Stage II: The Crossing
by Trinket2018

Summary

Dr. Spencer Reid, a dual-gendered ‘zed’ and well-known trouble magnet, is on a path to an intriguing, if dangerous, future, dealing with space, spies, sabotage, suitors, not to mention murders and common-or-garden bigots. Assholes really are everywhere… fortunately, so are cats.

Notes

RATING: NC-17 for profanity, violence.

Follows immediately after *Stage I: The Good Earth*. You really need to read that first, or this will make *no* sense at all. The Reid-whumping was done at the beginning of Stage I, so now it’s just common-or-garden bigots to deal with. Well, maybe not *just*…

I needed an archeology team, so I drafted a fanfic version of the BBC ‘Time Team’. But where Tony Robinson goes, can Rowan Atkinson be far behind? (I have a cunning plan…) No need to know anything about ‘Time Team’ or any of the ‘Blackadder’s, I use the characters as re-imagined for this story, not show details or canon.

DISCLAIMERS: for disclaimers & spoilers see notes for *Stage I: The Good Earth*. 
*~ To fly in space is to see the reality of Earth, alone. The experience changed my life and my
advice toward life itself. I am one of the lucky ones. ~ Roberta Bondar*

Spencer had tried to mostly ignore the uniformed men and women around him as he and Daniel
hopped from one short military flight to another, zigzagging across the country, but always at least
vaguely westward. He kind of missed the convenience and comfort of the BAU jet. Oddly enough,
though, even surrounded by military, who obviously recognized him immediately from the media
blitz still going on, he felt safe enough at Daniel’s side. For an academic and civilian, Daniel had an
air of military toughness about him when he wanted, a take-no-prisoners, don’t-give-me-a-reason
attitude that others seemed to react to with cautious respect.

Spencer was even more appreciative when they finally landed in Colorado, to be met by SFs who
were nothing but respectful and careful of their attitudes around the somewhat oblivious archeologist.
While Daniel had been on high alert around military he didn’t know, he seemed to drop all his guard
around the SGC personnel. Spencer wasn’t ready yet to give strangers that much benefit of the
doubt, to trust them so automatically, but he had never expected Daniel to have to babysit him 24/7.
That Daniel knew and trusted these men so implicitly did go a long way to telling Spencer how
important the other man was to the Program.

The process of getting Spencer signed in and passed through the multiple layers of security even to
enter Cheyenne Mountain, with cat in tow, was daunting. Then the interminable ride down the
elevator shaft into the very bowels of the Earth, far below what had once been NORAD facilities…
well. He was well and truly down the rabbit hole now.

Without a pause in their ongoing discussion of alien languages and the bizarre effects of the
universal-translator field on the Stargates, Daniel steered them both to what appeared to be a Mess
Hall. Spencer had to admit he was a little peckish, and, although he usually avoided such ‘open
concept’ eating facilities with horror, he was hungry enough to examine the steam table selections
with some interest. Daniel grabbed himself a tray and started loading it up with meatloaf, mashed
potatoes, peas, whole-grain bun, blue jello and apple pie, milk, coffee… Spencer, with some regret,
stuck to those things that were wrapped, sandwiches, plastic tub of salad, pudding cup and an extra
jello. He also picked up a small carton of milk and a bowl. He could hear Bast’s appreciative purr
ramp up a few degrees from somewhere behind and lower down.

Daniel led them both to an empty table in the corner, one Spencer would have thought would be
prime real estate and therefore already taken, out of the way of the high volume traffic of the
obviously busy cafeteria, but had been left noticeably empty. At the gentle swat he felt on his ankle,
Spencer lost no time pouring out the milk and setting it by his chair. That should keep Bast happy
while he ate himself.

And yes, Spencer couldn’t help but notice that they drew every eye in the place. Some curious, some
confused, most smiling with hand waves at the archeologist, most choosing to ignore his dinner
companion entirely.

And then, like a whirlwind, an attractive woman with black hair done up in pig-tails with bright pink
scrunchies arrived, giving a screech and almost attacking Daniel from behind.
“My Daniel! You’re back!”

“I am. Hi, Vala. Oh, Dr. Spencer Reid, meet Vala Mal Doran, member of my team, SG-1.”

“Oh! You’re the zed! Hi! My, you’re almost as attractive as my Daniel here, even if you are much younger. I’ve heard all about zeds, and I’m curious as to whether you’re really as good in bed as everyone claims. If you would like to try your sexual wiles on me, feel free. But I warn you, after sex with Daniel, it’s a hard act to follow.”

Spencer wondered if he was supposed to be shocked by the loud announcement, which caused wide-spread snickering across the room, although Daniel merely gave a long-suffering sigh.

“We never had sex, Vala.”

“Well, we never had *long* sex…”

“Or of any kind.”

“But surely all that sweaty rolling around on the *Prometheus* counts? You know, when we were all alone together? After you got me naked?”

“I changed you out of kull armor into fatigues. And we were fighting, not making love.”

“So you say. It definitely counts as foreplay. So, Dr. Spencer Reid, you’re a profiler? What is that, exactly?”

“My team and I hunt serial offenders. Killers, rapists, child abductors.”

“Oooh… kinky. How do you do that?”

“We look at the victims, the locations of murders, where and how bodies were dumped, and build a psychological and geographic profile, to try and determine the type of person who might have committed the crimes, and where they may be operating. Taken together, that information usually points us in the direction of potential unsubs… unknown subjects. We’re very successful.”

“Well, your last case was certainly successful enough! Half a dozen murderers arrested, one shot, something over thirty crimes solved, all in a few days. I was following the whole thing on ZNN. Avidly.”

“Well… I’m not sure if that’s a reflection on our skill, or the incompetence of the local law enforcement, who let them get away with it for so long.”

“Ah, but you’re the one who first saw what was happening, true?”

“True,” Spencer admitted.

“Well then. So is it true you can tell when someone is lying?”

“Well…”

“Try me.”

The vivacious woman was definitely one of a kind. Superficially she reminded Spencer of Emily Prentiss, with her dark hair, pale skin and an indefinable aura of physical competence, that kick-ass, bad-ass vibe both women shared. She also had more than a little of Penelope Garcia’s unconventional and totally shameless vivacity. Not to mention attraction to bright colors, in the neon
pink scrunchies. But Spencer had been told Vala ‘wasn’t from around here’, and as Dr. Thibideau had been at some pains to tell him, aliens… there was no telling what was going on with them.

“I’m not sure how well my perceptions would work with you, Ms. Mal Doran. Since you’re from…”

‘out of town’, so to speak, your reactions derive from an entirely different culture and mind-set than I’m used to. The usual markers probably don’t apply.”

“Oh come on now. I double dog dare you.”

He had to smile. Her interactions with him were entirely free and easy, showing no preconceived attitude or prejudice. It was like dealing with his team, or a norm unaware of his status, who saw only him, not his gender. He was aware that she probably didn’t even know what a zed really was, given Daniel had told him they had found none on any world in the Milky Way Galaxy other than Earth, or, as they had learned lately, living in the Pegasus galaxy.

“All right. But not here and now. How about we have a game of poker later? You play poker?”

Vala gave him a shark’s grin. “Oh, do I play! I’ll gather the usual suspects for this evening, seven o’clock, officers’ mess. It’s where we usually play, and it’ll be a full house tonight, in more ways than one. I’ll supply the snacks. Bring lots of candy. That’s the usual stakes. I like the peanut M&Ms.”

With that, the woman flounced out, apparently on a mission to prepare for the big game.

Daniel studied him. “She’s very good at it.”

Spencer smiled placidly. “So am I. I was raised in Las Vegas, you know.”

“Oh…”

“I’ve been banned from pretty much every casino in Nevada, and one in Atlantic City, because, with my memory and math ability, I can’t really avoid counting cards.”

“Ah. I see we have an interesting evening ahead of us, Dr. Reid. Eat up. You’ll need your strength. Vala doesn’t like to lose. And she isn’t above cheating, if she has to.”

Spencer smiled even wider. “I’ll show you a couple of card tricks, later, when I catch her at it.”

“Oh yeah, this is going to be interesting.”

“Jackson! You’re back!” called another loud voice from across the cafeteria, or was it a mess hall, since this was, after all, a military base? Spencer would have to ask Daniel, later on. The low level of conversations in the room had abruptly gone silent as soon as Ms Mal Doran had entered, her voice clearly audible to even the least interested eavesdropper, as was that of the man who now strolled boldly up to their table. Neither visitor made any attempt to lower their voice, or keep their conversations private. Where everyone on the relatively small SGC base probably knew each other well, perhaps this was more a small-town scenario? Where everyone expected to know everyone else’s business?

“Oh, hey Cameron. Dr. Spencer Reid, Lt. Col. Cameron Mitchell, team lead of SG-1.”

Spencer didn’t often shake hands, was uncomfortable with touch, but when Col Mitchell reached out and grabbed his hand, raised to give an acknowledging wave instead, and began pumping it enthusiastically, Spencer was too stunned and unprepared to resist. He had to content himself with withdrawing his hand as swiftly as possible.
“Dr. Reid! It’s an honor, sir. An honor. You’re a hero, sir, a gen-u-wine hero. Boy Howdy, my momma is going to flip when she hears I actually met you in person.”

When the boisterous and energetic man paused to allow Spencer a reply, he was too flummoxed to offer anything coherent. “Um…”

Daniel sighed as Mitchell grabbed a chair, spun it around to sit backwards on it so he could rest his arms along the back. “Tone it down a bit, will you Cam? Sorry, Spencer. Cameron can tend to be a bit of a fan-boy.”

“Hey now!” Mitchell protested, but his intensely blue eyes were sparkling. “I am a fan of the good doctor, I will freely admit. I heard you were recruiting him. Is he going to help out in the hard sciences section? I know they could sure as hell use someone better than Kavanagh to ride herd on the eggheads.”

“No. Jack and I are taking him to Atlantis. He’ll back up our Agent Afloat, Tony DiNozzo. We ship out on the *Daedalus* tomorrow.”

Mitchell blinked at this. “Atlantis?” He blinked again, looking from Daniel to Spencer and back again. “You and Dr. Reid. In Atlantis. With McKay, Sheppard, Beckett and DiNozzo…? Oh hell, no. General O’Neill is taking you? Who else is going?”

“Well, Vala…”

“Oh hell no! Since when does SG-1 ship out without the team lead, anyway?”

Daniel blinked. “I hadn’t thought of it like that. I’m sure if you ask Jack, he’ll let you come too.”

“I might just do that, sunshine. I sure as hell don’t like the idea of y’all going out there without me. No telling what kinda trouble you might get into. And who you got on Dr. Reid’s security detail until then?”

Daniel blinked again. “Well… me, I guess. I’m just going to be showing him around the base. Vala’s planning on poker in the officers’ mess later tonight.”

“You?” Mitchell huffed. “And again I say, hell no. Not when your hand-to-hand and firearm proficiency scores have been in the toilet the past month, when you bother to show up for testing at all.”

Daniel scowled. “I haven’t had the time.”

“You’re on a front-line first contact field team, Jackson. You damn well better make time. You’re lucky Landry hasn’t benched you already. You know how he’d love the chance. And seeing how lousy your last test was, even O’Neill won’t let you get away with going out anyway.”

Daniel colored red at the criticism, but Spencer had a certain sympathy for the man. He shrugged and said, “You’re looking at the person who holds the FBI record for most exemptions logged at the Academy for one agent, just so I could qualify for the BAU team.”

Mitchell looked him up and down, first critically, as if assessing his physical status, but then with a little sneaky half-smile, lingering a little on certain areas that made Spencer color uncomfortably himself. It took Daniel giving his team-lead a warning swat and a lifted eyebrow for the Air Force Lt. Colonel to straighten up.

“So you’ve qualified on firearms and self defense since then, right?”
“I’ve worked very hard in every area where I was deficient, yes. Although, I confess, I still struggle with the martial arts portions. My instructors are quite offended that I use moves my female teammates have taught me, and down-grade me because of that. I’ve passed all my quals the past few years…”

Mitchell was grinning at him, and Spencer felt his neck grow warm at the extra bit of heat in those blue, blue eyes. Although Spencer could certainly appreciate the aesthetic beauty of other human beings (and Col Mitchell was certainly a prime example of a healthy and attractive male), he rarely felt sexual attraction. He was also slow to register it when others showed such interest in him. In fact, he more often found it threatening, a consequence, no doubt, of the bullying he had suffered as a branded zed child and prodigy, and the repugnance he felt at the overly sexualized zed stereotypes. He was far more comfortable interacting with people on a purely intellectual level.

“Well, as my grandma would say, thank the Good Lord for that. I’ll have to get you on the mats myself, see those moves you learned first hand. But for now, you need an escort with better scores than Daniel here.” He turned and surveyed the cafeteria, and, as Spencer could have predicted, everyone seemed to duck their heads and turn away to avoid eye contact.

“Hey! Grogan. Nah, I see you over there, hiding behind Calvetti. Get your ass over here. You’re on escort detail for Dr. Reid. He gets so much as a hang nail on your watch, and I’ll have your guts for garters. Get it?”

“Got it, sir,” the young man with the captain bars sighed.

“Good. Now, I gotta go see General O’Neill about an assignment to Atlantis. Don’t lose him, Grogan. Dr. Reid? Once again, pleasure. I hope I get the chance to know you better.”

With a jaunty wink, Mitchell pushed himself out of his chair, and practically bounced out of the cafeteria. Spencer glanced askance at Daniel, who could only sigh and shrug.

“Sorry, Spencer. Cameron can be a little bit… high-handed. But he means well. You okay with this, Dave?” Daniel asked, turning to the young man.

“Actually, sir,” Grogan confessed, with the hint of a grin, “I was wondering if there was any way I could get an invite to the poker night. Sure. I’m good. Got no problems with zeds.”

“Well then. You finished there, Spencer? Bast too, I see? Then let’s finish the tour… and we’ll stop by the BX at some point to get you some M&Ms for tonight. I’m not sure if they have cat treats, but we’ll find something for her. Coming, Dave?”

“Right behind you, Doctor J.”

As they left their trays at the collection point, Daniel commented to Spencer, “Dave, here, has the distinction of winning the SGC ‘most number of non-fatal injuries’ award three years running, even beating out Sly Siler. And that’s not easy to do…”

Cameron found the general hiding out in the last place anyone would expect… the office assigned to him whenever he was in Cheyenne Mountain. He tapped on the door frame and waited for the silver-haired man to look up.

The general was currently on the phone with someone from the Joint Chiefs, or maybe the Oval Office, to judge by the carefully deferential tone of his voice, even as he made faces and rolled his eyes. When he didn’t frown or make signals to get Cam to leave, the colonel took that as permission
“Yes sir… yes sir, I understand that, sir… Oh hell no, sir. They take the long way out or they don’t go at all. We usually get a good three months to train new personnel, sir, and we need every moment of that. And we know, because whenever we shove someone untrained through the gate, they get themselves, their teams, and sometimes the whole planet they’re on, blown to tiny bits. And that’s no way to win friends and influence people, sir… Well why not? Why do they have to go out on this run?... At least wait till the next run. *Daedalus* will be back in three months, another month to make the Pegasus trip, that’s all prime training time, they should be good to go by then, or we’ll at least have winnowed out the flubs… No, sir, I’m not saying we don’t take them at all, I’m just saying it makes no sense to send *anybody* to Atlantis without a decent grounding in gate travel, or, you know, a cooling off period, if they decide they don’t want to go… Well, to quote Harlan Ellison, sir, anyone who *can* be discouraged, *ought* to be. And better to do it before they ship out, or else we’re just sending them back on the return trip anyway… No, sir. Dr. Reid is a special case. As a matter of fact, he’s the one new guy on the roster I *don’t* have any concerns about! An FBI agent with more than a decade of field experience, stellar marksmanship and negotiating experience is the *least* of my concerns… Because the last time the IOA forced our hands like this, we ended up sending one Trust Goa’uld, one Lucian Alliance ringer and one traitorous ass-hole gun runner to Atlantis! Right now I don’t even have names for half of them! If they won’t even give us time to do a decent security check on these pigs-in-a-poke they’re sending us, then… It happens, sir. It happens a lot, when we don’t get a chance to… Well then, sir, be prepared for our survival rate to go down the toilet. And we’ve been doing so well since the Ori left town… Seriously, sir? As far as I’m concerned, at the moment, they *all* look like Wraith food… yes sir… yes sir. Thank you, sir… Good bye, sir.”

Hanging up, O’Neill groaned, stretched and slumped in his executive chair, then stared at Mitchell. “Okay. Lay it on me. It can’t possibly be worse than what I just heard.”

Yeah, Mitchell had been hearing about the IOA shoving a bunch of newbies, geeks and sudden last-minute un-vetted international personnel on the next trip out to Pegasus. Even the spec-ops military they picked up for the project needed a significant breaking-in period. Mitchell almost felt sorry for the man. Almost.

“Sir. Got a bone to pick with you, general sir.”

Jack leaned back in his chair, glad of the interruption and the excuse to stop reading the infinite number of emails crowding his in-box, and none of them with good news for him. He gestured Mitchell to come in and take the five-minute chair across from him. As Mitchell came in, shut the door pointedly behind him and sat, Jack said “Let me guess. You want to come to Atlantis with us.”

“You’re taking Jackson and Dr. Reid. Not to mention Vala. That leaves me and sergeant… what’s-his-name. The new guy. The temporary new guy who probably won’t survive his first trip out with us, so I haven’t bothered remembering his name.”

“Yeah, I know that one,” Jack agreed. “What’s wrong with him?”

Mitchell shrugged. “Nothing really… just too damn new. Too damned military and by-the-book. Like there’s a book for what we do. And he *has* been through our regular three-month training schedule, but I’m doubting how much of it sank in. Day he got assigned to us, I asked him what he thought of archeologists going out with the teams… he gave me a song and dance that showed he at least did his homework and knew who Daniel was, but I was checking him in the mirror when my back was turned, and he was all over rolling his eyes and wincing. Haven’t had much reason to change my opinion since. And if you’re taking Daniel and Vala to Atlantis, that’s at least a three-
month turn-around, and I’d have to re-build a team anyway… thought I’d toss him back to the back-fill pool for some other team lead to show him the ropes.

“So tell me sir, why take Daniel and Vala and not me?”

Jack sighed, and shrugged. “Not a slight, Cameron. Not a deliberate one, anyway. But I’ve got an itchy feeling in my gut about what’s going on out there in Pegasus, and I need to be there.”

Mitchell sat up with a gratifying show of concern for Jack’s gut. Daniel had waved a negligent hand at his worry, and Hank had failed epically to earn his confidence in this particular matter. Maybe he had found someone willing to listen and offer an unbiased opinion.

“What’s got you riled, sir? If I may ask.”

“You may. It’s the zed thing. How do you feel about them, Cam?”

“I got no problem with anyone who isn’t trying to shoot at me. I got family who are Z positive, carriers and zeds both, and I gotta say… I don’t like how hard they have it, for something that’s no different than having dark hair or blue eyes. I know General Landry has some burr up his ass about them, but not me. So what zed thing are you talking about?”

“I’ve got this feeling… I think it’s about to blow sky high, and I think it’s going to start in Pegasus. I feel like I need to be there.”

Mitchell frowned. “Zeds, hunh? Yeah, it does seem like it’s high-time people got their heads slapped so they can get them screwed on right. And from what I’ve read about Dr. Reid, he’s just the guy to do the slapping. But you’re taking him to Atlantis.”

