


“Ye-ah. Apparently.” The man blinked down at himself, dripping onto the floor.

Simon blinked too. “Hunh.”

Daniel attempted to explain, an oddly endearing little frown making three neat furrows between his expressive bobbing eyebrows… “I was making little bubble dragons in the bathtub, remembering turning into a dragon on the spirit plane, just like the one guarding Merlin’s cave… when it suddenly occurred to me… so that’s how I did it! Turned into a kid, I mean… And then…” He gestured to his adult body. “I don’t suppose you have any clothes I could change into?”

~ *Since it is so likely that children will meet cruel enemies, let them at least have heard of Brave Knights and Heroic Courage.* ~ C S Lewis ~

~
Epilogue, Last Words

~ *And now for a final word from our sponsor…* ~ the formula traditionally used to end a North American TV show.

In the Rose Garden of the White House grounds in Washington DC, the usual suspects were all gathered to hear the President of the United States of America brief the world on the Allied victory against the Wraith. Beside him on the podium, not only his Cabinet (such as it was at this point) and numerous men in uniform, surrounded by a hedge of men in black with ear buds and bulges in their suit jackets, but many world leaders, and other guests specially invited for the occasion.

“Ladies and gentlemen, peoples of the world, I’m here to assure you that the Wraith Threat is now gone from the universe. The inhabited planets of the Pegasus Galaxy, and the Milky Way, can breathe easier and sleep soundly in their beds tonight. A Scourge over ten thousand years old has finally been laid to rest.

“But we didn’t do it all ourselves… and I don’t just mean Americans. We had help… a lot of help, from our Allies across the stars. Survivors of Athos and Sateda, the Free Jaffa, Tollan, Tok’ra, Serrakin, Galaran, Enkarans and Gadmir… and support from many others.”

To the surprise of the Press Corps, the President pointed out various people on the podium at his back… only the guy, identified as Serrakin, with the scaly lizard patches was obviously ‘not from around here’, although the two men at the back with the gold emblems on their foreheads, one a grizzled grey veteran, the other a huge black man with white patches at his temples, were probably alien too… but only an idiot who had ignored the SGC declassification briefings would miss Master Teal’c of Chulak.

In the NCIS bullpen at the Navy Yard, just down the street from the White House, the MCRT team paused to turn, like everyone else in the world, to the TV monitors.

“Wow,” commented a thoughtfully frowning Special Agent Ellie Bishop, “Teal’c looks a lot taller on TV.”

The President continued, “I wish to thank all the commanders and crews of the Allied Fleet for their assistance in this vitally important war. At this time, I would also like to thank the Tau’ri Fleet Commanders and crews for their courage and skill. The press packages we have supplied to everyone contains the full list of names, of our ships, and our personnel.

“A special debt of thanks goes to General O’Neill, recently promoted to four-star for his outstanding work in the past year, for manning the Antarctic Outpost. To recently promoted Brigadier General John Sheppard, for his command of the Ancient City of Atlantis. To Dr. M. Rodney McKay of Canada, and our own Brigadier General Dr. Samantha Carter, and their Home World Security staff, for their work on the Planetary Shield, and the shields which guarded Atlantis, our Fleet, our Allies’ ships, and also protected other allied planets targeted by the Wraith Swarm.

“I would also like to take time to honor Dr. Gil Grissom, renowned entomologist, who assisted the scientists of the Atlantis Expedition to come up with the critical weapon in their offensive. And thanks also go out to countless others who desired they not be named… the Shaman Circle of
Mother Earth. This might have been the first time they united in defense of their tribes, but hopefully, it won’t be the last.”

There was a riot from the Press Corps at this, questions coming fast and furious, about who the hell these shamans were… a new organization? Acronym? Code name?

Dr. Donald ‘Ducky’ Mallard, had wandered up from autopsy, to join the others in watching the unfolding conference, with Dr. Jimmy Palmer and Dr. Abby Sciuto in tow.

“My, doesn’t Teal’c look handsome!” Abby whispered in an aside to Bishop, to get an enthusiastic nod in reply.