Jack fiddled with his pen. “I don’t like what I’m hearing, Cam. Or rather, not hearing. We send one zed to Pegasus, and suddenly everything is about zeds. Teyla and Sheppard’s wookie are up in arms about how he’s treated, seems they’ve got berds in Pegasus and they’re all, like, holy men and shamans, highly revered there, and we discover a whole hell of a lot we should have suspected to begin with. Zeds didn’t evolve here with the rest of us, they came to Earth when the Lanteans returned. So. Not a genetic mistake, not a mutation or error on the part of Mother Nature, but a venerated people from another galaxy, who were taken from their homes and brought back here for who knows what bent reason. So how did they get to be pariahs on this planet, hunh?

“Now we find out they’ve all got the ATA gene… or at least, that’s Daniel’s guess, and when is he ever wrong about this stuff? He might not consciously remember from when he was glowy, but you know how those Ascended bastards like screwing with him so they can lead us all by the nose. And right now? I’d bet my last fishing rod that they’re leading us to some kind of revelation about the zeds.”

Mitchell frowned, considering this. “So you’re going to Atlantis to find out more about zeds.”

Jack nodded. “Because the answers sure as hell aren’t here. I need Daniel to come with, because he’s the only guy who has a chance of getting me those answers. And ever since we sent NCIS Very Special Agent Afloat DiNozzo to Pegasus, I’ve been getting the most white-washed and squeaky-clean bullshit mission reports out of AR-1 I’ve ever seen in my *life*. No way did Carter see those and not know she was looking at BS, first to last. God knows, we wrote enough of them ourselves over the years to be able to spot them a mile off. Yet she passed them on to me, without so much as a sticky-note to explain herself. So she’s going along with Sheppard and his wookie, backing whatever play they’re making out there, and waiting for me to come and call her on it in person. And that… that scares me green. ‘Cause you know it can’t be good.”
Mitchell slowly nodded. "And Dr. Reid? How does he fit into all this?"

Jack leaned back in his comfy chair. Much as Walter must hate Hank Landry, he still loved Jack.

"He fits a lot of ways. First, the poor kid has made Earth too hot to hold him, for now. He stays here, he’s going to get himself killed in the anti-berd back-lash from his adventures in Arkansas. And I have a feeling that would be a crime against humanity, if I were to allow it on my watch. So I’m sending him to the one place I know of where he has even a chance of surviving. Second… IQ of 187, reading speed that defies belief, and an eidetic memory, three PhDs and a whole collection of ABD terminal masters, not to mention the other degrees he’s collected… like other people collect postage stamps. He’s a walking talking database of Earth’s accumulated knowledge. Of course I want him on my team! And that’s even without his background of field work with the BAU. The kid catches serial killers for a living. He practically reads their minds. You bet I want him. Third…

“I’ve been doing this a long time, Cam. I can tell an Ancient SNAFU about to blow up in our faces when I see it. And the timing of Reid’s Arkansas case is just too much not to be a sign from on high. And I don’t mean God. Those bastard Ancients need us to clean up another of their messes. They never care too much about collateral damage, and Reid was lining up to be victim number one. So I’m going to personally escort that kid to Atlantis, and find out what the fuck is going on with zeds, and what it’s going to take to straighten it all out this time.”

Mitchell nodded. “Okay. I get all that. Thing is, sir… permission to speak freely?"


Waving his hands and vaulting to his feet, Mitchell roared out, “Are you *nuts*? You’ve already got McKay, Sheppard and now this DiNozzo guy out there in Pegasus… I don’t know too much about the NCIS guy, just enough to know he’s a god-damned trouble magnet of planetary magnitude, but the other two? They’re pan-galactic trouble magnets, well known fact! And you want to send Daniel and Vala, Universal magnets for all things trouble, and now Dr. Reid, who has *already* proven his trouble scope to be epic? All that trouble magnetism, all in one place at one time? Are you *nuts*?”

Jack blinked. “Um… I don’t think I actually thought of it that way…”

“Okay… point.”

“Now, the way you laid it all out, I have no doubts you’re right, but by taking Dr. Reid to Atlantis, you’re basically making him bait. If something ugly is coming at the zeds, it’s gonna hit him, and DiNozzo, first.”

“Now, that *had* occurred to me. Any suggestions about how I can mitigate the damage? Because believe me, losing either one of those young men is *not* in my plan.”

“Seems like DiNozzo is pretty well taken care of – Teyla and Ronon will have his back, from all I’ve heard. Which leaves Dr. Reid.”

Jack eyed the young Lt. Colonel, considering him. “Sounds like you might want that assignment. Care to tell me why?”
Mitchell colored bright red, and Jack had an epiphany. “But you don’t even know the guy! Have you even met him yet, face to face?”

“In the commissary, just now.”

“Don’t tell me. Love at first sight.”

“Hey now! Let’s not get hasty here.”

“Lust at first sight?”

Mitchell scowled. “No need to get all insulting, sir, just ‘cause I called you out on your fool plans for collecting the biggest trouble attractors in the known universe into one city. Dr. Reid is an outstanding human being who doesn’t deserve all the crap he’s had drop on him from a great height, or what you’re letting him in for, without even warning him. You haven’t, have you?”

“Yeah, the best defense is a good offense. Nice one, Cameron. No, I haven’t. I’m thinking Daniel knows most of it, or could guess. But it was hard enough talking Reid into accepting our offer in the first place, without adding any items to the ‘con’ column. And what do I even say to him? That there’s a big honkin’ target on berds? I think he’s already well aware of that. Okay. You’re in. I already knew I was going to need someone I trust to bodyguard Reid. You two will be partners, at least until we can get some kind of handle on what’s going on. But I’m going to warn you now. If, when you’re watching his six, you get distracted by his ass, I’ll string you by your *coholes* to the highest tower in Atlantis. *Comprende*?”

Mitchell placed his hand over his heart. “Sir. You wound me. I’m good enough at multi-tasking to do both.” Then he gave an irreverent grin that had Jack laughing.

“Go on. Get out. You’ve got packing to do. We leave tomorrow, you know. Oh! And, Cameron, just to put the cherry on your sundae... you do know we’ve got a bunch of Russians shipping out with us?”

Cam’s smug smirk abruptly disappeared under a scowl. “Aw hell, sir. How’d you let that happen?”

“IOA. Not my call. But given their attitudes toward zeds... much as I’d like a good excuse to dump them out an airlock on our way to Pegasus, not if it means putting our new pet zed at risk.”

“Yeah. I get that. I’ll do my best, sir.”

“You do that, Cameron. Or, you know, we’ll see if we can’t get the Israelis to do it for us.”

That hit-in-the-head-with-a-bowling-ball look on the colonel’s face as Jack shut the door on him, was priceless.
Daniel, Spencer and Grogan were late arriving at the party, mostly because he and Daniel kept getting side-tracked with a never-ending series of Q&A sessions. Spencer wanted to think that maybe one day he’d get to the bottom of all his questions, but it seemed doubtful.

Vala, sitting at a big round table with a green dealer’s visor on her head, had already amassed quite a pile of M&Ms before her. The other woman at the table, Dr. Caroline Lam, the base CMO, who had informed Spencer earlier that day that, yes, he did indeed have a strong expression of the coveted ATA gene – at least as strong as General O’Neill’s – was holding her own. The big losers at the table were the three men. Daniel introduced Colonel Lou Ferretti, a member of the SGC since the very first mission, but he hadn’t met either of the other two gentlemen. Vala took up the slack.

“Oh,” she said blithely, “these are two of the crazy Brits we’re taking with us to Atlantis. Edmund Black and Tony Baldrick. They’re the security detachment.”

Edmund Black was a slender, striking-looking man with jet black hair, a moustache and beard, trimmed to within an inch of its life. He was also the dominant, quick to offer a hand to shake. Spencer, as always, tucked his right hand away to offer a little left-handed wave instead. This stalled the man for only a moment before he turned up the wattage on his smile, looking over the shy zed with some interest.

“Ah, Dr. Reid. I’ve heard *so* much about you. Looking forward to our trip to Pegasus together.” It took a nudge from his companion to get Black to acknowledge him, with a bit of a curled lip. “Ah yes. And this is my partner, Baldrick. Pay no attention to him. He’s basically along on this trip as cannon fodder.”

Baldrick was a middle aged somewhat dumpy fellow, balding, rounding, unprepossessing in the extreme. He’d disappear into the woodwork, if he wasn’t so effusively happy and enthusiastic. Not exactly what you’d expect in a security consultant of any kind – but maybe that was the point? He pretended not to be offended by his partner’s disparaging comment, instead focusing on Spencer.

“You’re with the Behavior Analysis Unit of the FBI, right? You hunt serial killers? How brilliant is that! I’ve read some of David Rossi’s books, he’s on your team, right? Maybe you can get him to autograph something for me?”

“What,” Black commented dismissively. “You can read?”

Spencer wasn’t sure what to make of the pair, how seriously Black meant his put-downs, or what prompted them. From their differing accents, Black’s decidedly on the upper-crust side while Baldrick’s was far more Cockney, Spencer couldn’t help wonder if it was a class thing.

He gave Baldrick a tentative smile and said, “I can certainly have Rossi autograph a book for you. I’m not sure how soon I’ll be able to get it to you…”

Baldrick almost wriggled in excitement, “Not a problem! I understand. We’re going to be in another galaxy, after all! Thank you, Dr. Reid. Phil and Mick are going to bust a gusset over this.”

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“What?”

“The British team we’re taking,” Daniel supplied smoothly. “Phil Aston and Mick Harding are archeologists, their partner Taylor Timson is a geologist. I’ve been trying to draft them for the project
“Enough with the small talk,” Vala told them all sternly. “We’re here to play poker. Take your seats and ante up, gentlemen. So where’s Cameron? He blow us off?”

“He’s packing,” Daniel answered. “He’s coming with us tomorrow, and it’s a last minute assignment, so he’s got to pack.”

“Uh-hunh.” Vala glanced knowingly at Dr. Lam, then in speculation at Dr. Reid. The grape vine in the Mountain worked at warp speed, and most had noted the popular Air Force Colonel’s sudden case of smit. “Last minute assignment. Sure. Come on, come on. You all know the ante.”

Spencer took it easy the first few hands, getting the lay of the land, and studying the other players. The easiest of all to profile was Baldrick… which immediately made Spencer wary and suspicious. Could someone with SAS background, or similar, a bare minimum to rate him such a seriously vital assignment as the SGC, possibly be that guileless? Put him together with the snooty, smarmy Black, though, and as an undercover duo pretending to be cliché Brits, it made perfect sense. Black was definitely the one to watch out for, his sharp black eyes missing nothing as his partner played the fool, distracting attention to himself.

It took three hands for him to tell the pair were playing to lose. He was pretty sure Vala knew, too, although she was letting them, and taking full advantage. But then, Vala was a chancer down to the bone. She had probably learned the art of the long con at her pappy’s knee, and was quick to recognize it in others.

Since being distracted played into his strategy, Edmund Black focused his attention on Spencer, even sitting twisted in his chair so he could keep an eye on the profiler, barely giving his cards a look.

“So Dr. Reid… you know, that seems awfully formal for us when we’re going to be spending a month at close quarters together… I’m Edmund. May I call you Spencer?”

“Of course.”

“*Most* gracious of you, Spence. So are you single, married, in a relationship?”

“Uh… I’m zed. I’m not allowed to marry in the United States.” Spencer wasn’t so sure about the flirtatious looks and suggestive tone of voice Edmund Black kept sending his way. The profiler was inclined to be offended by this. Poker was serious business, and not to be used as an excuse for flirting. Although… the misdirection could give one an advantage in disguising tells. Spencer would have to think on that, see if he could work a similar strategy into his own protective coloration.

Edmund made a moue with his mouth, and tutted. “How tragic for all of us. If you can’t accept proper proposals… is it illegal for you to accept any indecent ones?”

That had been so blatant, Carolyn Lam had to hide behind a fit of coughing. Spencer, meanwhile, decided to go with his oblivious persona, until he got a better idea where Black thought he was going with this.

“It’s perfectly legal for me to play poker, and raise the bid.”

And slowly but surely, Vala’s pile of candies shrank, while Spencer’s grew. Emily would be proud of him, for going easy on these amateurs. He was positive, within the first couple of hands, that he out-classed them all.

“So, Spencer,” Vala declared, “this zed thing….”
Daniel and Carolyn shook their heads and sighed, Grogan and Ferretti looked wary, but Black and Baldrick merely blinked. Spencer, however, stifled a smile. Ah, misdirection. She was going to say something absolutely outrageous, and then…

“I totally get that having two working sets of genitals is a distinct advantage. Instead of having only half the population for your dating pool, you’ve got *all* of them. Handy. What I *don’t* get, is why everyone thinks this is a bad thing? What is it, envy?”

Even Edmund Black choked on that one. But Spencer was watching… Ah. Gotcha. An ace skillfully slipped into her hand.

“You’re asking the wrong person, Ms Mal Doran,” he replied easily. “In my experience, being zed rather restricts my dating pool. As does my being a genius, a profiler, an FBI agent and apt to be called away on cases at the drop of a hat... I haven’t had a lot of time or opportunity for dating.”

“Oh, now, that is criminal. So if you can’t answer the question... what about the rest of you? Caro? Is this or is this not the most adorable person you’ve ever seen in your life? And... would you date him?”

Caro gave her friend a glowering look. “I would date him in a New York Minute, if I didn’t think my father would hunt him down and shoot him the next day. He’s done it with every date I’ve had since high school, so why stop now? And they were all normal single-gendered, so...”

Vala opened her mouth and turned to Daniel, who wisely held up his hands. “Don’t ask me. I’ve dated probably less than Dr. Reid over the past ten years. Too much work for dating. Unless, you know, it’s dating artifacts…”

Everyone chuckled at the mild joke. Which gave Spencer the opportunity to slip himself a King.

Ferretti, wise man, said only, “Against the non-frat rules,” and Grogan chimed in with “What he said.”

Vala was about to put their two guests on the hot seat, when Cameron arrived.

“Hey guys. What did I miss?”

Vala smirked. “I was about to win this hand. Four aces. Read ‘em and weep, everyone.”

“Ahh... not so fast,” Spencer suggested, laying down his hand. “Straight flush. King high.”

Vala’s jaw dropped. “But... No! That’s impossible! That King was...”

“In your hand, before you traded it out for the ace? Why yes, it was,” Spencer smirked. “This is usually where the gun-fight breaks out in old westerns.” He picked up his hand, made to shuffle, and the straight flush became... four twos. Then back to flush again. “I was born and raised in Las Vegas, you know. I’ve been banned from playing in every casino within the city limits, a few in Reno, and one in Atlantic City, but that one was work-related. In my youth, it was the only way for me to support my Mom and me when my Dad walked out on us, before I turned sixteen and I could legally hold down a legitimate job. By that time I was well on my way to my first PhD, not to mention my first million.”

He had collected all the cards, and was running through a few of his sleight-of-hand routines.

“Because I was zed, I was disqualified from a lot of scholarships and grants, no matter what my IQ results and SATs said, so I had to pay for school on my own. There were limited job opportunities for an aspiring magician to make that kind of cash, so I had to go for gambling. Online poker was the
best bet for me. All you have to do is hit the button that says you’re over eighteen. I made something like a killing. At sixteen, I approached several casinos and offered my services to catch cheaters. I was very good at that. And since I could do it behind the scenes where the paying customers couldn’t tell how old I was, or rather how young, or that I had the zed brand, the casino bosses didn’t mind hiring me for whatever I asked. I absolutely made it worth their while, saved them millions in lost revenue.”

Spencer’s flexible fingers manipulated the deck like a master, showing any card he wanted at any time, shuffling the cards like a slinky, making cards pop up wherever he wanted. Vala’s agate eyes widened and she grinned, feral and focused.

“Oh, you *must* teach me that!”

“Uh-hunh,” Cameron drawled. “And I’m never playing poker with either of you, ever again.”

“No kidding,” Ferretti grumbled, although Grogan’s eyes were like saucers, following Spencer’s deft movements.

Baldrick was grinning like a madman, too. “Do that thing with the aces again!”

“You wanted to know if I could tell when you were lying?” Spencer asked the lady space pirate. “I think I can. I certainly knew the moment you decided to cheat in order to win a hand, and just the way you’d do it. Shock tactics. Not a bad distraction strategy, actually. But I was watching for it. My profile on you said that would be your preferred method.”

The woman’s eyes met his, and he was seeing the true person behind the masks. He was certain of it. “This could be the start of a beautiful friendship, Dr. Reid.”

“I certainly hope so, Ms. Mal Doran. I would hate to have you as an enemy.”

She laughed outright at that, then pushed aside cards and candies and propped her elbows on the table. “Okay then. Zeds. What’s this ‘zed pattern’ I keep hearing about?”

“Vala! No!” Daniel protested. His was the loudest objection at the table, although Edmund Black laughed, himself caught out by the unconventional woman, who was probably not so unlike himself. A chancer and a showman, master of masks.

Spencer had a passing notion this man might have a coyote shadow when dreaming in a blue jungle glade. But Edmund wasn’t either a zed or pregnant, so he wasn’t the coyote Spencer was fated to meet. Spencer shook himself out of the momentary distraction, focusing back on the woman before him.

Spencer matched Vala’s pose, and her double-dog-dare-you grin, and said, “You really want to see it?”

“Yes!”

“No!” yelped both Daniel and Cameron.

“Do you really, really, want to see it?”

“Yes!” That was both Vala and Edmund, laughing and delighted at this new game.

“Okay then.” Spencer stood and made to reach for his belt buckle... but faked them out, instead pointing to a shadowed corner of the room, where a cat none of the others had noticed had been
sitting silent and watchful. “It’s just like that. Only pink and purple, and confined to the area around
the groin. Meet Bast, everyone.”

Grogan blinked. “How did a cat get in here? You haven’t let your pet wander around loose, have
you? I didn’t think cats were even allowed on base.”

Ferretti sighed. “Yeah, tell that to the cats. We’ve had a few of them get in the past few months. That
DiNozzo guy, the NCIS Agent Afloat, had a big orange tom with him when he left. Still, Dr. Reid,
might be best if you kept him in your quarters until you’re ready to leave, so we don’t have to go
chasing him down.”

Spencer shrugged, sitting back down so Bast could come and jump into his lap. “I have tried, you
know. But I think she must have figured a way to undo the latch on her carrier. Luckily, she likes to
stick close to me, wherever I am.”

“I can readily understand that,” Edmund offered in a low, sultry voice as he pulled his chair up closer
and reached to pat the animal. Bast jerked her head back and just stared at him... to little effect, since
Edmund was gazing into Spencer’s wary caramel-coloured eyes.

Across the table, Cameron bristled. “Hey, now. Back off, there. Dr. Reid is a tad touch averse.”

Edmund swung his head around to face the colonel. “Oh?” he challenged blandly. “Was I touching
anyone? My apologies.”

“Oh man,” Caro whispered, sharing a glance with Vala. The women could almost smell the
testosterone filling the air. So could Spencer, and it was making his skin itch.

“You know, we’ve got a big day tomorrow, so I think Bast and I will just...”

Cameron, not taking his eyes off a smirking Edmund Black, clicked his fingers. “Grogan.”

“Yes sir,” the young captain agreed hurriedly, getting up to shadow the profiler.

“Oh, this trip is going to be *fun*,” Vala confided to Daniel and Caro both.

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Much as he’d made it his excuse for escaping an uncomfortable situation, Spencer actually wasn’t
very tired. Certainly not tired enough to sleep, with everything that was on his mind. When he left his
quarters – without his human guard, but with Bast trailing idly behind him – he had no definite,
conscious, goal in view.

But it wasn’t much of a surprise to find himself in the conference room. It was shadowed and dark,
but the huge window on the Gate Room was throwing dim light onto the back walls, the blast wall
pulled back. The dark grey ring in the cavernous room below had an ominous beauty to it, almost
hypnotic, almost malevolent, standing still and silent, but promising untold wonders, and horrors, just
a dial away.

Restless and conflicted, he had wandered the quiet, near-empty halls of Stargate Command,
encountering few people, and of those, all had given him curious stares and then a wide berth. He
had found his way to the twenty-seventh floor, and been drawn by instinct, it seemed, to the
darkened conference room and its panoramic view.

There was light from an opened door further down the corridor, evidently the operations room,
where voices could be heard, and the ever-present hum of high-tech computers and various other
sorts of equipment, no doubt required to operate the Stargate and maintain the kind of vigilance necessary when anything might come through at any time. There would be teams on the other side, somewhere ‘out there’, and the situation could no doubt go ‘hot’ at any moment.

Spencer had been given access to the full un-redacted mission reports, both for the Earth Stargate Command and Atlantis, and if he hadn’t yet completed reading through them, it was because of the limits of the SGC laptop paging utility. As state-of-the-art and enhanced by alien tech as it was, it still couldn’t match his normal report reading speed. What he had found in the missions he had read, those clearly labeled ‘mission critical’, told of an incredible adventure, almost beyond imagining. Sci-Fi and Dr. Who fan that he was, Spencer’s imagination was, perhaps, a little more flexible than most, but even he had been caught by astonishment at some of the revelations he found. He could well imagine the wonders and dangers, analogs to Cybermen, Daleks, Gallifreyans and Ood…

But Earth had been in peril more times than he liked to think, and no one, outside the extremely small circle of those under the umbrella of Home World Security or the IOA, even knew about it. And in the early years, just before the millennium, the entire planet was a sitting duck for the first Goa’uld, Replicator or space pirate who chose to drop in, nothing more than a few nukes and a space shuttle available for defense from extra-terrestrial threats. It made him shudder to think how hard these people had needed to fight, to save everyone. Alone, without recognition or any significant help from outside. He had nothing but the utmost respect for the work they had done, collecting allies and tech, and was absolutely astounded by their successes. In ten years, to go from totally helpless and planet-bound, to a significant space presence in this galaxy and Pegasus… The Goa’uld, Replicators and Ori defeated, against all odds and expectation, an, admittedly, small but growing space fleet at their disposal… The Wraith still a concern, and a looming threat from the space pirate gangsters of the Lucian Alliance who had risen to fill the power vacuum left by the Goa’uld… But with all the tools needed to defend the home planet, Tau’ri, the First World. And all across the Milky Way Galaxy, planets populated by Earth’s kidnapped and enslaved descendants were now free.

It was an amazing story, and Spencer felt humbled and honored that he had been asked to participate in it. But…

But.

He sighed, resting his forehead against the chill glass.

He heard the footsteps approaching, and in the reflection, recognized Daniel, even in silhouette from the lit corridor, entering behind him.

Silent and introspective as Spencer himself, Daniel stood beside him, staring out at the Stargate.

After a moment of calm quiet, not feeling awkward or pressured at all, Spencer finally spoke, if for no other reason than to try and sort out the chaos of his own thoughts and feelings, still resisting any attempt of his to get them into logical order.

“I have this feeling I’ve jumped from the frying pan into the fire,” he began slowly. “If it was up to me, I would have stayed with my team, doing my job at the BAU. Either this hoopla would have quieted down, just another nine-days wonder, and people would have forgotten about me or ignored me, or I would have been beaten with increasing severity until I either died, or worse, was crippled badly enough to prevent me doing my job any longer. Those two are extreme ends of the probabilities, and I could have lived with something in the middle.”

When Spencer paused, unwilling to proceed any further, a hand on his belly, Daniel nodded.

“I understand,” Daniel said. “I wish I could tell you this will be better, but you already know it won’t
be. I think we can promise you won’t face the level of violence because of your gender, although I imagine even Sheppard and Dex won’t be able to stone every asshole before they sling insults or some form of hazing your way. So death and crippling injury are very probably off the table, and given where you’re going and the work we need you to do, you’d have to be crippled pretty badly to prevent you doing your job.

“But I’ve been doing this for over a decade now. And I’ve died… more times than I care to count. Alien tech has brought me back, or actual aliens, or even Earth-bound resuscitation on a couple of occasions. I was ‘dead’ for over a year at one point.”

Spencer smiled wanly. “For tax reasons?”


“That’s a line from ‘The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy’. Yeah.”

Daniel nodded. “My point being… every time we step through that amazing, terrifying artifact, we never know what we’ll find… our new best friend, our new worst enemy, or both. Sometimes in the same being at the same time. The risks are incredibly high, but so are the potential rewards. Sometimes we save a life, or a village, or a whole planet… sometimes we save *our* planet. And for me, that makes any personal sacrifice I have to make worth it. And I’ve made a lot of personal sacrifices. A lot.”

“But still worth it.”

Daniel shrugged. “I’m still here. Still fighting, still exploring. So yeah, still worth it. But that’s me. You need to decide if it’s worth it to you. And I think… because you’re here, you’ve already decided that the BAU job, as important and as valuable as it was, and make no mistake, saving innocent lives and getting closure and justice for the families of the dead, is always going to be worthwhile… but it was no longer worth the personal sacrifices you were going to be required to make.”

“If it was just me… it would be an easy decision.” Spencer rubbed absently at his belly, imagining he could already feel the new life growing there, wriggling and as restless as he. “But it’s not. I want… I need… My baby has to know love. Security. Respect. Those things are going to be impossible here. Every media outlet, every day, they show those surveillance tapes of… of my ordeal in Sulfur Springs. They’ll tire of it eventually, I know, but it seems like my very name has become synonymous with zed rights, so every time the issue comes up, every time zeds are discriminated against or the victims of violent crime, that story and that tape is going to be resurrected, and I’m going to be fielding calls for interviews or statements. How can I possibly protect my child from that? At least until they’re old enough to be told the truth? How can I control what they learn and how, anywhere on this planet? And every time my name comes up, I’ll become a target all over again, from any idiot with an axe to grind. And there are a lot of idiots out there. Until this whole disaster, I don’t think I fully appreciated just how many gullible, deluded, bigoted idiots there are, everywhere I go.”

Daniel’s eyes grew distant and darkened. “I understand that, too. My wife Sha’re… after she was abducted by the Goa’uld Apophis and infested by his Queen, Ammonet… they produced a child. The human child of two hosts is a Harcesis, cursed with the genetic race memory of the symbiotes infesting its biological parents. The Goa’uld System Lords forbid that, and make it their business to hunt down and destroy any harcesis. Shifu was Sha’re’s son, but… She asked me, her last dying request, to find him and protect him. I did find him. I would have taken him as my own, raised him as my own, loved and protected him to my dying breath… I would have given up the Stargate and all it meant, to raise Shifu as Sha’re would wish… but I couldn’t protect him from the genetic
memories inside him. I had to leave him behind with… a friend. Someone who did have the power, not just to hide him from the Goa’uld, but protect him from the memories of a thousand Hitlers, and what that would have done to him, how it would have twisted him. It was one of the hardest things… I ever had to do. To give him up. But I couldn’t protect him. The only way I could save him from what he would have become... was to entrust him to someone else.”

“You think I should give my baby up?”

“No! No, no way. Spencer, your situation is entirely different. You aren’t carrying a Harcesis, or even a potential serial killer. No, I wasn’t suggesting you give up your baby. That decision is yours alone, and I have no right to an opinion on the matter. I only told you about Shifu so you would know… I once faced the same difficulty as you. Trying to make a decision that would not only impact my life, but the life of an innocent I was responsible for. When I could barely sort out what my own priorities should be.”

“Priorities. Yes. That’s the root of my problem, isn’t it? Conflicting responsibilities. Before this, it was to the victims of crimes, to my team, to my mom.”

“And to yourself?”

Spencer waved that away with a negligent hand. “Now, my responsibilities have changed, to the planet, the race, and now, it seems, to my gender… and then there’s my doubled family, mom and my baby. As you put it yourself, save a life, or a village, or a whole planet… sometimes we save *our* planet. But which takes priority? I can’t help but feel… it should be my baby. I want it to be my baby. I want it to be safe and loved, I want it to know that whatever happened to cause its conception, it is entirely innocent and entirely loved, and absolutely free to make a life of their own, unclouded by any lingering legacy from either of its parents. And maybe it’s unreasonable and unrealistic of me, but I want it to be respected as a human being, with all the rights, protections and privileges that entails, no matter its gender. That’s my dream.”

Daniel eyed him, smiling faintly. “Dreams teach. Just watch out, Spencer. The dreams I get are mostly advanced aliens, interfering in ways they think they won’t get caught, to lead me by the nose to some new dreadful mess.”

Spencer blinked at him. This was unexpected. “Dr. Thibideau mentioned that… aliens… well, they’re alien. No telling what’s really going on with them.”

“True enough. Jack calls me a Trouble Magnet. From what I can tell, you kind of qualify for the title too. Which means it doesn’t really matter what you do or what you decide, trouble is going to find you. And poor little junior is going to be collateral damage, no matter what. But at least on Atlantis, you’ll have support, people you can count on, absolutely, to protect you both. You’ll be able to better manage the threats from your own people, control the flow of information enough to manage how much your baby learns and when. And then there’s this. Everything we’ve ever thought we knew about zeds is, apparently, a lie. The truth about you is in Pegasus. I think someone needs to find out what that truth is, and I can’t think of a better person for the job. Not just for you and for Earth zeds, but for your baby as well.”

Spencer considered this with a nod.

Daniel patted his back, and for once, the touch of another didn’t feel intrusive or threatening.

“We’ve got a busy day tomorrow, a last briefing and then boarding the *Daedalus*. Try to get some sleep, if you can.”
With that, and another reassuring pat, Daniel left Spencer alone with his feline companion and thoughts, and a new reason to think maybe he wasn’t taking himself and Little One (as his mom called his baby) into certain death. Or, at least, not without sufficient justification.

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Slowly, Spencer became aware that, although he had space, he wasn’t alone. Well, apart from the grey tabby leaning against his calf. Not Grogan out there in the hall waiting in guard, but Cameron Mitchell. With a sigh, Spencer bowed to the inevitable. The colonel had wanted a private talk with him, and was adamant in not leaving him unguarded. The two goals were meshing rather nicely for the man right now.

With Bast at his heels, Spencer started on his journey back to his quarters.

“Can’t sleep?” Cameron asked with some sympathy in his voice.

“I’m leaving my home planet tomorrow. Everyone and everything I’ve ever known in my entire life. I don’t know if I’ll ever return. That’s just a bit much for me to process. Sleep… I’m not sure I even know what that means.”

Cameron chuckled.

“Pardon me if I’m overstepping, colonel, but… for a military man, you seem… well, rather relaxed around me. It’s not what I expect from any strangers, even at the SGC, but most especially anyone military.”

Spencer could almost see the man preparing to laugh this off with a light joke. But he seemed to change his mind.

“I got a big family… Kansas… The Mitchells are a military family. Have been for generations. But we’re a bit more inclusive than most, I guess. See, every generation, every war zone, every one of us has brought back a war bride… or a war groom, as the case may be. Great gramma Gwyneth, great uncle Guido, great aunt Freida, aunt Chin-Sun, aunt Chau, cousin Haidar… well, you get the idea. Interracial, interfaith, same genders… it’s all the same to us.

“Then there was the day my baby sister bought home a zed fiancé for Thanksgiving, and when he confronted the family, like he was facing a tribe of hungry cannibals… tribe, okay, cop to the hungry too, 'cause you don’t come to momma’s Thanksgiving spread without being ravenous, to do full justice to the turkey, fixin’s and twelve kinds of pie for dessert. The kind of courage it took for the guy to face us all, with his arm around my baby sister’s waist and white-knuckled hand clutching her belt… told his feelings for my baby sis, and that’s all any of us needed to know. Next thing you know, there’s laughter and congrats and slaps on the back, appreciated the nerve he showed… and then one cousin’s wife is crying and taking off the thick bracelet she always wore to reveal her Z brand, running to hug the new guy and crying on his shoulder… turned out at there were three zeds already in the Mitchell clan, hiding their secret from all but their spouse, and that was the end of that bullshit. Far as we’re concerned, they’re all married, tight as tight, whether it’s legal or not. Mitchells are nothing if not inclusive, once you show your worth by sticking up for the mate you want.

“So if you’re looking for me to show my colors as just another alpha male ass-hole, you’re gonna be waiting a long time. I said it’s an honor to know you, Dr. Reid, and I meant it.”

Spencer nodded. They had reached his door. He turned to face Colonel Mitchell, and offered his hand. “Call me Spencer.”
Mitchell grinned in relief, like he’d won a battle, and maybe he had. “I’m Cam to my friends. And I sure as hell hope that’s the least we can be, Spence.”
It had never occurred to Spencer before, and he felt like an idiot for not realizing, but… space travel was… *BORING*. After the initial thrill of actually being on a real honest-to-god spaceship, seeing his planet from orbit, and the flash-by of the solar system as the ship reached a safe jumping-off point for them to engage their hyperdrive (*hyperdrive*! So cool…)! and then the half hour it had taken to tour the entire *Daedalus* from one end to the other, and the first few hours spent in front of the mess-hall view-port, mesmerized by the blue arcs of hyperspace speeding by in graceful ribbons of light… well.

There wasn’t a whole lot to *do*. It was as close as Spencer hoped he would ever come to being incarcerated in prison. And he could tell right now, if that ever happened, no matter his dual-gender or federal agent status, or even his long-haired, milque-toast, kick-me demeanor, he would *not* do well in the close confines and severe physical restrictions.

His ship-board quarters were tiny. There was a bunk-bed cot, a bathroom he could *just* turn around in, that was no bigger than the one on the BAU jet (for obvious space-saving reasons), enough head room for him to stand up-right, and his go-bag and Bast’s carrier (now doubling as a litter box) both tucked in the storage lockers under the bed… and that was it. With no windows, and even the door having an air-tight seal as a security feature, when the lights turned off the cabin was utterly black… but for a row of tiny led lights against the corridor side wall, enough to allow you to get to and from the bathroom, as if you couldn’t just grope your way… but with Spencer’s border-line scotophobia (fear of the dark), he found the tiny night-lights vastly reassuring. He could read while sitting or reclined on the cot, but it didn’t take long for the walls, every one within arms-reach, to start closing in. At least he didn’t have to share, which, he understood, most did, and there was, in fact, a second bunk above him, fastened unused against the bulkhead. Thankfully, Daniel had put his foot down about their one zed passenger having to endure such close quarters with anyone else. There was one shower room down the hall shared by all the passengers on this deck, on a strict rota.

There was a gym for working out, but it was almost always full of military personnel, who stopped, turned, and gave him blank, level stares when he passed by. It wasn’t that they were threatening or harassing or anything, but… they were polite. If it were possible to be *aggressively* polite, then these guys fit that description. Nothing wrong with that, exactly, it could certainly be worse, Spencer had expected and been prepared for far worse, but…

Most of the civilian passengers and off-duty science crew spent the larger portion of their time in the two common areas – the mess hall and the conference room. These two groups, passengers and crew, did *not* mix. It was all very high-school and cliquish, which Spencer found rather odd. And even among the passengers, there were clear demarcations by nation. The Israelis and Russians, for example, took great care to claim tables at furthest ends of both spaces, away from each other. In the middle were the Brits, a somewhat raucous bunch, and Spencer was beginning to understand the meaning of the term ‘loony’.

It was their security guy, Tony Baldrick, who enthusiastically introduced his team, archeologists Phil Aston and Mick Harding, and geologist Taylor Timson. All three men were rather later than middle aged, sporting shaggy academic hair long since gone white, Timson and Mick with neatly-kept white beards. All three men were obviously used to long hard hours in the field, with weathered faces and
hands, from performing excavations at various dig sites around Great Britain. They were finding the cramped quarters as hard as Spencer was, so haunted the Mess, going over Atlantis Expedition laptops full of mission details, often with Daniel Jackson assisting and answering questions. Phil in particular had a strong accent, like he was keeping the words hoarded like marbles in his mouth before releasing them, charming, but all but unintelligible to Spencer, until he began to develop an ear for it. All three were excited beyond measure by all the revelations about the Stargate Project (they had been briefed about the same time as Spencer, so were just as new and struggling to wrap their heads around the reality of aliens), and what they expected to find in Pegasus. None of them had even blinked at Spencer’s brand. Zed? Who cares, listen to what I just found out… It was a refreshing attitude Spencer could well live with.

To his personal mortification, however, what Spencer could *not* live with was the overt interest of the two security personnel. Things Dr. Thibideau had said about being able to handle the shunning and hostility, but freaked when faced with overtures of friendship… they now made perfect sense to Spencer. Edmond Black never lost one single opportunity to leer at his backside, or deliver more, but mostly less, subtle double entendres. It was just so… weird. And while Spencer did his best to ignore it or fake being oblivious, every once in a while Edmund was so blatant that Spencer could only blink in astonishment. He had the distinct feeling that Black was laughing at him.

But even worse… was Baldrick’s gleeful and somewhat creepy interest in Spencer’s career. It was just so… ghoulish. Spencer knew a lot of ordinary people, who had never been directly confronted with death in any form, were fascinated by the whole concept of serial killers, but… to *enjoy* it so much, as if it were a form of entertainment? Spencer was beginning to understand why Rossi was sometimes reluctant to go on his book tours. He must be faced with this sort of inappropriate enthusiasm all the time.

So here it was, day two into a month-long trip, and Spencer was hiding out in his quarters, with Bast grumbling and occasionally pacing at the door.

Until there was an abrupt rap on the door, it slid aside in a very Star Trek way, and Cameron Mitchell stood there grinning. “Hey there, sunshine. You decent?” The pilot gave him a quick once-over – more leers, terrific – then said, “It’s our turn at the gym. Care to join me?”

“Our turn?”

“Yeah. Regular military get the 0-1200 slot, passengers and civilians get 1201 to 2400. It just seems to work out better that way. But you promised to show me your hand-to-hand moves, and we can’t have you moping in here all day. Bast, you can come too.”

Spencer stood readily enough. He had been itching with the inactivity, but now he understood a bit better about scheduling. “I didn’t actually promise anything, but I have no objections. Do I need to change into work-out clothes?”

“Naw, there’s a set of sweats waiting for you there in your size, SGC issue.”

The sweat pants and T-shirt fit him fine, and he began his warm-up routine with Mitchell watching him critically… just like Bast. He would never win any awards at martial arts, but he had at least got to the point where he could hold his own against an unsub or assailant. As long as they came at him one-on-one, or didn’t taze him first.

Mitchell gave a nod after the first few minutes of him going through a kata Derek had shown him, and reached for a communication panel on the wall by the gym door.

“Jackson! Where the hell are you? We have a date in the gym, did you forget?... Well get your butt
down here! I’m not letting *anyone* loose on the Pegasus galaxy if they can’t pass their fitness quals. And you *know* Sam will back me up on that.”

Fifteen minutes later, a grumbling Daniel Jackson dragged in, highly aggrieved. “I’ve been trying to get ten minutes to meet with the Israelis, and you interrupted the best shot I had yet, Cam. It’s like they’ve been avoiding me.”