Vance, chewing the ever-present toothpick, sauntered down to join them. “The Shaman Circle? Sounds almost like a terrorist organization. Something we need to watch out for in future, you think?” he asked Leroy Jethro Gibbs.

“Oh, I doubt that,” Jethro replied, glancing at Ducky in speculation.

The medical examiner endeavored to look innocent of all knowledge of shamans… while unobtrusively patting the emerald-green head of the duck squatting on his shoulder. The Spirit Guides, it appeared, had a somewhat low sense of humor. “If they have taken the title of shaman upon themselves,” Ducky commented mildly, “then they have identified themselves with the healers and wise elders of our tribal past. That doesn’t seem like a threat to me, Director. More like a hopeful sign for the future.”

The President on the screen attempted to stem the flow of questions, without much luck, finally just giving up and shrugging, to let them wear themselves out when he obviously wasn’t going to answer anyone. And standing not too far away, was a tall African of the Tutsi tribe, dressed in traditional kaftan of bright colors, a quiet young woman at his side with watchful eyes and flaring nostrils. And for those who could see… a lioness at her side, a falcon on his shoulder.

Ducky was one of those people. He smiled reflectively, remembering… His own dragon had been fashioned after one played, or at least voiced, by the actor Sean Connery in the movie Dragonheart. Coming out of his momentary reverie, he was not really surprised to see a nebular shape form behind Jethro. It might almost be a grizzly bear… with his extraordinary sight and hearing, Ducky had been warned that any period of isolation might bring Gibbs to full use of his sentinel gifts. Past personal traumas might be the only thing preventing him from emerging before this. Umuhigi had been quite helpful in supplying Ducky with the information he would need should emergence occur. And young Blair had gladly offered his own email address, should he need more advice.

Once the Press storm had been somewhat quelled, the President turned the podium over to General O’Neill.

“I know a lot of you have complained about the veil of secrecy we kept over the work of the SGC for so long… but it was considered necessary. Not all the monsters under the bed are fantasies, but not all of them are aiming straight for Earth, either. And what saved us this time, and not a few other times, is the network of allies, past and present, and the technology we’ve gained in our explorations through the Stargate. We have all of that, could defend ourselves and the people of two galaxies, and more, because of the participation and influence of one man… my team-mate and friend, Dr. Daniel Jackson. Yes, *that* Daniel Jackson, Destroyer of Worlds… or, at least, those worlds needing destroying. He couldn’t be here with us today, but… anyone thinking of taking on the destroyer of worlds in future… just don’t. Be warned.

“And on that note, now it can be told… the earlier Invasion of the Wraith was traced to a renegade
organization calling themselves the Trust, whose stated goals are to take over the planet. They took prisoner humans, Goa’uld, jaffa and Wraith for the purposes of infiltration, interrogation and experimentation… and their irresponsible and treasonous acts led directly to that earlier Wraith scouting group finding Earth. In their efforts to recover their people, the Wraith inadvertently exposed a Trust prison base on the grounds of Area 51, nick-named Gitmo West. Only the brilliant observations and quick action of several volunteer defenders that night, Dr. Spencer Reid of the FBI BAU, with an able assist by Dr. Gil Grissom, and CSIs Nick Stokes and Greg Sanders of the Las Vegas crime labs, prevented the Wraith from achieving their goal – which would have had disastrous results for all of Earth.”

“Yeah!” shouted out Very Special Agent Tony DiNozzo. “Go Hamid!”

Ducky was not a little startled to see a smoky coyote curling around Anthony’s legs. But upon further reflection… maybe he shouldn’t have been?