“No!” Cam professed sarcasm and shock. “Don’t tell me the Jackson charm failed you? Or did you try to speak Hebrew to them? Because you know your accent stinks.”

“My Hebrew is just fine, thank you very much. It’s my Russian that sounds like an American university student, but they’re not the team I’m having problems with. At least they aren’t dodging me. And they’re not the anthropologists I need to brief. They’ve got one security, one geologist, one astrophysicist and one diplomat. I might need an hour or so with the diplomat at some point, but… the rest are Sam and Jack’s problem, not mine.”

As Mitchell had Spencer square off against the archeologist for a little sparring, Spencer managed to ask, “You didn’t vet their staff yourself before we left?” That seemed a little unwise to him.

“Couldn’t. We didn’t even get everyone’s names before launch, just beamed them up from Tel Aviv and Moscow. At least I knew the Brits before they arrived at Cheyenne, the specialists anyway. We recruited them at my request. The rest are all IOA appointees, on recommendation from their home governments. I know Mick and Phil personally, they’re solid, and they vouch for Timson, so I know he’s okay. But the others? I’ve read a couple articles by Dr. Chaykovsky, but I’m totally unfamiliar with Dr. Sasson’s work, and I’ve never heard of Dr. Berkovich, their linguist. Which is just a little odd. I thought I knew everyone in linguistics, at the doctorate level at least, or had at least read their work.”

“Sounds like they’re political,” Mitchell suggested. “No wonder they’re not so eager to have you grilling them on their competency. It’s probably being related to some big-wig.”

“All too likely, I’m afraid. But I still need to get them enough up to speed that they can function effectively in their jobs when we reach Pegasus… or at least, avoid getting eaten their first trip through the gate.”

“My Daniel! Here you are!” announced Vala as she bounced in, with General O’Neill shadowing behind her. “See, Jack? I told you he’d be here. Cam’s been trying to get him in the gym for weeks.”

O’Neill smirked as he propped up a wall next to the watching cat. “Hey boys. Show me what you got.”

Daniel was actually a lot better at sparring than Spencer… not surprising since he’d been on a field team, trained by jaffa and military for over a decade. The profiler was sure the linguist was going easy on him, too, feeling him out. Both he and Mitchell showed him a few moves, corrected a few of his stances, warned him of a few of his weak points… He had no doubt he had many. Vala considered him with a frown for a moment, then pushed the men aside.

“Okay, turning you into another standard issue GI is never going to work. But I think I can help get you to a better place. You’re a thinker, Dr. Reid, so here’s what we’re going to do… we’re going to turn off that formidable brain of yours and turn on your instincts. Oh yes, you do so have them, and I’m betting they’re very good, since you’re still alive after all your adventures. Now, come on.”

Spencer did actually loosen up a lot for Vala. The alien woman put him at ease far more easily, and faster than any male could. She just didn’t seem as threatening to him. He’d always done better in
 lessons with JJ, Emily, Kate and Elle, too. Vala, however, was in a unique class all of her own. She was a force of nature, and feral in her approach... the only rule of fighting she acknowledged was not to lose. She took one of his greatest physical assets – his quick hands – and taught him how to grab, poke and jab around, under and past any kind of guard, to get at the opponent’s most vulnerable points. It was down and dirty, and Spencer could certainly appreciate its advantages. By the time she turned him loose on Daniel again, Spencer was even able to knock the linguist to the mats and pin him. Once.

To the appreciative applause of his small audience and an approving blink from Bast.

Spencer and Daniel were both signed up on a schedule of daily afternoon classes to take them through the month, before they were allowed the shower and change. Then O’Neill collected them all to take them to the captain’s ward room, where they were invited to dinner with the Captain of the *Daedalus*, Colonel Steven Caldwell.

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Jack and Steven had agreed that, this early in the trip, best not to rock any more boats than necessary, so guests at Steven’s table would include SG-1 (past and present), Dr. Reid, and the Israelis, along with his command staff; XO Major Marks, X-302 squadron leader Major Kyle Donaldson, Chief Medical Officer Dr. Alisen Brightman, and Chief Engineer Dr. Lindsey Novak. Mixing any of these with the Russians could at least wait until the third day out.

Caldwell was certain he could depend upon his people to be rigidly polite, no matter their personal feelings about any of the guests. If he was concerned about anyone, it was that Lindsey’s nerves would send her into a reflexive attack of hiccups. Again. Jack seemed to bring that out in her. So did the attractive Dr. Jackson. It was actually a little bit… adorable.

Before-dinner conversation was actually quite civilized and interesting. Vala wanted to know more about profiling, magic tricks and poker, all of which Dr. Reid spoke to with authority, and even had Steven and his staff laughing and applauding the young zed’s sleight-of-hand with spoons and napkins. Whatever initial discomfort they might have felt in the presence of a dual-gender disappeared almost at once.

Okay, Steven thought, this was going to work out fine. Attitudes rolled down-hill, especially in the close confines of a space-ship (design patterned from submarines for obvious reasons), and with his command staff loosen up around the zed, he could be reasonably sure the rest of his crew would too. He had already given everyone the ‘hands off the zed’ lecture, but he would have a private word with his command staff after dinner to make sure they understood the importance of underlining the message to everyone.

As far as he was concerned, the Russians were a minor annoyance, when compared to the aggravation he could foresee if anything… *untoward* happened to their FBI guest, who still had a few visible bruises from his last beat-down by ass-holes who couldn’t mind their own fucking business.

Everything seemed to be humming along nicely. Alisen was trading SGC emergency room disaster stories with Dr. Reid’s more bizarre cases, to the avid interest and delight of everyone, and even Jack eased the tense set of his shoulders just a little.

Then the Israelis showed up, presenting a united front. There were four of them. And Steven almost had to check the thermostat on his ward room, because the temperature seemed to drop at least ten degrees.
Dr. Jackson stepped forward with a smile and a handshake, eager to meet the two anthropologists, Dr. Isaak Chaykovsky and Dr. Leah Sasson, and their linguist Dr. Eitan Berkovitch. Unfortunately, none of the three seemed especially glad to meet him. The linguist hid it the best, but he was still a little on the frosty and distant side as Dr. Jackson spilled into a torrent of Hebrew.

“Pardon, Dr. Jackson,” Berkovitch interrupted. He was a tall, lean man, and although older, oldest of his group by some margin, he certainly seemed fit enough. His hair was gristled grey and curly, and like most of the academics this trip out, he kept it shoulder-length, his thick beard black with two silver stripes down either side of his chin. His black eyes were shrewd and watchful behind thick horn-rim glasses. “But in a group of people, most of whom do not know our language, would it not be better to converse in English?” The gentle reprimand should have passed as just that, but the haughty demeanor of the man made it a tiny bit offensive.

Steven could feel Jack bristling at his side, so rushed in to smooth things over. “I’m sure Dr. Jackson meant no disrespect. We’ve all known Daniel a long time, and we know he likes to take advantage of any opportunity to practice his impressive language skills.” Steven gave a sly wink to the SGC prize geek, and Daniel, who had been blushing and mortified, faked a smile. It was a good fake, though.

“Yes, of course,” Daniel rushed to agree. “Sorry. But I’ve been anxious to get together with you all, and maybe I let my frustration get the better of me. Shall I introduce you around?”

The rest of the introductions went smoothly enough, but Jack was still watching Berkovitch with narrowed eyes.

After that, it didn’t seem so odd to Steven that the younger Israelis, Chaykovsky and Sasson, seemed uneasy in their company, and unwilling to initiate any conversation with anyone.

Chaykovsky, a weedy nerd in sculpted black beard, round bi-focal glasses with wire rims and a black and white patterned yarmulke pinned atop his thinning dark hair, seemed especially jumpy to Steven. He dodged any attempt Daniel made to draw him out on his papers and theories. His specialty was, apparently, ancient Semitic cultures from the Golden Triangle, something the SGC head geek knew a *lot* about, after over a decade fighting aliens claiming to be the gods of those societies… that alone might make the younger and awkward academic nervous.

Sasson was a mousy young woman, keeping very close to Chaykovsky, but very definitely in his shadow, behind his left shoulder. Brown eyes, brown hair, non-descript clothing that did nothing to flatter a figure she obviously had, and no makeup. Steven would have guessed she was a feminist, one who did not believe in parlaying physical attraction into social advantage, but she was a bit too shy for that. More like Dr. Reid himself, who seemed to go out of his way to escape notice, when allowed. She was especially careful to hide from Berkovitch, keeping Chaykovsky between them at all times. Or was it the fourth Israeli she was avoiding? It was hard to tell. Sasson seemed nervous of both.

The final member of the Israeli team was their security attaché, a deceptively small and slight woman named Ziva David, dark complexion, raven-black hair, piercing black eyes, exotically beautiful, and who lived and breathed a lethal grace. According to Steven’s (minimal) briefing materials, she was ex-Mossad, and from a prominent political family. In spite of the implication that the appointment was due to her family connections, he had no doubt whatsoever of her ability to do her job.

An alert over his ear-wig told Steven that dinner was ready to be served. With a sigh of relief, since the atmosphere in the room had chilled considerably, Steven invited his guests to take their seats.
The dining table was a long rectangle, which made it somewhat difficult to watch everyone, but Spencer was finding it an interesting exercise in profiling. Although he wished he wasn’t beginning to get a headache…

He also wished he wasn’t beginning to get flashes of… something else, which aggravated the pain in his temples and sometimes made him suck in an unwary breath. Until Bast made her presence known, and slid into his lap. Then whatever pain he was feeling evened out, and he became aware that he might, possibly, if it didn’t seem too weird and possibly psychotic… be *feeling* something from his fellow dinner companions.

He had Dr. Leah Sasson on his left, and Ziva David on his right, but both women were ignoring him totally, so he was free to make what observations he wanted in peace. And no one seemed to realize he could speak Hebrew, or at least understand it when spoken, so they were unwary in their whispered exchanges around him.

Little Leah. He overheard the term of endearment once from Dr. Chaykovsky, whispered, as if it had slipped out by accident, but it gave the woman a warm and secure feeling – it was what her family had always called her. The youngest, the most retiring of her family, most protected… she needed the security right now, as her situation seemed fraught with dangers and threats. Particularly from Berkovitch and David. She didn’t know them, didn’t trust them, they seemed to be in charge, and she didn’t like the way they kept Isaak in his place, the anthropologist deferring to them at every turn. He had warned her to be particularly careful around them both, though she wasn’t sure why. The revelations of the Stargate Project were a mere footnote to her… her dedication to anthropology was minor when compared to her feelings for Isaak.

As for Ziva… Spencer recoiled from that bright, sharp, focused mind. She was deliberately turning a cold shoulder to him, and he was perfectly fine with that. She had a grudge against zeds, a long-standing personal grudge that was probably rooted in some negative incident in her past… maybe more than one. She wanted nothing at all to do with him, and Spencer was more than fine with that, too. It should be easy enough for him to avoid her totally… he had no reason to have to interact with her, or any of the Israelis. At least she wasn’t showing any aggression toward him, or any inclination to attack him in any physical way… snubbing him was satisfying her for the present.

She was far more interested in Dr. Daniel Jackson. As the only member of the Israeli team who was giving the archeologist the time of day, he was more than pleased to return her attention. And that had not gone unnoticed by either Vala, or Jack O’Neill.

Spencer contemplated the woman across the table from him, and the general at the foot. He already had his suspicions about O’Neill… and Vala couldn’t possibly make her own romantic interest more clear. Daniel seemed to slough it all off as jokes and teasing, but Spencer knew better. It was an interesting dynamic. But with Ziva throwing heated glances, fluttering her eyelashes and giving tinkling little laughs, avidly congratulating the SGC head geek on his every pronouncement… well, Spencer was glad no one was permitted to carry weapons on board ship.

“I have been reading the materials supplied by the SGC,” Ziva said in a low, seductive voice, “and the story of your discovering the Stargate, your adventures among the stars… it makes for incredible reading, Dr. Jackson.”

“Thanks… and please, call me Daniel.”

The sudden silence at the table was punctuated by a loud hiccup.

With a sigh, Colonel Caldwell supplied a glass of water to his chief engineer. It *almost* covered O’Neill’s acidly muttered, “Well I’m glad I wasn’t there for any of that… I’m just chopped liver,
apparently.”

Cameron Mitchell, as alive to most of the undercurrents as Spencer, quickly hid his mouth behind a hand and turning his face away.

Ziva gave that heart-warming chuckle and tossed her lovely wavy midnight-black hair off the shoulder. “And I must be Ziva. I feel honored to have been included in this adventure. I had no idea. None at all, what wonders awaited me.”

Ah yes, that was a double entendre worthy of Edmund Black himself, Spencer thought, as he watched the murderous gleam rise in Vala’s eyes.

“Still do,” Daniel replied, and could he really be as oblivious as all that? Or was it a game he played, just as Spencer did, to turn away unwanted attentions? “You haven’t seen Atlantis yet. She’s the most amazing place I have ever been, and speaking as someone who has explored galaxies for years, that’s saying something.”

“Yeah, something,” O’Neill practically growled.

Then, rather alarmingly, so did Bast. And Spencer, belatedly, realized that Bast *hated* Ziva. Hated her with all the enthusiasm of a small, but determined, predator. Even Edmund had merely got a jaundiced, amused and totally dismissive look from her on occasion, when she deigned to acknowledge him at all. In fact, most humans seemed totally beneath her notice. So when she did react so powerfully to someone, Spencer decided it would be wise of him to take note.

Vala suddenly leaped into the conversation with a smile so bright and focused it could laser through metal. “I’ve been hearing about a martial arts technique practiced by your people,” she offered, direct to Ziva, “Krav Maga? I don’t suppose you know it, Ziva?”

“Oh hey now, rein it back a bit, princess,” Cameron leapt in, alarmed, clearly anticipating where this was heading.

“Of course I do,” Ziva retorted with a dismissive wave of her hand, annoyed that anyone had dared interrupt her intent flirting with Dr. Jackson. “I am an expert at it.”

“Wonderful! I don’t suppose you’d mind giving us all a demonstration, later, in the gym? I volunteer to be your sparring partner.”

Cameron groaned, rubbing his face, and even Daniel blinked, finally cluing in to the fact that there was every possibility that blood was about to be shed.

O’Neill, with a feral and evil gleam in his eyes, declared, “Sounds like a plan to me!”

“Tomorrow,” Colonel Caldwell stated coldly. “Alisen, you might want to attend…?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t miss it for the *world*!” Dr. Brightman agreed happily, a long-time fan of Dr. Jackson, and, evidently, just as protective and possessive of the man as everyone else at the SGC seemed to be.

Ziva David wasn’t making *any* friends in this crowd, Spencer thought.

Although day and night had no real meaning in the depths of space, the *Daedalus* followed convention with a twenty-four-hour schedule, with dimmed lights and skeleton crew working the
A seal-point Siamese cat wandered in, sandy-beige coat ever-so-faintly patterned in stripes, spots and swirls, bright blue eyes popping against a dark brown face, with dark brown ears and paws, dark brown tail slashing uneasily back and forth, for all she seemed totally unconcerned and meandering aimlessly. Still, she checked each door, sniffing delicately, before pausing at one in particular, deciding to sit and give herself a good wash with pink fastidious tongue.

Inside, Ziva David stood, painfully correct, before Dr. Eitan Berkovitch, whose quarters these were.

“You will need to be more careful, Ziva. None of these people are cretins, unlike your last assignment. Dr. Reid is a profiler, and undeniably brilliant.”

“He’s also a hermaphrodite. I can barely stand to be near him.”

“Then restrain yourself, or avoid him altogether. In spite of the close quarters, it shouldn’t be difficult. And… I’m not certain if playing so aggressively for Dr. Jackson is a good idea. I have no objection to a honey pot operation, if you chose to pursue it, and the man has a lot of power, a lot of influence, both of which would undoubtedly be useful… but… you don’t appear to be off to a very good start.”

Ziva shifted almost imperceptibly in her stance. “Yes sir. I will be more… circumspect. But the man does seem susceptible. He is very alone. He must feel the need for female companionship, don’t you think?”

“Perhaps. The alien woman seems… overly possessive of him, however.”

“I detected no answering feeling from him. And, seriously? She’s alien!”

“Beware of jumping to judgment too quickly. They’ve been team mates for some time, even if no more than that. Maybe if you can get him alone… as alone as you can be on this tiny ship. And… I would appreciate it if you would keep an eye on Isaak and Leah. They seem… overly nervous to me. I’d like to know why, and if it might interfere with our plans.”

“I’m sure they are only aware of your reputation, sir. Were they not chosen for this mission precisely because they could be counted upon not to make waves? Isaak’s theories and papers are the very definition of middle-of-the-road, and he has never once courted controversy in any of his work. Leah is a far better researcher than she is an original thinker. And they are in a relationship. They may fear you are going to try and drive them apart. Rule twelve. Never date a co-worker.”

Berkovitch blinked as he took off his glasses and regarded the ex-Mossad woman. “Ah. I had not considered that. I will make it clear to them I have no interest in their relationship, one way or the other.”

“I’m sure that will help.”

Berkovitch nodded, then said, “If there’s nothing else? Then go, get some sleep, Ziva. I gather you’ll have a big day tomorrow. Unless I miss my guess, the entire ship will be watching your… cat-fight, I believe it is called? With the alien woman. Think you have a chance of defeating her?”

Ziva sniffed disparagingly. “Please.”

The older man regarded her dispassionately, assessing her coldly. “This arrogance of yours concerns
me, Ziva. Where is it coming from? Surely the very fact that Ms Mal Doran is alien makes her an
unknown, and therefore to be treated with caution? You risk underestimating an opponent, and that
is never a good thing. And this unreasoning hatred of zeds… it is… unbecoming. Dr. Reid has his
champions, one of them Dr. Jackson, and you do yourself no favors in that quarter with this attitude.
I think the time you have spent in America has led you into some bad habits.”

Eyes narrowed, Ziva bowed her head in silent acquiescence. “I will… endeavor to mend my attitude,
sir.”

Berkovitch nodded, then waved the woman away, “Then I’ll bid you good night, and sweet
dreams.”

Ziva bent to give him a kiss on the cheek. “Thank you, papa. Goodnight.”

The door slid open and Ziva exited, almost tripping over the cat, who yowled at her, and then
strutted away, butt waggling pointedly in her direction, tail thrashing.

Ziva blinked. “Isn’t Dr. Reid’s cat a tabby stripe?”

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The Siamese sauntered down a few more doors and sat again. Ziva had left the corridor for the
quarters she shared with Dr. Sasson. The cat seemed to consider a moment, then yowled plaintively.

The door behind her obligingly opened, and Dr. Spencer Reid stood there, staring down at her.

“Oh. I wasn’t aware the ship had its own cat.”

She blinked up at him a little more pointedly.

“Oh, of course. Come in. I was just opening a can of food for Bast. Would you care for some?”

And if that wasn’t just the stupidest question *anyone* could *ever* offer a cat, then the Siamese
didn’t know what was.

“Do you have a name?” Spencer asked, as she entered and touched noses with a welcoming Bast.
So, okay, maybe *that* was even more stupid. “I’m inclined to name you Anna… is that
acceptable?”

As long as you feed me, Anna seemed to reply, you can call me anything you like.

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Later that night, in the blue jungle, Bast and Anna met the big orange marmalade cat. They sat in
silent commiseration over the difficulties of protecting their various charges. And Anna hadn’t even
met hers yet. But she definitely had a warning to deliver to the big ginger tom.