“In their efforts to escape further exposure and arrest for their crimes against humanity, not to mention treason against the entire human race, the Trust attempted to assassinate all members of their cabal identified through their associations with Gitmo West. The spate of deaths, arrests and forced retirements among the great and powerful, world-wide, since Invasion Night, are all down to a race between the Trust and HWS to apprehend everyone connected with this conspiracy. We are now certain we have all of the major players, and, we hope, all of the minor hangers-on, opportunists, and ‘I did it under orders’ minions, all accounted for. Anyone compromised by Goa’uld symbiotes or brainwashing of whatever type, have been identified and are under care for rehabilitation. Those remaining, in cells in the SGC, will shortly be shipped off to a cozy little abandoned planet we’re calling Botany Bay, for obvious reasons. And by shortly, I mean as soon as the President releases me from this debriefing. This is being done with the unanimous assent of the international community and our own legal experts.

“Any questions?”

“Well, hell, yeah, there are questions,” McGee complained. “How are they so sure these are all bad guys? What proof do they have? Did they just walk all over the entire Constitution to railroad these guys? What about JAG? What about—“

Jethro walked over and gave McGee a firm tap to the back of the head. Probably lighter than he deserved. “Treason to Earth, McGee. Opened the door to the Wraith. Let the entire Swarm put a target right on us. Avowed goal to take over the world for themselves. Were running Gitmo West, and you read the same field reports I did from Invasion Night. If ever there was a case where the Patriot Act applies, it’s this. I think connection to that place alone gets them a one-way ticket off the planet. Don’t you?”

So, it seemed, did the Press Corps. Although a few questions about other pioneer and colonization opportunities ‘out there’ did almost threaten to totally derail the debriefing.

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Newly-minted General John Sheppard had to put on a *really* impressive hound-dog look to get out of the Presidential congratulations party going on in DC. But he and Woolsey wanted to be there on the Stargate deck to say goodbye to their guests. With the Trust neutralized, it was considered safe for all those under protection, on Atlantis, in the care of US Marshals or in various degrees of Witness Protection, to go home to their lives. Not without a certain amount of whining from the younger members, who had been ecstatic about living on a flying city, and sneaking secret agreement from their elders.
Rodney McKay, who had also dodged the proverbial bullet by claiming damage reports and repairs from the battle – all being performed by his minions – was on the control deck at a console, pretending to monitor… something. But out of the corner of his eye, he was watching Dr. Spencer Reid approach.

“Thank you, Dr. McKay, for all your hard work. You may not want to collect the thanks of a grateful world, but I thought someone should say it, sincerely, heart-felt, to your face.”

McKay actually blushed, which would have astounded most of his fellow expedition members… although not, perhaps, those who knew him best. “Yes, well… it’s not like I have any respect for most people, or care what any of them chooses to think of me… but… thank you, Dr. Reid.”

Spencer grinned, offering a hand to shake. A rare gesture on his part. “I hope that means you do respect me, at least a little?”

“We-ell…” the irascible scientist prevaricated, “I suppose, since saving people is what you do… it’s worth-while. That isn’t to say if you finally come to your senses… when!… and want to put those PhDs to work, you shouldn’t give me a call! I’ll review your employment application personally.”

Spencer laughed and gave a salute before he patted a nearby console and said, “Take good care of our girl, Dr. McKay,” and joined his team on the stargate deck.

Grissom collected his wayward CSIs, saying (hopefully) last goodbyes. Nick was offering room and board to Ronon, Derek and Will (and their families) any time they wanted to come visit Las Vegas. Greg was making sure Vala, Ronon, Spencer and Radek Zelenka had his email addies, Facebook and Twitter accounts, and web-site address.

Teyla was huddled with JJ, Savanna and Garcia over baby issues… making the men in their lives shy well away. Vala, by the way, was wearing a pair of Garcia’s most dangly ring earrings, while the tech goddess had on a necklace that could *only* have come from off-world. Before breaking up, Garcia turned to call over to Vala, never more than an arm’s reach from Reid.

“Shopping. Saturday. Your choice of venue.”

Vala grinned, full of teeth. “Oh, you betcha!”

Ronon made quite the show of *not* hovering around Dave Rossi… but the book in his hands was a dead giveaway. With a grin, the veteran profiler merely made a grabby hand and said “Gimme”, so he could sign the damn thing. “And you’re coming to my next poker night, right? I want to pick your brain about off-world crime. Think it might rate a book or five.”