Coyote, cougar and polar bear said their good byes, and all three cats fell to feline dreams of comfort,
cuddled up to their humans. Two were lucky enough for that to be true, and the third was borrowing,
with Bast’s permission.

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Chapter End Notes
Anti Ziva & Eli David. I have nothing against these NCIS canon characters, really, and I do like actor Michael Nouri, but Ziva makes *such a wonderful* villain, I needed one, and I simply couldn’t resist.
Spencer felt he should be congratulated for his success at avoiding any meeting with the Russian party. Even just casually passing in the halls or in the mess, he ignored them entirely, and they ignored him, and that was just fine by him. And in the ordinary way of things, he would never have any call to interact with them at all.

But both General O’Neill and Dr. Jackson took their responsibilities seriously, and Pegasus was far too dangerous a place to visit without a thorough briefing on the hazards of intergalactic space exploration. Anyone, civilian, military or scientist, who might conceivably be expected to go into the field, had to be extensively trained. And in the case of most of the passengers on the *Daedalus*, they were almost all newbies to the Stargate Project. Like Spencer himself.

This situation had almost never happened before, Daniel had told him, unless a special consultant had been needed for a crisis situation. Almost always they had a few months to run raw recruits to the program through classes, briefings, tests, and various war-game-type scenarios, the last being as close to a ‘real world’ situation as they could fake, without their students guessing. That gave them plenty of opportunities to stress their candidates into voluntarily bailing, if they weren’t up to the challenge, even before they washed out for lack of ability. But with this batch? Most had never gone through the ‘big sideways flusher’ even once. It would be absolutely insane to toss them through the Atlantis gate without some warning and drill. When they arrived at their destination, the Atlantis Expedition members could no doubt be counted on to put them through ‘Pegasus Boot Camp’ anyway, but that wasn’t good enough for either of the charter members of SG-1. They at least needed ‘Stargate 101’, as background. In fact, Daniel had told Spencer flat out, it was the main reason they were taking *Daedalus*, rather than the Stargate, to their Pegasus destination. To give their newbies time to acclimatize to their new reality, and the way the SGC did things.

Spencer, and he suspected most of the others, considered the full schedule of morning briefings as relief from the boredom of hyperspace travel. He’d always been good at classroom lessons, and he had read every report he could get his hands on for both the Milky Way and Pegasus missions. So he felt well prepared.

Just not… happy, when he was joined in the briefing room by so many potential difficulties, and not one of them had anything to do with his competency as a potential SGC member.

To start with, fan-boy Tony Baldrick took his left-hand side, while lecherous Edmund Black took the right. Phil, Mick and Timson, the heartless bastards, seemed to find this hilarious. As did Cameron Mitchell and Vala, propping up the wall at the back of the room.

Then the Israelis arrived, once again presenting a united front… or, at least, a cowed one, behind the eldest member of the team. Berkovitch seemed impatient to get this over with, as if they were wasting his valuable time, and he was being generous in allowing them to do so. That seemed dangerously arrogant to Spencer. Where the hell else did he have to be, after all? Chaykovsky and Sasson did their level best to disappear utterly into the woodwork (or rather, metalwork, considering this was a spaceship), and everyone let them. As for Ziva…

It was morning, so the gym wouldn’t be free to passengers till after lunch, and already, anticipation was high for the coming battle between the SGC favorite, Vala Mal Doran, and the dark-horse challenger, Ziva David. Spencer had overheard heated arguments in the mess hall at breakfast as betting ran the gamut. He was far too experienced a gambler himself to even hazard any odds, until
he saw the ex-Mossad woman in action.

But the way the two women faced each other now, all feral grins, cocked eyebrows, and mocking salutes, seemed to point to a no-holds-barred flat out war to come. Spencer was looking forward to it. Even more so when Ziva, looking around for a spot to sit, noted his presence, and with a cold sneer, deliberately took a chair as far from him as possible.

Edmund, observing this, declared in an overly loud voice, “How rude,” calling the attention of everyone to the exchange. “Have you been turning down the lady’s advances, dear Spence?” he asked. “Because I can think of no other reason for her to cut you dead like that.”

Perhaps it was just as well that the Russians picked that moment to make their entrance, all in a lump.

Daniel could only sigh. None of the interactions in the room were lost on the SGC’s premier negotiator. His quick glance at Spencer assured him the profiler was also well aware of the undercurrents. He could only hope familiarity with the situation eased it a bit. At least Spencer seemed to be handling the determined romantic attentions of Black with patience, the same patience he was showing his number one fan, Baldrick. Certainly better than a glowering Cameron was handling his competition in the romantic pursuit of Dr. Reid.

Tipping his chair back and offering a wry smirk, Jack was leaving it all to him. Including dealing with the Russians.

Daniel had read all of their files, such as they were. He and Jack had already talked this over, and there were significant holes in a lot of the dossiers the IOA had handed over with all these strangers. Jack surmised they were all there because they were related to Someone back home, were owed some serious favors, or knew where Someone had buried the bodies. Daniel wasn’t so sure. The more he interacted with them, the more he was convinced most had got to the top of Someone’s Shit List, since assignment to Atlantis was almost guaranteed to significantly reduce their life expectancy. Out of sight, out of mind? There was a reason the recruitment, hiring and training programs for the SGC were so strict, and every single reason why *not* to include someone seemed to have been tossed into this group.

Chaykovsky and Sasson couldn’t lateral think their ways out of a wet paper bag. They were toast, the very first artifact puzzle, booby-trapped ruin or hostile alien they met. Daniel *still* didn’t have any idea what languages Berkovitch could actually speak, beyond English and Hebrew, but Ancient sure as hell wasn’t one of them. Edmund Black looked like a competent security agent on paper, but he was working overtime to play up the upper-class-twit persona, when he wasn’t blatantly ogling poor Spencer’s ass. And could any ex-SAS soldier possibly be as wide-eyed thrilled with everything as Baldrick seemed to be? That pair were playing some kind of long con, as Vala had told him just last night, utterly convinced in a ‘takes one to know one’ way, but neither of them had any idea why, what they hoped to gain from it. The fact it didn’t seem to trouble Jack made him even more suspicious.

And then there were the Russians. Daniel sighed.

Yuri Yashkin was a wiry, compact blonde man, ex-SVR (or maybe not so ‘ex’), their security attaché. And while he might be hot-shit at security, the way he was eyeing Spencer made Daniel very nervous. There was a blank, almost oily intensity to his expression that made Daniel want to hustle the profiler right out of the room.

Timur Shelyapin, a tall thin man with a shock of surprisingly red hair, beard and moustache to match,
was their diplomat, and, according to his file, had cut his teeth mediating disputes in Chechnya, Afghanistan and several Middle East conflicts. Daniel had his doubts. He had tried both Pashto and Dari on the man, and he had blinked at both. How the hell do you negotiate in Afghanistan without speaking either one? Worse yet, he sat there between Yashkin and Reid, and made no attempt whatsoever to intervene, didn’t even seem aware of a potential problem. Yeah, no, that was just not on. In fact, he seemed more interested in staring down little Chaykovsky, who edged further and further from the Russian all the time. As an intimidation tactic, it was working, but negotiators were not supposed to aggravate situations… they were supposed to defuse them. And really… wasn’t Isaak far too easy a target? Everyone and everything made that guy twitchy. Daniel just couldn’t see him handling the hazards of field work well at all.

The two women on the Russian team, astrophysicist Dr. Evgenia Andreeva and geologist Dr. Katya Petrova, at least had the science chops to earn their way onto the City of the Ancients. Jack had had Lindsey Novak sound out Andreeva, and Daniel had had a word with Timson, so he was pretty sure those two knew their stuff. Of course, given the revelations of the Project, they would both have to re-write practically everything they thought they knew in light of alien science and alien tech. But all indications were they were mentally agile and flexible enough to accept that. Good news there, then.

Andreeva was a grey-haired matron, long widowed, with successful children and grown grandchildren back home, and unless Daniel missed his guess, she was in this for the adventure of it, but old and wise enough to temper excitement with caution. All good signs. Also, she ought to deal well with Rodney, the irascible Atlantis CSO, always a serious consideration with any of the science staff.

As for Katya Petrova… Daniel hadn’t been able to get a read on her yet. He would be watching her pretty closely through the briefings. All he knew for now was that she was in her mid-thirties, blonde and strikingly beautiful, and was inclined to vamp the male military personnel. Apparently, she liked a man in uniform. She was already batting her eyes at Cameron. Yeah, good luck with that, Daniel didn’t think his team lead had even noticed, so focused was he on their FBI profiler. As far as he could see, Petrova hadn’t noticed that Cam was smitten with Spencer, either, and wasn’t sure how it would go down when she did.

Oh yeah, this was going to be a fun trip.

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Spencer was actually enjoying the morning. Daniel was a natural teacher, had obviously been through this drill many, many times before, and knew the material inside out. Well, naturally, he had lived it over the past decade and more. Aliens, planets, weird tech… it was all just too fascinating.

“The first evolution of humans in the universe, as far as we’ve been able to determine, were the Alterans. Well, most call them the Ancients, the Others, the Ascended, or, in Pegasus, the Ancestors or the Lanteans… they’ve had a lot of names down through the ages. And it’s a lot of ages. Conservative estimates put it at fifteen million years or more. They left their home galaxy when their race developed a political, or possibly religious, schism. The Ori believed their seniority as the ‘origin’ of humankind and their tech advancements gave them the right to call themselves gods, and force their less-evolved neighbors to worship them. The Others, the Alterans, disagreed. When the disagreement became violent, the Alterans left rather than fight a war they didn’t think they could win, and eventually arrived in the Milky Way, and settled on Earth. This was at least ten million years ago. One of them invented the Stargate technology, and they began seeding our galaxy with gates, and populations of humans. They built their greatest city, Atlantis, a city with a star-drive, at their main base and outpost, at the south pole, before Antarctica froze over.
“They met three other advanced races, and formed an alliance of Four, with the Asgard, the Nox, and the Furlings. We’ve actually met the Asgard and the Nox.

“At some point, and we don’t know many details, the Alterans contracted a plague. Nothing they could do stopped or cured it. The Alliance fell apart, and the Alterans began to desperately search for a way to save themselves from extinction. Eventually, they were faced with three main options. First was to die. Second was to take all those still un-infected by plague, and fly them in their Atlantis lifeboat to another galaxy where they would be safe from the contagion. The third was to Ascend to another level of existence, leaving their physical bodies behind for an existence of pure energy. So we have the Lanteans in Pegasus, and the Ascended here in the Milky Way. The Lanteans did what that race always does, and began seedling humans across their new home galaxy.”

“What of the other members of the Alliance?” Spencer asked.

Daniel smiled, always glad of a little encouragement. “The Asgard lived in another galaxy themselves, great mapmakers and explorers. They took on responsibility for watching over the people of this galaxy. But although they started out humanoid like ourselves, they chose to dispense with all the messy sex and became a clone race…”

“Where’s the fun in that?” Edmund asked, with a smirk and a wink to Spencer.

“… They cloned new bodies when needed and transferred their consciousness from an old worn out one to the new one. But the law of diminishing returns got them in the end. With each iteration, each generation of their clones, they deteriorated, until they could no longer create viable bodies for themselves. That, plus their millennia-old conflict with the Replicators, machine intelligences programmed to proliferate and take over superior technology, eventually destroyed them. They committed mass suicide a few years ago, leaving their legacy to us.

“The Nox retreated to their own home world and became devout pacifists. They refuse to interfere with the rest of the galaxy. We’re too violent, too ‘young’ for them to interact with us.

“As for the Furlings… the *only* thing we know about them is their name. All the Asgard would say is that they aren’t around anymore, and there’s nothing in the Asgard core about them. As far as we’ve been able to find, there’s nothing in the Atlantis data banks, either. We think we’ve found one or two colonies in the Milky Way where they might once have lived, but that’s it.

“The Asgard left us their legacy because they believe we, alone of all the other human races seeded across the universe, have the potential to be the Fifth Great Race. We aren’t there yet, the Nox are right and we are ‘too young’, but the potential is there.”

At this point, Dr. Berkovitch yawned. Spencer was too startled by this to guard his own reaction. He bristled, frowning at the man before turning resolutely back to Daniel. But it was enough to draw fire from another quarter.

“Do you have a problem with one of my team, Dr. Reid?” Ziva David challenged, a frontal attack, which seemed to be her preferred strategy.

“Of course not. But I think it would be wise of us to gather all the information we can from the experts.”

“So you say, and yet I have observed that you have not even opened your briefing materials, or picked up a pencil, or typed even a single remark into your notepad. What are we to make of that?”

There were any number of people jumping into the conversation at that point, while Yashkin
chuckled in appreciation, but Spencer merely held up a hand. “It is of no consequence to me what you make of it, Ms. David, but I happen to have an eidetic memory. I can recite every single line in the material by page, or deliver any and every statement Dr. Jackson has made this morning, verbatim. I *have* been paying attention. Any fact he’s given us could make the difference between life and death when we are out on missions in Pegasus. Or don’t you agree?”

The woman’s coal black eyes narrowed. “I am waiting to hear what any of this has to do with the Pegasus Galaxy, Dr. Reid. So far, it has only been mentioned once, as the destination of Atlantis, millions of years ago. And therefore, of little relevance to us now.”

“And I’m getting there,” Jackson leapt in, feeling like this was getting away from him. The animosity between Spencer and the Israeli woman seemed to come out of left field. He had been expecting something like this from one of the Russians, but not… Israel was one of the few nations on Earth with some sympathy for the zeds of the world, willing to offer refugee status and accept immigration without question. “I admit, much of this is background, but it’s all stuff you need to know, to set the stage.

“Because now we come to the Lanteans. As I said, they seeded Pegasus with more humans. But there was an indigenous life form on some planets that… interacted badly with humans. The Iratus Bug.”

Daniel cued up the surveillance footage they had of then-major Sheppard, with a blue insect attached to his neck, obviously sucking something out of him.

“These creatures are totally alien to us. They feed on some form of energy generated by other living beings. Once they’ve attached to a victim, they suck them dry, and don’t release until the victim is dead. However, if they are made to release, or the victim survives somehow, the wound is left behind as contamination, with some kind of stinger or enzyme embedded.

“Somehow, with a human victim, by a process we don’t fully understand, this can create a hybrid creature… half Iratus, half human… a Wraith. They cannot eat physical food, don’t seem to be compatible enough with animals or other life forms to feed from them, unlike the Iratus, can only suck the life-force from a human.”

More footage played over the conference room monitors, of Wraith feedings. Humans seemed to age in minutes, shriveled into dry, desiccated husks, in mere moments left as dead mummified shells.

“They have an insect biology, Queens in charge of a Hive, spawning drone mates and sexless soldier-workers. Drones and soldiers are larger, stronger, faster than we are. Because they feed on life-force, they are quick to regenerate, and can virtually live forever. Some of them, the older drones, seem to have a limited telepathic ability, to make people hallucinate, to confuse them so they can be caught more easily. The Queens are telepathic enough to overwhelm and suck out all the knowledge of a human victim as they feed, as well as communicate one to another over any distance, and to their troops, at least within a solar system distance. And they spawn quickly. They are also able to hibernate, so when food becomes scarce, they are able to wait centuries in stasis while humans in their territories re-populate.

“Their technology is not all that advanced, when compared to the Alterans or Lanteans, or even our own, derived from some kind of biological organic base – their hive-ships are grown, not built. But there are untold millions of them. We really don’t know how many. When they went to war with the Lanteans, they won by proliferating far faster than they could be destroyed. Eventually, they drove the Lanteans back to their last refuge, Atlantis, with sheer numbers. With the war already counted as lost, the last Lanteans sank their city to the bottom of the ocean on their last planet to hide it, and escaped through the Stargate back to Earth. This was around ten thousand years ago.
“They must have assumed the intervening millions of years were long enough for the plague to die out, and they were right. But it was also long enough for humans to spontaneously evolve on Earth… or maybe re-evolve. There weren’t enough Lanteans left to form their own civilization, so they interbred with us. We know this, because some of us possess their DNA legacy… what we call the ATA gene, the Ancient Tech Activation gene. At some point, they decided to protect their technology from abuse by others by adding this special DNA Key, without which their tech won’t initialize, or in some cases, even turn on.

“So far, we’ve discovered a number of humans who have this ATA gene. General O’Neill here is one of them. These people, with a strong, natural ATA gene, are fairly rare in the population. Our original estimates were one in several millions. But there are something like ten to fifteen percent of the population who can successfully be given our ATA gene therapy. This gives the subject the ability to use most Ancient tech. Once we get to Atlantis, you’ll all be tested to see if you can successfully receive the therapy – actually taking it, or not, is absolutely voluntary, it will be totally up to you.

“You need someone with a strong natural gene, like General O’Neill, or Colonel John Sheppard, to command Atlantis, or operate the Ancient Outpost Weapon’s Chair we found under the Antarctic ice, where Atlantis was once built and anchored. But other gene carriers, even the mouse-gene recipients, can operate most tech, fly the Puddlejumpers, put a lock on certain doors, access city databases and security systems, things like that. Then there’s other ‘every-day’ tech, you don’t need an ATA to operate, such as, use the transporter cabinets, operate the library functions, open unlocked doors and turn on lights.”

Eyes narrowed in concentration, it was the red-headed Russian diplomat, Shelyapin, who startled everyone by coming out of his supposed bored coma. “You say your original estimates place it at one in several millions with this genetic advantage. Your estimates have changed?”

Daniel glanced at Jack O’Neill, who scowled, shrugged, then nodded.

“Yes. We have recently discovered eight more people with extremely strong ATA genes. We’re talking O’Neill and Sheppard level strength. Recently, as in just the past six months. They all have one thing in common. They’re all zeds.”

Shock ran in a shiver around the room, and everyone stared at Spencer. It was just a little unnerving.

It was Berkovitch who made the connection. “You believe all zeds have this ATA gene.”

O’Neill glanced at Jackson, then admitted, “It’s certainly looking that way, although we haven’t begun to test it yet, and we don’t know why. Except our best current guess is that this genetic ‘mistake’, the Z chromosome, isn’t a mistake at all, but something the Lanteans brought back with them from Pegasus. That’s just a guess, mind you, and we’ll be looking into it.”

“Holy hell,” Edmund Black breathed, then grinned and slapped Spencer on the back. “Congratulations, mate, you’re an alien! We should definitely share a pint later, to celebrate!”

“Here here!” agreed a giddy Baldrick.

“Sounds like a party to me,” Phil Aston piped up in his charming south shire accent.

There was some laughter at this, but there were also a few grumbles. One rather curt statement in Russian made a few in the room stiffen. Yuri Yashkin had a few more pithy things to say in his own language, as he glared at Dr. Reid.
Unfortunately, there were more than just his countryman and women who understood him. Berkovitch stiffened and cast a disapproving look. Ziva smirked from her corner. Black glanced at the Russian security agent with a level look that seemed mild and disinterested… unless you were directly facing it. Spencer himself winced and tried to physically shrink in his chair, even though he realized this was the body language of submission, and he truly resented that this was his gut reaction to a verbal attack he did, in fact, understand all too well.

None of these interactions were lost on the anthropologist at the front of the room. And Daniel Jackson was not amused.

“Enough!” he snapped out, staring directly at Yashkin. He had wanted to confront this issue head-on, sooner rather than later, and this was his chance. He spit out another order in perfect Russian, not at all like an American language student, but reminiscent of the more ruthless echelons of the Bratva. Satisfied he finally had Yashkin’s startled attention, he continued in English.