Ronon grinned, looking a good decade younger, like an excited puppy. “Try fifty!” he retorted gamely.

Grissom and Hotch, meanwhile, compared last-minute notes. “Any time. Lecture, lecture series even, we’ll make it happen,” the entomologist assured.

Hotch nodded complete agreement. “Not that we’ll have our usual reason to visit, as I believe Diana is moving east to be near Reid. But I’d be fascinated to see how the excavation work progresses on the Gitmo West mass graves.”

Grissom scowled. “Yeah, we don’t think we’ve found them all, yet. Identification is going to be a bitch.”

Hotch gave him a pat on the shoulder of commiseration, having seen more than his share of such
gruesome finds. Then he turned to make sure his own group was gathered together.

Spencer had another destination, first, a park in Cascade Washington, for reasons he was unwilling to explain. Hotch didn’t ask. He trusted his man. He also trusted that Morgan would take care of their trouble magnet, since he was also going on this little side-trip, as was Teyla Emmagan and Ronon Dex, two people who rather intimidated the dour Unit Chief, and Vala Mal Doran… who… didn’t. And, oh yes, Diana Reid was going along for the ride.

Hotch rather suspected this was an errand to collect Reid’s Invasion Night project, code named Firestarter. And the less said about that, the better.

“Come on, Jack. You know Torren is coming to visit next weekend – you’ll see him then. Let’s go home.”

The boys, Jack, Henry and Torren, gave each other a complicated set of hand shakes, slaps and high-fives before turning to their parents.

And then it was definitely time to go home.

As the white wash of the Asgard transporters took clutches of visitors to their destinations, the city herself gave a wistful sigh. ‘I’ll miss them…’

John chuckled to his girl. ‘Don’t worry, sweetheart… I’m sure they’ll be back. And we’ll keep an eye on them all from here.’

‘Oh good. I feared I would have to sneak around to do that. But there is more than one trouble magnet in that batch… who *need* watching over!’

Å

Derek tried not to see the elephant at his back. He really did. But it was growing increasingly more difficult. The desert owl that always seemed to be perched near Reid, the tiny cute ball of fur that seemed to haunt Diana’s pockets, those he had grown to accept. And, he supposed, the giant green tiger and the scaly bird-lizard-thing hovering near Teyla was not so strange. But his elephant? His Pretty Boy had told him in a matter-of-fact way that everyone had a spirit animal to help guide them, and not to sweat it. Derek wasn’t sure he bought that. Problem was, it was getting *very* hard to tell when the kid was lying. Too much time with Rossi, no doubt. Or, come to think, that Vala chick, who simply *oozed* an aura that would make any cop itch for their hand-cuffs.

So there were six of them taking seats around a worn picnic table in the wide-open park, looking unimpressed at the threatening dark skies. Given it was the Pacific North-West, if it wasn’t already raining, that only meant it was due any moment.

Teyla and Ronon, experienced traders and explorers on hundreds of planets, took variable unpleasant weather in stride. Not so Vala, who should have been more inured to it.

“You couldn’t pick somewhere indoors?” she complained to Reid.

“Nope,” Ronon was quick to answer. “He has to be able to check us out. Instincts won’t let him come out unless he knows we’re safe.”

“He who?” Diana asked. “You mean Ethan?”

“Nope,” Ronon replied. “Him.”
Jim Ellison came out of the trees, still scanning over the park and all the ways in and out, even as he led his partner Blair and another grown man into the open. Derek recognized another cop instantly, and something in him eased.

“*MY DANIEL!*” screamed Vala, running hell-bent-for-leather across the field to leap into the waiting arms of the laughing man, who was bowled back onto his ass on the ground.

“Hey, Vala. Miss me?”

“You’re back! You’re all you again!”

“Yeah. Guess I am.”

Jim and Blair exchanged glances. Daniel’s hold on his current adult form was somewhat… intermittent. Depended upon his mood. Watching the ‘Simpsons’ last night with Jim to unwind had resulted in a five year old laughing along with the big cop. At least, now, his clothes were going along for the ride as he morphed from one form to another.

Jim and Blair joined the more sedate group at the table, while Daniel endeavored to pry himself loose from his adoring fan. Spencer introduced everyone.

Ronon and Jim eyed each other searchingly, then glanced at the big cats tentatively sniffing each other’s noses. When black panther and green tiger agreed to be friends, so did the two men, shaking hands and smiling. Derek joined them… hands touching hands, he felt a shiver of… recognition? Hitting him, low and hard. The other two looked him over, then exchanged glances with each other, nodding and shrugging. Soon. Not yet, but soon.

“Wow,” commented Blair as he gave Teyla a hug of greeting, one shaman to another, then gave another to his auntie Di. “So. Everything cool?”

Spencer nodded. “Very cool. Thanks for helping out, Blair. It was a pretty close thing there, a time or two…”

“Hey, we were safe enough here in Cascade, man. As safe as anyone while the Swarm was out there. You were the one under the gun, all the way from Vegas.”

Spencer chuckled wryly. “When I talked about knights getting a little singed, I had no idea. None at all.”

“No kidding. Your little firestarter was quite the catalyst in the end, hunh?”

Then Daniel finally managed to join them, with Vala clinging to his back, arms around his neck, legs wrapped around his waist. Spencer viewed this with some interest. If there wasn’t an intimate relationship between them now, he predicted there soon would be. Maybe he should mention a few homilies about not letting the grass grow under your feet, making hay while the sun shines, life being
too short…

“And when are you two getting married?” Diana Reid demanded with a stern look. “Neither of you are getting any younger, you know… oh wait, maybe that doesn’t apply in Ethan’s case… um… how about…”

“Life is too short,” Spencer suggested, grinning at his mom. No wonder she qualified as a shaman, no matter what her mental state.

“Yes!” Diana agreed, pointing a finger. “Life *is* too short. Get your heads out of your asses, kids, and face facts. You’re both gone on each other.”

Poor Ethan looked like a deer in the headlights. “Um…”

Vala sent a meaningful look at Diana and said, “I’ll take care of it. But maybe it’s a discussion we need to have in private.”

“Bedrooms are best,” Diana suggested.

Teyla gave a merry laugh and shook Diana’s hand. “Thank you! I have been wanting to say that for ages, but was not certain of the cultural taboos I might be violating. Earthers are really peculiar about sex.”

“Aren’t they, though,” Diana agreed.

Blair sniggered and nudged Spencer. “That’s kind of a dangerous duo to let get their heads together. Come on, everyone, let’s go get some lunch before we say final goodbyes. It’s gonna start raining any minute, and I’d rather not get wet.”

As the others gathered, Vala arm in arm with Diana, Daniel stepped up beside Spencer.

“Thank you,” he said quietly. “Really, Spencer, thanks. I owe you more than my life. If it wasn’t for you… I hate to think what kind of mess the entire Milky Way Galaxy would be in right now.”

Spencer felt a blush sweep over him. “It was my pleasure, Daniel. I… I think maybe this was all meant to be. The Wraith gone, the Trust dealt with, the Shaman Circle… I have no idea where that is going to go, but I have faith it all means something. And not what the Ascended intended, either.”

Daniel gave him a look. “You’ve been talking to Rodney.”

“He makes a compelling case. But he wasn’t there on the blue plain. That wasn’t the Ascended pulling the strings. That was all us. Maybe they arranged things to get us there… but what happened wasn’t anything they imagined. And I think the Alterans, or what remains of them, will be just a little leery of messing with us again.”

Daniel nodded, thoughtfully. “I think you’re right.”

“And… I liked being a big brother. For a little while.”

Suddenly, there was a very little hand in Spencer’s, and a very high voice piping up at him. “You were really good at it. You’d make a great dad. And you can still call me Ethan… if you want…”

Spencer smiled wide. “I’d like that. Ethan.”
Applaud, my friends, the comedy is finished.* – the formula traditionally used to end a performance of commedia dell'arte.

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