“We are explorers, ladies and gentlemen. We are representatives of our planet, and our race. Sometimes even our species. And as long as the alien we meet isn’t trying to kill, enslave, possess or eat us, we *will* respect their culture, behavior and choices. Just as we *will* respect each other, without regard to religion, race, national origin, sexual preference or gender. Failure in this regard will get you a one-way ticket back to Earth. Whether it’s merely home in disgrace for having failed to measure up to the high standards of the SGC, or to a jail cell for assault, is up to you.

“One of the wisest comments I’ve ever heard on this subject was this: when a young woman of my acquaintance was first confronted with two men obviously in a romantic relationship with each other, she said, ‘not my thing, but neither is golf.’ Let that be your own attitude, and we’ll all get along just fine.”

“Yeah, about that,” Jack decided to, *finally*, weigh in, “As Director of Home World Security, I *am* the boss of all of you, and I fully support Daniel in this. Of course, you might have to *also* include those who *are* trying to kill, enslave, possess or eat us. I can think of at least one case where a… an *individual* started out wanting to eat Daniel, hitting him over the head and dragging him off. He talked Chakka out of it, obviously, but he, and his people, are now one of our best allies. Nine foot tall lizard with horns on his face. Plays a mean game of soccer. And I don’t want to count the number of aliens who have possessed one of us, with or without our consent, and although a few of them *still* get me all miffed, it did, on balance, turn out for the best.

“This is space exploration, people. There’s no rule book. Every time we try to write one, the very next encounter forces us to scrap it and start all over. The best we’ve ever been able to do is come up with the three Golden Rules. Protect the geeks. Protect the planet. And *never* leave a man behind. We try our damnedest, and when we fail, and we do occasionally fail, we do our best to fix it. So I guess we can add a fourth rule, respect others. Or is that the original Golden Rule? Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. But… that one should go without saying. So… *Don’t* make me have to say it, as if you were a school-yard bully.”

Speaking of school-yard bullies… Spencer thought… if ever there was a situation that seemed like nothing more than a grade school duel… girls talking trash and challenging each other to a fight after school, with the whole student body gathered to watch and cheer… This was definitely it.

After the morning’s briefing session wrapped up, the participants all rushed out to nail down prime spots in the mess hall, or other places with monitors piping live feeds from the gym. Daniel was blatantly unsubtle about holding Spencer back, long enough for the Russians and Ziva to clear out. Cameron, as Vala’s team lead, was obligated to join her in the gym, and Colonel Caldwell had taken
it upon himself to officiate, hoping to limit the blood on the floor. Dr. Brightman would be attending as well, for much the same reason.

“You’re coming with us, Dr. Reid,” O’Neill ordered as he and Daniel escorted the profiler to the *Daedalus* command bridge. “Just want to let tempers cool a bit, and let certain hot heads have a chance to think better of their attitudes.”

Spencer sighed. “If you mean Yashkin… I doubt he’ll change his mind about zeds. His prejudice is too firmly ingrained, and far too endemic in his society. It would be like expecting one of those Sulfur Springs cops to change their minds about me. Not gonna happen.”

Bast butted against his leg as they walked. Spencer appreciated her support.

“What the hell…” O’Neill muttered as he opened the door to the captain’s ward room, off the bridge. This was another locale supplied with comfy seats and a large-screen monitor that could be tuned to pick up the piped live feed, and since Caldwell would be busy elsewhere, Jack had commandeered the private space. It also appeared to contain a cat, sitting big as life in the captain’s chair.

Spencer also blinked. This was not Siamese Anna, but a black cat with large green eyes. It stared down the general, who obviously felt he rated the command seat, but the animal obviously didn’t agree, and did not make way.

The profiler sighed. “There seem to be a number of stowaways on board,” he commented. He picked a seat for he and Bast to occupy.

“Shoo!” O’Neill attempted, without luck. When he made to reach out and dislodge the animal, it hissed at him. O’Neill was the one to back warily away, and Daniel chuckled.

“Respect, Jack. He *was* here first.”

“He?”

“Oh yeah. Definitely a he. They’re everywhere on most dig sites, particularly in Egypt.”

Bast was ignoring the tom totally, settling herself with a bit of kneading on Spencer’s lap.

“You got a name for him too, cat-boy?”

Spencer smirked. “How about Lucifer?”

Daniel laughed and agreed. “Come on, Jack. Get over it. You’ve been out-alpha’d. Live with it. We’re going to miss the fight. By the way… any idea what brought this on in the first place?”

Jack just stared at his old team-mate. “What do you mean?”

“Well, it isn’t like Vala, is it? To pick a fight like this? What has she got against Ziva?”

Jack just stared at the linguist. “Seriously? You don’t think maybe it was all the flirting the Mossad chick was doing last night?”


Jack sighed and turned on the monitor. “Wish we had popcorn for this.”

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Spencer knew a little about the basics of Krav Maga, the "contact-combat" self-defense and fighting system developed for the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Like almost all martial arts, it stressed avoiding confrontation in the first place, but if a fight was forced on you, you struck hard and fast, aimed for any vulnerable point, eyes, nose, groin, knees, used any objects within easy reach that could be made into weapons, and didn’t stop till your opponent was down and wasn’t getting up again. The principal objective was to deal with the threat as quickly and decisively as possible, any way you could.

Ziva David might have the formal training, maybe even the real-world experience, but he was pretty sure Vala was a natural, and had probably lived by those principals her entire life.

The moment Colonel Caldwell said, “Go!”, the two women immediately flew at each other, arms and legs flying, kicking, reaching for pony tails (both women with long dark hair, and had taken pains to make it difficult to use that as a weapon against them), shoving, gripping, breaking holds… they moved almost too fast for Spencer to follow their movements.

It was an impressive display. He had watched Emily and JJ sparring like this a time or three, totally intimidating every man who gathered to watch. Vala and Ziva were no different. There was an earnest, serious, lethal intent in both women. A high kick to the face drew blood – Ziva getting the first point on Vala – but when the Israeli woman attempted to press the advantage, she found she had been suckered into lowering her guard, and Vala was viper-fast in striking back with a hand across the throat.

Both backed off momentarily, gasping for breath, assessing, or maybe re-assessing, their opponent.

“Ouch! That’s gonna leave a bruise,” Jack commented with artificial lightness, his hands gripping tensely to his fatigue pants.

Daniel was also frowning, worried, dark brows lowered and three vertical furrows forming between them on the bridge of his nose.

As the combatants resumed their battle, Spencer saw a definite change in tactics from one of them.

“Vala’s going to win this,” he said with certainty.

“How so?” Daniel asked neutrally. It certainly didn’t seem so at the moment, since the ex-space pirate had apparently taken more damage, so far.

But Jack nodded, seeing what Spencer had. “Because Vala is learning. Ziva isn’t. She’s stuck in her training. Look at that smug little smile. She thinks her skills are better, and sees no reason to change them up. Vala’s learning and already figuring out how to adapt.”

So it proved. Slowly but surely, Vala was learning to fend off or counter every move Ziva made, or even slip under the telegraphed attack to get her own strike in.

Then came the fatal mistake, Ziva over-extending so that Vala neatly flipped her in the air, end-over-end, till Ziva landed flat on her stomach on the mats, Vala sitting in top of her, straddling her waist, right wrist caught, right arm twisted up and back and behind. Just a little pressure, and the bones would snap.

“Yield!”

Ziva struggled, giving a furious scream… before she shouted out angrily, “I yield!”

Vala grinned, standing, and offering a hand up. Ziva eyed her suspiciously, before nodding in
acknowledgement and taking the hand.

“Interesting technique,” Vala granted. “Maybe you’ll show me some of those moves in a less… confrontational setting?”

Ziva was still angry, with herself and the woman who had bested her, but, eyes narrowed, she had to admit defeat. “Likewise,” she grudgingly agreed, somewhat stiffly.

All over the *Daedalus*, money changed hands, even as Alisen Brightman moved in to apply antiseptic and band aids.

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Spencer was not at all surprised to play host to three cats that night, all of them claiming a piece of his bunk for themselves. At this rate, he was soon going to have to pull out the second bunk above his head, to make room for everyone.

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Derailed

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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It was the weight on his chest that woke Spencer. A soft paw batted at his chin, and he opened his eyes to stare directly into two glowing gold lamps, the faint glimmer straying from the LED night-lights reflecting off her tapetum. There was no purring from Bast, just a growing pressure, as if she was somehow able to increase her weight. He glanced down to see both Anna’s blue and Lucifer’s green eyes also staring directly at him.

Expecting him to do something.

“What?” he asked them, somewhat plaintively, still half-asleep.

He had a sudden image in his head of the emergency drill everyone had been taught the first day out… not many had paid attention, as if it were the ‘buckle your seat-belt’ drill on a commercial airliner everyone was conditioned by now to ignore. But Spencer had actually practiced, thinking of the life-boats on the *Titanic*.

So, without even wondering why, he quickly leaned over the edge of the cot, shut the storage locker hatches to prevent anything (but mostly cat litter) from flying loose, then pulled out the crash netting that was part of the bunk bed apparatus. It rolled out of the bulkhead wall, lifted over the bed occupants (his room-mates were *not* amused by this, but accepted its necessity with disgruntled mutters) and fastened at the far edge of the cot.

He had barely completed this when he felt a mighty jolt, tossing him, *hard* against the crash net. Luckily, the safety device did its job, and tossed him back into his mattress. There was the screech of metal, the ventilators spit out smoke and the acrid reek of burned electronics, before he heard the clangs of sealing air-tight panels slamming into place.

Then the lights went out. Even the tiny LED night-lights at the side of the room.

Spencer’s heart began hammering, even as he felt the shimmy of the ship dropping abruptly out of hyperspace.

And then silence. Total and utter silence, in total and utter darkness.

And then the gravity cut out. Spencer could feel himself floating ever so slightly, above his mattress. Three cats reached out suddenly, with loud complaints, to hook claws into his blankets, sweat pants and T-shirt. And then Spencer became aware that, everywhere he didn’t have a cat plastered against him, he was growing steadily colder.

Without the ventilation on, and with all hatches and doors air-tight… was asphyxiation a possibility? There was an emergency oxygen bottle attached to a wall in the bathroom… Spencer talked himself out of needing it, staying still inside the protective crash netting, even as the three cats squirmed up beside him and began to purr reassuringly, loud as truck engines in the silence, vibrating in companionship, reminding him he wasn’t as alone as his senses told him he was. As if his companions could feel his anxious toying with the possibility of indulging in a full-blown panic attack. He took himself sternly in hand, moving back from that brink, made the monumental effort to control his breathing… the last thing he needed right now was to hyperventilate.
But he did just wonder… What the *fuck* had just happened?

And how had the cats known, in time to warn him?

And was he about to die a horrible death?

Then the night-lights came back on.

Then the gravity field re-asserted itself.

And then, and only then, red lights began to flash from panels by the door, and the alarms blared out that signaled battle stations. As a civilian passenger, Spencer’s battle station was just where he was, his assigned cabin quarters, waiting for a crew member to come and give him other orders.

Then the grudging rasp of metal on metal, and he could hear the faint whir of fans, and felt the shiver of air being pumped back into the cabin, still tainted with barely-filtered smoke.

It felt like hours, but was probably only minutes, before there was a shriek of metal, and his door was being pried open by a crew-member.

“Pull on some pants if you don’t already have them, and out in the corridor. Now!”

Spencer quickly released the crash net and obeyed orders. Luckily, he slept in sweat pants and T-shirt, so he immediately exited bare-foot into the corridor.

It was sheer chaos out there, red flashing lights and blaring horns, with more and more passengers stumbling out, some choking, a little more sensitive to the hint of burning in the air than others. Crew were hastily trying to assess injuries, and there were quite a few, as not everyone had a cat early-warning-system. Thrown out of bunks, hit with flying objects, cuts on heads, maybe a broken bone or two… And everyone was talking. Well, shouting, really, over the background alarms, demanding, asking, pleading, for explanations. But, yeah, all anyone really had to say was…

What the *fuck* had just happened? And were they all about to die a horrible space-type death?

It was a dead relief when the alarm horns cut out, and the red lights stopped flashing. But it wasn’t normal lighting even then, but the intermittent battery-pack emergency lights, and the tracking LED lights in the floor.

After a bit of milling around, crew started herding them all to the mess. Well, that made sense, Spencer thought. It was the largest contained space on the ship, apart from the port and starboard X-302 hangar bays.

But, twice on their way, some major system momentarily cut out… lights once, and the gravity the second time. Luckily, they both flickered back on again before more damage was done to the confused and panicky passengers.

Once they arrived, Spencer didn’t even bother trying to claim a chair, but went straight to a piece of wall and slid to sit, legs crossed in a lotus before him. Bast made herself at home in his lap. It was only then he realized Anna and Lucifer had not made it this far, but it was no use wondering where they got to, or why. They had their own agendas, apparently.

Only then did Spencer start to take stock of his surroundings.

A glance out the mess hall window showed nothing but black, making the port a mirror on the dimly lit room inside, so there was nothing to see outside. That was a bit odd… no stars? None at all? But if
they were far enough into the void between the Milky Way and Pegasus galaxies, then maybe no star was close enough to be seen with the naked eye, and maybe neither galaxy was within view on this side of the ship.

It wasn’t just the passengers being herded together here, but all the X-302 pilots, and most of the crew as well, except for Bridge, Infirmary or Engineering staff.

Oh, and General O’Neill was conspicuous in his absence. But then, he was the one person on board who could pull rank to get his curiosity assuaged. The few other missing faces were probably in the sick bay getting first aid treatment.

Everyone was still shouting, demanding, throwing questions and speculations and voicing fears, hassling any crew they could get their hands on… Spencer was just relieved the emergency lighting was working in here, not to mention ventilation, heating and gravity, and there was the end of the awful silence… even if the rising volume in here was beginning to give him a headache. He concentrated on Bast’s purring, and the pressure at his temples seemed to fade back to manageable levels.

Edmund arrived right about then to collapse on Spencer’s right.

“Hell of a night,” he commented with a wry chuckle. “You damaged at all?”

“No,” Spencer assured, both hands kneading Bast’s ruff, at least partly in grateful thanks.

“Lucky. Baldrick’s going to need stitches to the top of his bald head, and I think Taylor’s got a broken wrist.”

Spencer nodded, his guess substantiated. Those were two of the several missing people he had identified so far.

Daniel came to rest on Spencer’s left side, reaching out to give Bast a pat, which she accepted as her due. For whatever reason, she didn’t seem to mind the archeologist at all.

“Vala and Cam are on the Bridge, helping sort things out. They both have enough familiarity with the ship-board systems to be of help.”

Spencer had wondered about that. Part of his briefings had included the information that many of the ship’s systems were derived from Goa’uld ha’taks, and Daniel and Vala had both told him the highly entertaining (and probably not at all accurate) tale of their first meeting, when space-pirate Vala had come very close to stealing the *Prometheus* out from under Daniel.

“So you don’t know what’s going on either?” Edmund quizzed Jackson.

“Nope,” Daniel replied cheerfully. “In this case, ignorance is probably bliss.”

“Until the hull cracks open and we all die horribly of exposure to hard vacuum,” Edmund suggested just as cheerily.

Spencer thought briefly about quoting the stats and details on all the myriad ways this could kill them all, but decided not. He had tried to brief Rossi on turbulence one time on the BAU jet, and the senior profiler had not appreciated the information. Probably because they were experiencing turbulence at the time. Instead, he whimsically quoted, “Well, my philosophy is that worrying means you suffer twice.”

Edmund and Daniel both chuckled at that.
Some of the crew were smart enough to get the galley working, and began to deliver hot drinks to the unsettled crowd, which worked remarkably well to quiet and reassure everyone, as illogical as that seemed to Spencer. It wasn’t like a cup of coffee would make the danger any less. Still, he gladly took a hot milky tea, and offered Bast the chance to dip her tongue in for a few delicate laps.

Then the PA system came alive.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” came Colonel Caldwell’s calm voice, the very embodiment of confidence. “My apologies for the alarms, but as I’m sure you’ve all noticed, we’re experiencing some technical difficulties. There was an accident in engineering earlier, and some of our systems are presently offline. I assure you, life-support is fully functional, so you need have no concerns about that. But the hyperdrive is damaged, and it will take us some time to get it repaired and be on our way. In the mean time, please stay calm, and obey all orders from the crew. We have your safety and well-being as our primary concern. Caldwell out.”

Spencer watched with some interest as that also helped reassure the others, even though Spencer himself realized that nothing had actually changed in their situation. They were still dead in space with unspecified damage, to the engines, apparently, although that was pretty much all they had between them and certain death in the harsh and unforgiving physics of vacuum and absolute zero temperatures just the other side of the hull. And while life support systems might be up and running right now, they were all powered through the engines, surely?

Glancing at Daniel’s carefully bland face, he decided to keep those thought to himself as well. As Newt Scamander knew, worrying was not a useful reaction to deadly peril, and there wasn’t much else he could contribute at this point in time.

Spencer had actually managed to nod off, well accustomed to catching what sleep he could in the most uncomfortable of circumstances, when Daniel jostled him awake. A young female crew member came into blurry view before him.

“Sir? The Colonel has ordered you to report to him. Will you come with me, please?”

The most obvious question was, what could he possibly need me for, but Spencer held it back. No doubt he would learn soon enough. So he nodded, collected himself, set Bast on the floor, and levered himself up, with grinning assistance from Edmund Black.

“Save us all from certain death, Dr. Reid. From all I’ve heard you’re very good at that.”

Spencer didn’t bother answering that, just nodded to the crew-person, and followed in her wake, totally ignoring all the eyes following him, and the few querulous demands for why the zed/hermie/damned effem should get preferential treatment. He was too busy wondering that himself.

She took him down deserted corridors toward the aft of the ship. As they neared engineering, at the stern, the noise levels rose. Shouted orders and warnings, clanks, clangs, the hissing of what might be soldering irons, the crackling and spit of sparks from damaged electrical connections, were no less chaotic than the confusion of the passengers earlier.

But at a faint yowl from Bast, he focused on the smells… smoke, yes, burning plastics had a reek all their own, there was something odd he tentatively identified as some kind of fire-retardant foam… char smells… and… cordite? Surely not? And then, under that, another smell he was all too familiar with. The coppery sweet smell of…
Blood.

Had there been casualties in the... accident? Because he wasn’t even in the engineering room yet, and that had to mean a lot of blood. And now, also, that he was looking for it, expecting it, that aroma of charred meat. It set his mouth to watering, always a disconcerting reaction, but he was used to that, too.

There was one obvious reason the captain of the ship would need his attendance in the midst of such a serious event... if there was a crime scene to be analyzed.

Oh, that was so much worse than an accident...

The crew member held a hand to make him pause at the entrance to engineering. Not that he needed the warning.

This met all the requirements to be described as a disaster area.

In Spencer’s first tour of the ship, the day of launch, he had been impressed with the higher-than-high alien-derived tech in the control room, clean, bright, shiny surfaces and impressively-lit panels, with three consoles standing in the center, monitor screens mounted on the outer walls, and cabinets hiding away whatever wiring, equipment, devices, crystalline conduits were needed to operate Asgard hyperdrive engines. At the back of the room was a window into the actual engine bays. It wasn’t safe for anyone to be back there while the engines were in actual operation, thus this control and monitor station.

There was nothing clean or bright about it now, almost all the screens dark, or only showing a single blinking cursor. Even the window at the back was dark, but for a faint, ominous red glow from somewhere below, and there appeared to be more people wandering around down there with flashlight beams occasionally cutting the smoky gloom. The relatively small control station itself was rather crammed with busy people right now, all moving with jerky quick motions, faster than was maybe wise, but slower than they obviously attempted to be, battling with whatever components they had, behind panels in the bulkheads, laid out in charred pieces on the floor, or pulled out of plastic crates. There was a large clunky piece of equipment parked right in the middle of the floor, connected with all sorts of cables, humming and casting its own yellowish glow over the scene, evidently an emergency power unit of some kind, feeding to one of the three consoles. People were careful to step over the power unit and warily avoid the cables. Dr. Novak was only half in view, her front half squirming around inside the main control console, with two people offering her bits and pieces of parts, or any tool she requested in a curt sharp tone, quite unlike the unassuming shy woman Spencer had met at dinner the second night out.

He took a quick glance around...


His BAU soul cringed at the contamination that had already taken place, the body rolled up out of the way against the wall, no attempt made to avoid the blood pooled and scuffed and smeared around on the deck, no bright yellow caution tape, no little flags to alert to the position of arterial blood spatter on the consoles and walls, no CSIs bustling about to photograph and log the scene and contents...

But then, these people had a far more urgent priority than an inconvenient body in their work area. EMTs were never overly careful with physical evidence at a scene, either, if there were lives at stake. And in this case, it was everyone aboard the *Daedalus*, one hundred twenty officers and crew, twenty four X-302 pilots, and eighteen passengers, for a total of one hundred sixty-two human lives.
Well, less one. From the frenetic pace and barely-restrained sense of urgency, it was clear to Spencer that the situation was far from under control yet.

The charring and blast pattern seemed to indicate that the equipment damage was from a blast of some kind centered around one of the Asgard consoles. He had no idea what systems this one regulated, it was one of three, and Spencer couldn’t imagine any of them being any less than vital to ship operations.

And, yes, there was arterial blood spray over that console, and on the wall behind. So he could estimate, at least, where the victim had been standing. But, clearly, the blood spatter was *under* the soot and charring. So the murder occurred first, the blast second.

Wary of making any other conclusions as yet – after a few brief seconds of studying the scene from the outside – Spencer could only surmise that the body belonged to a crew mem—

Then he caught sight of the black and white yarmulke, pinned under a bit of blackened housing, one remaining hair pin still hanging from it.

Dr. Isaak Chaykovsky.

What the hell had an Israeli anthropologist been doing in the engineering section, in the middle of the night?

General O’Neill detached himself from wherever he had been, and strolled forward to meet Spencer and his escort.

“Thanks, Lieutenant Brown. I want you to ride this guy’s ass from now on. Do not let him out of your sight. If he has to go to the head or take a shower, you wait at the door till he comes out again. *You* have to go or shower, make sure he’s locked up nice and tight in his cabin. He does not so much as stub his toe while he’s in your care. Right? Nice toes by the way, Dr. Reid… you didn’t have time to pull on slippers? Never mind. Lieutenant Brown, go fetch him some infirmary booties or something, right? I’ll watch him till you get back.” The very young lieutenant Brown scuttled away, and Spencer blinked at the General. “Normally,” he commented easily, “I’d have Mitchell play babysitter, but he’s busy right now. They need him on the Bridge. So… we got a job for you, our FBI consultant… a little sooner than we anticipated.”

Spencer nodded, glancing back at the body. He winced. “I don’t suppose we have surveillance of engineering before the… accident?”

“Nope, we got none of that. Well, maybe we do, but it’s unavailable at this time. All internal sensors and surveillance are off-line, and all things being equal, not high on our priority list right now.”

“Was anyone else injured in the explosion?”

“No. We caught a break there… well, there was one other probably related to this incident, but he didn’t get his throat cut, just a knock on the head and shoved in a closet… the engineering tech on the night shift. He’s in the infirmary right now, along with about twenty five others with minor injuries from falling debris or falling out of their bunks.”

Spencer nodded. “Dr. Chaykovsky?”

“Yeah. That’s the dead guy. Sorry about the mess… the crew had other things on their minds than… you know, preserving the scene, all that CSI-type stuff.”

“I quite understand.”
“So… what do you need?”

My team, thought Spencer with a sigh. Failing that…

“Can Lieutenant Brown serve as my assistant?”

“She’s all yours. Unless, you know, she has to defend your honor or something. She’s got excellent hand-to-hand scores and no anti-zed bias. You might have noted she’s got a circle brand. Got a zed brother. She already let him know he can have a job with us if he wants it. Anything else?”

A hell of a lot, actually, but… “I’ll need a camera, lots of baggies for logging evidence, a crate or something to keep it all in… my laptop… I guess that’s it for right now. I’ll process the scene, such as it is, then report to you on what else I’ll need. If I have questions, I’ll ask Lieutenant Brown first.”

O’Neill seemed relieved. “That’s good. I was afraid you’d want me to do the Q&A.”

“Not right now, at any rate. Not until after I’ve made an initial investigation of the situation. Then I’ll no doubt have a lot of questions.”

O’Neill grinned and clapped him on the back. “Good man. I’ll have a camera and baggies delivered post haste. And here’s Brown with your booties. Don’t want you stepping on debris and cutting your feet. Okay, Brown, he’s all yours. I got… stuff. To do. You know.”

And the General disappeared. Spencer gave a little wave to Brown. “Lieutenant? I’m Dr. Spencer Reid of the FBI Behavioral Analysis Unit…”

Little Lieutenant Brown, dark hair pulled into a severe and military-approved bun at the nape of her neck, brown eyes shy but shrewd, blushed and quickly nodded. “I know who you are, Dr. Reid. I… it’s an honor to meet you, sir.” Which made Spencer blush in turn.

“Thank you. Let’s get to work, shall we? Oh, and, this is Bast. She’s also assigned to my protection detail. I don’t imagine she’ll obey orders, but you can give it a try…”

Brown had an infectious grin. “I know what you mean, sir. My brother’s cats all run his life for him, too.”

“Ah… your brother has cats. I see… Oh, here’s the camera and baggies. Let me just get started, then. With this much disruption of the scene it may not make much difference, but please stay behind me, will you? I just need to capture the scene as it is before we get to the body… and I imagine the quicker we are done there, the quicker they can remove it to the Infirmary, the better everyone will feel.”

Spencer was as careful and thorough as he could possibly be. He had to operate on the assumption that whatever damage had been done in the engine control room would make it impossible to consult the internal sensors or any camera surveillance recorded from before the Incident. If it had been possible to contain everyone at the ‘scene’, which pretty much meant everyone on board, to determine if they had evidence on them of cordite, or the victim’s blood, that would have been… helpful. But, in this case, clearly impossible. Thankfully, the Colonel’s authority on a deep space carrier was absolute, for glaringly apparent reasons. Spencer wouldn’t need any warrants to search the ship, and everyone’s quarters and possessions, looking for clothing with the wrong sorts of stains, the murder weapon, or the materials for bomb-making.

Because it was definitely a bomb. It wasn’t just a murder he needed to investigate, but an act of
deliberate sabotage as well. He badly wished Derek Morgan were here with him. His expertise with bombs, building them, defusing them, identifying components from even the most cursory glance... yes, it would have been helpful. Spencer could get there, it would just take him longer, and he would need help. Luckily, on a ship full of military, and ex-military, he would have no dearth of expertise to draw from.

Unluckily, the same could be said for his unsub pool.

"Lieutenant Brown, do you have any explosives experience?"

"None at all, sir. I was trained for linguistics. And firearms and hand-to-hand. And since I was assigned to the SGC, I've been taking archeology courses. Dr. Jackson would throw a big hairy fit if he saw what they've done to this dig site. He likes all artifacts and evidence left in situ."

Spencer chuckled. "I imagine he does. But I'd rather these people save us all from certain death than they worry about our evidence. Well, I need confirmation from an explosives expert, but I'm pretty sure the blast started here on this console... a block of thermite, maybe C4, something like that, heavily laced with cordite... blasting cap, and detonated remotely with something like a cell phone. This is all that remains of the trigger." He held up one baggie with a few scrap bits of debris, burned and blackened, twisted metal and wire and melted plastic. "The individual components are readily available enough on Earth, even if some of them would have to be supplied through the black-market or the military... but I would have thought none of them could be had on board this ship."

"Not so sure about that, sir. Every trip out, we carry significant firepower and explosives supplies for Atlantis. You wouldn't believe the amount of C4 those guys go through in a month."

"Hunh... then that's another question for the Colonel and General. Has anyone been dipping into the cargo hold for their own bomb-making kit, or did they smuggle their own on board. Well, I think I'm done here. Can you call Dr. Brightman, or whoever's in charge in the infirmary right now, and have them take Dr. Chaykovsky away? We'll need an estimated time of death from his liver temp, but after that, I hope they have somewhere cold to store him for now. We probably want to wait on a full autopsy... I can probably get enough from a cursory examination for now... And then I'll need to speak to Colonel Caldwell."

"The Colonel left orders that you meet him on the Bridge whenever you're ready, sir."

"Ah. Fine. Do you have somewhere secure for our evidence bin? Good. Then I need to clean up a bit... is it okay to go back to my cabin and get dressed first? I'd prefer to proceed with proper shoes on, at least."

Colonel Caldwell and General O'Neill were both present on the Bridge when Spencer and Lieutenant Brown arrived. So were Mitchell and Vala, although both of them were frowning mightily at work stations they were manning.

As soon as they appeared, Caldwell stood from the captain’s chair and said, “Mitchell, you have the con. Dr. Reid, please join me in the ward room. General?” Spencer nodded to the lieutenant to follow.

The four of them took their seats at the colonel’s conference table, and Spencer quickly plugged his laptop in to the monitor on the wall where they had watched Vala and Ziva David battle it out just a few days ago. Again, Spencer stifled a passing pang at missing Garcia to give the briefing.
“Colonel, General, I have determined that there is evidence of two crimes occurring early this morning. One was the murder of Dr. Isaak Chaykovsky. The other was a bomb set to explode in engineering. At this time, I can’t state with certainty that the two are related, although it seems likely. Dr. Chaykovsky died approximately three and a half hours ago, according to liver temp, at about two-thirty am ship’s time. Dr. Novak confirmed that the explosion occurred at precisely two-thirty-seven am.

“Dr. Chaykovsky had his throat cut with a long bladed weapon, a single decisive slash across the front, as deep as the neck bones, so it must have been exceedingly sharp, and used with some force. The murderer stood behind Chaykovsky… lieutenant, if you will?”

Brown stood up, and Spencer stood behind her, reaching around with his left arm to clamp her against his front, then, with his right hand, and miming the action of drawing a knife across her upper throat, from left to right. Then he nodded for her to sit again, and turned to the monitor, where he cued up the pictures he had taken of the body.

“As you can see, he practically decapitated Dr. Chaykovsky. There’s no hesitation marks. It was quick, relatively clean, practiced. The murderer has at least some training or experience. I doubt the victim was even aware of the attack before it was all over, but I’ll check later for post-mortem bruising, looking for signs of a struggle. There was considerable arterial spray on the third console, the one I am told controls internal systems, life support, security, that sort of thing. I took samples, and, using the truly impressive Asgard scanners in the Sick Bay, Dr. Brightman has already confirmed the DNA match to the victim. As you saw from my demonstration, whatever the unsub was wearing at the time, the left sleeve will be soaked in the victim’s blood, so we need to look for that, as well as the weapon.

“The explosion occurred *after* the murder. The burning and damage to the body is all on his back side, so he was already on the floor when the bomb went off, and the soot and blackened areas, as well as much of the debris, is on top of the blood evidence.”


“So there’s a murderer and saboteur on board my ship.”

Spencer nodded. “And that might mean two people, not just one… although, as I said, it seems more likely the two crimes are related. But it’s far too early in the investigation to be able to state that with any degree of certainty.”

Caldwell nodded grudgingly. “Anything you need, Doctor. Anything at all. After repairs, you have priority.”

“Can you at least give us a guess who might have done this?” O’Neill asked.

Spencer sighed. “There’s not much to go on right now. For one thing, I doubt very much that it’s an accident that the one console that controls the internal security systems was the one targeted by the bomber.”

“Yeah, that *had* occurred to me,” O’Neill growled.

“The two likeliest scenarios here are that, one, the saboteur was caught red-handed in setting his bomb, and moved to eliminate a potential witness, interfering in his actions. A spur-of-the-moment crime. In that case we’re looking for a motive for the bombing, and we have to consider that it did *not* in fact, destroy the ship, merely crippled it for an undetermined period of time. That might mean it was meant as a distraction only, for some other purpose… as yet unknown.”
O’Neill groaned and face-palmed at that, while Caldwell grimaced.

“Or, two, the bomb was intended as a forensic counter-measure, to obscure or eliminate evidence of the murder, although, in that case, the murderer would have had to bring it with him, which means both murder and bomb were pre-meditated. At this time, I have no way of knowing which case is most likely. But I would like to know… Who would know enough to cause an explosion bad enough to hide the crime, or maybe cripple the ship for a time, but not so bad that it would kill us all out-right?”

O’Neill glanced at Caldwell and nodded, so the colonel sighed and replied, “Since it still isn’t certain that it *won’t* kill us all out-right… I’d say no one. For one thing, there’s a lot of naquadah in this ship, its hull, tech, everywhere, and naquadah is a known catalyst that enhances the power of any explosion that can ignite it. We also have one or two systems running on naquadria… and that stuff is unstable and prone to explode at the best of times, let alone when near a bomb flash-point. We were real lucky neither of those worse-case scenarios took us out altogether. Could someone have known that? Maybe… but I really doubt anyone who knew that much would even take the chance. I sure as hell wouldn’t.

“But even without blowing us up to kingdom come, whether we can survive this all depends on if we can get the hyperdrive back up. And when. After that it’s a calculation… how much oxygen do we have to get us to the nearest safe harbor? Maybe we can still reach Pegasus… maybe we turn around to get back to the Milky Way… or maybe we all asphyxiate before we can reach any viable planet. At this point, we can’t even call for help, because that damned console included the communications system controls, too.”

O’Neill groaned and stretched, the weariness and stress of the past few hours very briefly telling on the older man, before he collected himself. “Bottom line, Dr. Reid, it would take a real idiot, or a bona fide madman, to blow up the ship they’re on… they’d suffer death along with everyone else. But, lucky for us, madmen are sort of your thing, right?”

Spencer was quiet just a little too long, contemplating that.

O’Neill exchanged glances with Colonel Caldwell. “Okay, son. Out with it. What bad news do you have for us here?”

Spencer said, “This is all speculation at this point, remember. But there are a few classes of unsub who, in my experience, might profile for such an apparently insane action… suicide bombers are the most obvious one. But that’s unlikely to be the case here, for a number of reasons. That type of unsub is mostly motivated by religion or politics, and I don’t see how anyone on this ship qualify for that kind of action. They crave to claim responsibility, not hide culpability. They would have stayed in engineering, right next to their bomb. If they counted on everyone dying anyway, then it wouldn’t matter if he detonated remotely or not. And if total destruction was the goal, it sounds like that would be all too easy to guarantee first time out, especially given the expertise shown so far. Why aim for half-measures?

“A second type of unsub… would be someone at least a little delusional, with a god complex. It’s all about them, their entitlement, they are the center of the universe, and there’s no way they can possibly die, so they feel secure taking any risk. Then, third, there’s the chancers… willing to take the risk if it’ll achieve their goals or save them from blame, and trusting in their luck to see them through. Now, we do have quite a few who might qualify for either of the last two personality types… most of them military, ex-military or security, any or all of them who would know the most efficient way to slit a throat, and with the necessary explosives experience.”

Terrific. I don’t suppose we have any stowaways we can blame?”

Spencer smiled faintly. “Not any with opposable thumbs, no. At least there’s some limit to my usual suspect pool. There’s an old joke… July 20, 1969, Apollo 11 mission, the lunar landing module Eagle has set down on Tranquility Base, and Neil Armstrong is the first man to walk on the moon. When he returns… ‘Knock knock.’ And Buzz Aldrin says, ‘Who’s there?’” That won a few chuckles.

“Well, do your due diligence, doctor. Everyone on board is a suspect, until you clear them.”

Spencer suggested, “What if it’s me?”

O’Neill grinned. “You’re the one person I *know* isn’t guilty. I’ve had a special surveillance program running on you since you got aboard, including a separate camera hidden in your quarters. I *know* when you make it safe to your cabin, and I’ve got the tape from your evening. Including all those cats haunting you everywhere you go.”

“For my protection?”

“I promised Elle Greenaway I’d get you some place safe. Safer. And if I fail in that promise, she *will* hunt me down and shoot me. And she’ll only be the first in a long line of your friends. So, Dr. Reid, you’ve got quite a job ahead of you.”

Spencer nodded. “Someone on board *Daedalus* is a saboteur and murderer. And I have to find them, before they can do more harm.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes folks, Stage II is a classic snow-bound-house-on-the-moors-mystery, a la Agatha Christie’s ‘Mousetrap’, complete with parade of bodies, which is why I took such a long time setting the scene and introducing everyone… suspects and potential vics alike…. And why this is case!fic.
O’Neill shook his head doubtfully. “You said we might be looking for a ‘chancer’. You do realize, everyone on this ship said yes to exploring space, right? That means all the military, and especially the civilians, pretty much anyone who goes into space, qualifies as willing, even eager, to take risks. So that doesn’t exactly cut down on your suspect list, does it? You might as well say those with heads. Or opposable thumbs.”

“But to set off a bomb on the ship they’re in? That’s an order of magnitude greater in risk-taking.”

O’Neill had to grant that. “Okay. So next steps?”

“Possibility number one. Chances are good that if the bomb did not destroy the ship, then it wasn’t meant to. Which means odds are it was a secondary crime, meant as a distraction from some other purpose, maybe to cover up the murder, although it didn’t do a very good job of that, or the murder was either unrelated or collateral damage. The primary purpose may be to facilitate theft, smuggling, or hi-jacking. These are all possibilities we need to watch for.

“Possibility number two. If not a distraction, then the bomb failed in its intent, which means, worst case, another attempt will be made to finish the job. Colonel, General, you should plan and prepare for either that, or hi-jacking.

“Possibility number three, the bomb was a forensic counter-measure only to make the murder investigation more difficult. I myself will watch out for signs the murder was the primary goal, and the bomb detonated to obscure the murderer’s trail.”

Caldwell and O’Neill were both taking copious notes, as was Lieutenant Brown, which was gratifying to Spencer, a sign he had their support and confidence.

“Now. Is everyone accounted for? Are their whereabouts known right now?”

Colonel Caldwell nodded at once, consulting a screen he pulled up on the ward-room monitors. “Passengers and all non-essential crew, that’s anyone not immediately required for repairs or handling the injured, are either in the Sick Bay or the Mess. As Dr. Brightman releases them from the Infirmary, they are relocated in the Mess.”

Spencer nodded. “Have the Israelis been informed of Dr. Chaykovsky’s death?”

Caldwell shook his head. “No. The only people who know are those who have actually had to deal with the body.”

“Good. I’d like to deal with that myself. I know Dr. Sasson was in some kind of relationship with the victim. I need to be the one to tell her, and their team. They knew the victim best, and must be considered the likeliest suspects. Even if she’s innocent, Dr. Sasson is bound to take the news hard, emotionally, but she is also the most likely to have some clue as to what Dr. Chaykovsky was doing in engineering, and who might have reason to kill him.

“In the mean time, keep everyone possible contained in the Mess or Infirmary. I’ll need an office somewhere to question witnesses, and after that… can we send them to their quarters to wait? It’s best if we try to keep witnesses separate until I get to everyone.”
Caldwell nodded. “This is clearly an emergency situation. As you finish your questioning, we’ll have everyone return to their cabins. They’ll be safer there and out of the way of any issues we may have with the ship. I’ll make it an order. There’s an auxiliary office off the Mess. Brown, you know it? You can use that. Anything else?”

“I need a ship-wide search to begin as soon as possible. We’re looking for the weapon, a long sharp blade, bloody or cordite-tainted clothing, and any evidence of bomb-making. We want to know where the bomb-making supplies came from, any anomalies or anything missing from the cargo area. We are also looking for any illicit communication devices or homing beacons.”

Caldwell and O’Neill exchanged an uneasy look. O’Neill said, “This is for your hi-jacking theory, right? You think the saboteur is setting us up for a boarding party of some kind.”

“I actually think that makes the most sense right now, given a bomb designed to damage, not destroy, to cripple us and allow confederates to catch up and board us, but... it’s really too soon to say for sure. I just think that right now we’re a sitting duck for anyone who wants to take advantage.”

Caldwell winced. “That’s certainly true enough.”

“Search parties should be crew members of long-standing, in pairs, wearing gloves if possible... I hope the Sick Bay is well supplied? They need to bag any suspect clothing they find, and note where they found it and who it belongs to. My assumption is that if the saboteur is crew, it’s a first-timer, or they could have pulled this before now, and the longer a mole has to wait, the more likely they would be to be un-masked. For now, put a lock on the Cargo Hold, and guard it well. We need to search personal quarters, cabins, common and sensitive areas and the main ship first. The cargo hold can wait, we’ll take it last and note any anomalies at that time.”

Caldwell nodded, grim, but in some ways relieved. “I agree. This all makes good sense. Thank you, Dr. Reid. I know I can leave this matter in your capable hands. Brown? Anything the doctor wants, he gets.”

“Yes, sir.”

Spencer stood up. “Well, that’s all I have for now. It’s time we get to work, lieutenant. I’ll take the Israelis first – they knew the victim best.”

As the pair of investigators left the ward room, Caldwell sent a wry grin to O’Neill. “I’m glad he’s here, Jack.”

“Yeah, he’s quite something to see in action, isn’t he?”

“He and DiNozzo will get along like a house on fire, I can see that right now,” Caldwell was even able to chuckle for the first time in hours.

Jack eyed the colonel with speculation. “Yeah, about that. What do you know about DiNozzo? Because from the reports I’ve been getting... he’s been doing a hell of a job out there, but there’s not a lot about #him.#”

Steven met his old friend’s eyes in a steady neutral gaze. “Now that you’re coming out to Pegasus yourself? We all agreed to let you make up your own mind about that, Jack. There’s things you’ll need to know... when you get there. Not before.”

Jack growled. “Terrrrific. I knew it. I just knew it. You can’t even give me a hint?”
“What kind of hint do you want, Jack? That this zed thing is about to blow up in our faces? You already know that, or you wouldn’t be bringing Dr. Reid with you.”

“Blow up in our faces… interesting turn of phrase considering our current situation, Steven. Okay. So, how do you want to handle this hi-jacking possibility? ‘Cause I gotta tell ya, it makes the most sense to me, too.”

Brown helped Spencer set up the small office with a table in the middle, two chairs on one side, one chair on the other, and a camera to record the interviews.

“Lieutenant Brown, how is your poker face?”

Turning a blank stare on him, Brown answered, “I do okay, sir.”

Spencer grinned. “Good. Now, usually, the first round of questioning is just to get a rough general picture of the situation. I fully expect people to lie to me, or withhold information… you’d be surprised what secrets people hold close to their chests and guard with fanaticism. Most won’t have anything to do with our investigation, and will only serve to muddy the waters for us… but we still need to hear what they all have to say, and how they say it. Hence the camera recordings. It may take time to dig deeper, just to discover what issues we can disregard and what we need to focus on.

“Unlike most other investigations I’ve taken part in, everyone on this ship knows exactly who and what I am. I expect a certain amount of blow back on that score. People will resent having to deal with me, be angry and resentful that a zed is in any position of power over them, has the nerve to question them about their whereabouts or relationships. Be prepared for that. It could get ugly. It might even get violent. I want you to keep silent, watchful, try to disappear into the back-ground, unless someone actually pulls a weapon or throws a punch. And keep a rigidly neutral face… yes, just like that. And… the more someone displays any sort of zed prejudice… if you could, perhaps, seem a little sympathetic to them? Roll your eyes, maybe? The Colonel assigned you to watch the zed, and you no doubt have better things to do with your time than waste it on a lousy zed. Right?”

Brown shifted uncomfortably, but nodded. “Yes, sir. Should I take notes?”

“Sure. Lots of notes, all the time, and if you have nothing to actually take note of, write anything down… the lunch menu, your favorite poem… our witnesses will be watching you for any clues as to how their statements are going over, but we don’t need to tell them.”

“Very good, sir.”

It didn’t take long before Spencer was ready for his first witness/suspect.

Dr. Leah Sasson, Israeli anthropologist, and Spencer was pretty sure, the victim’s lover.

The mousy woman looked terrified as Brown ushered her in.

“How have I been singled out like this? What is happening? Are we in danger?” She fired off half a dozen questions as she trembled, even sitting down. “Where is Isaak? Is he in the infirmary? Is he badly hurt? Can I go see him?”

“Dr. Sasson,” Spencer tried to stem the headlong rush. “Please. I have some bad news for you. Dr. Chaykovsky is dead. He was killed when an explosion occurred in engineering.”
Spencer had little doubt that the shock on the woman’s face was genuine. “Dead?” she whispered, and immediately began to hyperventilate. “No! It cannot be! He was just… he just… No! Please, it isn’t so, is it?” She was pleading now. “What happened? How… how…”

At last, a more constructive opening. Spencer did his best to remain neutral but open. But the woman’s flood of emotions were almost overpowering. Luckily, Bast made her presence known, leaping into his lap. His hands found her ruff and began carding through her fur at once.

“I have to ask you, Dr. Sasson… were you in a relationship with Dr. Chaykovsky?”

“We… we were lovers. Engaged to be married. We would have made it official once this assignment was over and we returned to Israel.” She rubbed at her lower abdomen… it was a telling gesture to Spencer, not unlike the one he had taken to using in unguarded moments.

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“Last night, at curfew. We… we had grown into the habit of using the back section of the library for… assignations. Few ever occupied the library after dinner, and the back section was isolated and… intimate.”

“I understand. Did Isaak have problems with anyone on board ship? Did he complain of anyone threatening him?”

“Why… why do you ask such questions?” Sasson asked nervously, twisting her fingers together, then wrapping her arms around her chest. All markers for defensive behavior and unwillingness to talk.

“Dr. Sasson… Leah… We have reason to believe Isaak may have been murdered. The explosion wasn’t an accident.”

“No…” the woman whispered faintly. She looked about to pass out.

“Lieutenant, water. Dr. Sasson? Do you need a moment?”

“Who… who would… do such a terrible thing?”

“That’s what I am trying to find out, Leah. Now, did Isaak have issues with anyone on board? Did anyone threaten him?”

“I… I… I don’t know…”

“I couldn’t help but notice that you both seem rather nervous around both Dr. Berkovitch and Ziva David. Why is that?”

The poor woman looked like a possum stunned in the headlights of an oncoming car. Certainly nothing so large or imposing as a deer, but someone all too likely to become road kill in very short order.

“I… I… of course not… why should we fear them?”

“Well, it’s no secret that Ms David has a problem with me. I can easily see how she could be an intimidating person.”

“Well… um… I suppose so…”

“But there was nothing between them?”
There was the spark of something there, like a green flash of jealousy, maybe, but it was gone just as suddenly as it flared. “No. No. Definitely nothing between them.” And there, Spencer thought, the lady doth protest too much.

“What about Mr. Timur Shelyapin, the Russian diplomat?” Again, there was the flickering of some awareness, just as hastily covered and buried.

“I do not know what you mean.”

“Well, I couldn’t help but observe that Mr. Shelyapin lost no opportunities to attempt to push Isaak around and bully him. Was there some reason for that?”

“No, no, what reason could there be?”

“Well, that’s what I want to know. If it had been me, I could understand. Russians, as a rule, hate and despise zeds like myself. And there is often some animosity between Israelis and Russians…”

“Yes yes, that must be it,” Leah leapt upon the offered explanation with patent relief. And was just as obviously lying her head off.

“One last question. Do you know of any reason Isaak would have gone to engineering last night?”

That one just mystified the woman. “No… no. I have no idea. Perhaps he was just restless and needed to walk. When he was trying to work something out in his head, some knotty problem or mystery, he would often take long walks… hard to do on a ship like this.”

“Yes, I suppose. Well, thank you for your assistance, Dr. Sasson. I am very sorry for your loss. If you can think of anything that might help us get to the bottom of this, please let me know.”

“I… I… I will…” and that, it seemed, was as far as the woman’s control of her emotions would take her. Brown had to help her out the door and into the hands of a crew member to take her to her cabin.

When Brown returned to give Spencer one eloquently raised eyebrow, Spencer merely shrugged. “She doesn’t profile as the personality type we’re looking for… if anything, she’s so totally risk-averse I can’t imagine what possessed her to come on this trip at all… except to follow her lover. And, unless I miss my guess, the father of her unborn child.”

Brown gasped. “She’s pregnant?”

Spencer nodded. “I’m almost certain. I’ll check with Dr. Brightman later. As for her secrets and lies… I doubt they have anything to do with the crimes we’re investigating… but I wouldn’t be surprised if she knows something about Berkovitch and David she’s been warned to keep to herself. According to Dr. Jackson, the Israelis are one of two groups on board the SGC was unable to vet before they joined the mission, so we don’t know anything for certain about any of them.”

The next for questioning was Dr. Eitan Berkovitch. He shared a cabin with Dr. Chaykovsky.

For some reason, this man, like his security attaché, rubbed Spencer the wrong way. It was nothing to do with gender status, but Berkovitch was a control freak, entitlement and arrogance was like a battlement upon which he stood, inviolate, while he looked dismissively down at all the little people from his great height. Spencer profiled him as an experienced leader, at the very least, used to command, impatient with any hint of insubordination from anyone around him. He was the spider in
the centre of a web, highly attuned to the slightest tremble in any of his carefully set trip wires. He must have been a university department chair, and of one of the more prominent institutions, too, at the very least, to be so accustomed to his leadership role. Odd, then, that Daniel complained about never having heard of the man.

“Dr. Berkovitch. Please have a seat. I’m afraid I have some bad news. Dr. Chaykovsky was murdered in the early hours of this morning, at about the same time as the explosion in engineering.”

Spencer watched very carefully for the reactions… shock, yes certainly, but then… relief?

“Murder! You are certain?”

“We are. Yes. Now, you shared a cabin with Dr. Chaykovsky. When was the last time you saw him?”

“At dinner in the Mess. He said he wished to review more Atlantis reports, in the library. I just naturally assumed he was going to meet with his lover, Dr. Sasson. When he was not back at curfew, I assumed he had found somewhere to spend the night with her.”

“Ah. I did wonder why you didn’t report him missing.”

“I can imagine nothing more awkward than sending either Ziva or a crewman to hunt down a courting couple.”

“Do you know of anyone Dr. Chaykovsky might have been having problems with? Did he mention anyone threatening him?”

“Not that I was aware. For all that we shared a very small cabin, we were not actually that close. We had not met before we arrived on the *Daedalus*, and moved in very different circles. He was unlikely to confide in me, and I took little notice of him.”

“I see. I have noted that there seemed to be some… friction, between he and Mr. Shelyapin, the Russian diplomat, for example. Do you know the reason for that?”

“Isaak’s family came from Russia originally, generations of his ancestors kicked off one homestead after another… he had no very warm feelings for any Russian. Few Israelis do.”

“Ah. Do you know why he was in engineering when the bomb went off?”

Berkovitch was inclined to bristle at that. “I hope you don’t mean to imply that Isaak was in any way responsible for the explosion! That is absurd and preposterous! And the man is dead, by heaven, and cannot defend himself.”

“I mean no disrespect. But if he did not set the bomb, then we must conclude the bomber and saboteur killed him. So what took him to his death?”

“I have no idea. But Dr. Reid, I doubt you are aware, but our security attaché, Ms David, has major crime investigation experience.”

Spencer blinked. “Through Mossad?”

“No. She was trained for many years at NCIS, under one of the best of your American investigators, Leroy Jethro Gibbs. You may know of him. She has expertise that could be invaluable to you at this time.”
There was a hidden glee in that piece of information, as if he had already won a battle not yet declared. Spencer kept his poker face rigidly in place as he absorbed this surprising news.

What are the odds, Spencer wondered, that Ziva David had managed to get herself assigned to Atlantis, where Very Special Agent Afloat Anthony D. DiNozzo Jr. was presently operating, and *didn’t* know she was about to meet again with a former co-worker? What could that be about?

Slowly, Spencer nodded. “I will certainly consider that, Dr. Berkovitch. Thank you for your help. If you can think of anything else that might assist us, let me know.”

“Certainly, Dr. Reid. I don’t suppose it is possible for me to see the body? There are certain rights for the dead that must be observed in our religion, and I doubt you have access to any Rabbis, either on the *Daedalus*, or in Atlantis…”

“You’ll need to take that up with either Colonel Caldwell or General O’Neill, I’m afraid.” Spencer felt a little guilty, siccing the Israeli on the two men, but… better them than him.

When he left, Brown looked up at Spencer, opened her mouth to make a comment, then shut it again, words failing her.

“Yeah,” Spencer agreed whole-heartedly, rubbing at an aching temple. “He’s a piece of work, all right. Used to controlling situations… but a murderer or saboteur? Hard to say. The fact he thinks it’s going to be so easy to wedge his agent into the investigation… makes me wonder.”

“Yes sir,” Brown agreed fervently. “You do realize… David hates your guts? She loses no opportunity to spread it all around the ship, what a waste of space zeds are, not to be trusted, sex fiends, moral degenerates, weaklings and idiots. A few of us have been keeping track of anyone listening to her drivel… on General O’Neill and Colonel Mitchell’s orders. She isn’t making many friends on board, sir.”

“No. I have noticed that she doesn’t seem very good at that.” Spencer considered thoughtfully. “Maybe you should play into that. Remember about the rolled eyes and the unspoken sympathy for her point of view? If she and Berkovitch are playing some kind of game here, it might be useful to know what it is, and why it has Leah Sasson so scared.”

Spencer sighed, not looking forward to the next interview at all. He didn’t know how Berkovitch could have missed the animosity Ziva seemed to hold for him, which would make any interaction between them rather… fraught. Why the man thought they could work smoothly together… or maybe he assumed Ziva could simply take control and run the case, steam-rolling over the seemingly weaker FBI agent… even if there wasn’t the issue of conflict of interest in this case. The Israeli group were altogether too close to Dr. Chaykovsky for any of them to be allowed a part in investigating his death.

He was prepared for a prickly woman to enter, defensive and angry.

“What is the meaning of all this subterfuge? What is going on here?”

If she had law enforcement experience, she should already have guessed some of this.

“Ms David, I’m sorry to have to tell you that Dr. Chaykovsky was murdered early this morning, at around the same time as the explosion in engineering. Did you know Dr. Chaykovsky well?”

At least that stopped her in her tracks and got her thinking, calculating, cautious of every word as she
assessed and evaluated. Shoved aside, for the time being, was her personal feelings about the man before her. Slowly, she answered, “Not well, no. I had not met him before this assignment.”

“What about Dr. Sasson?”

“I had never met her, either.”

“You were aware they were having an affair?”

Ziva scoffed, “It was rather hard to miss. Although I have reason to believe they had begun to argue. Neither of them were overly happy with the Atlantis posting, and it caused some dissension. I suppose you will want to know of alibis for the time of the murder? I last saw Dr. Chaykovsky after dinner in the Mess, when he and Leah left to do some… studying and report reading in the library. I took that as a euphemism for making out like teenagers in a place of privacy, difficult to come by on this ship. Leah returned at curfew to her bunk in the cabin we share, she had quite obviously been crying, and I naturally assumed Isaak had returned to his own cabin at the same time. And that is all I know, until the… accident. Not an accident at all, I take it? We have a saboteur on board?”

“Yes. And at this stage in the investigation, I don’t know whether the two crimes, the murder and the sabotage, are related or not.”

Ziva frowned disapprovingly. “But it is rather too great a coincidence if they are not, yes?”

“Perhaps. You are the security attaché for the Israeli team. I quite understand that, while on board the *Daedalus* your guard wouldn’t need to be so high… you would be expected to take part in away missions, of course, and responsible for your team’s safety in the field…” Spencer carefully noted the brief cringe and even briefer spurt of resentment, “but here? Everyone should have an expectation of safety. But maybe you were watching for any potential friction among the passengers? We do have a Russian team on board. Did you notice anyone having problems with Dr. Chaykovsky? Threatening him, perhaps?”

Spencer hoped that by stroking her ego a little, he would get at least some cooperation. If she did have a background in criminal investigations, then she knew the drill, and might actually have some helpful insights.

Ziva studied Spencer closely, frowning. “I must suppose you mean the animosity between Isaak and the Russian diplomat, Mr. Shelyapin. It seemed odd to me, as Isaak is not known for being argumentative or causing… waves. But…”

“Yes?”

“Well, Shelyapin is a negotiator in Middle East disputes, yes? I had assumed that his path had crossed Isaak’s at some point. Like all Israelis, Isaak did military service for two years. At least one of his engagements was in Afghanistan, where Shelyapin also spent time. Their discomfort with each other seemed personal to me.”

Spencer nodded. “Yes, to me as well. Dr. Berkovitch suggested that there was a natural antipathy between Israelis and Russians, particularly since Isaak was a Russian Jew.”

Ziva shrugged. “It is possible.”

“Tell me, Ms David… does Israeli training for the armed forces include explosives?”

“Of course it does. We must know how to build, recognize and defuse all manner of bombs, from nuclear warheads, car bombs, suicide bombs, to all manner of home-made IEDs.”
Spencer nodded. “I thought so. Thank you for your candor. Dr. Berkovitch tells me you yourself have law enforcement experience.”

“Yes. I spent over five years with NCIS, the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, on their major crimes response team.”

“Yes. So he said. I’m sure you understand that your team is far too close to the victim in this case for me to invite you to take part in the investigation.”

“I quite understand. It would be a conflict of interest. I am familiar with the protocols.”

Spencer nodded, then decided on a frontal attack, much as the lady herself preferred. “And then there is the fact that you seem to hate my guts. Although I have no idea why, as we had never met before the *Daedalus*.”

Ziva stiffened. “I am sure I don’t know what you mean. It seems to me that, on the contrary, you have taken me and my team in some aversion.”

“Then you don’t have a problem with zeds?”

There was a flash of fire in Ziva’s black eyes. Gotcha.

“Such an unreasoning prejudice would be… irrational, would it not?”

Spencer smiled. “I certainly think so, Ms David. Thank you for your assistance. If you can think of anything that might help me in this investigation, since you do have experience, I would certainly appreciate it. I assure you, I only want to see justice done, and this ship and its inhabitants protected.”

Ziva nodded.

Lieutenant Brown showed her out to a crewman who would escort her to her cabin. The young woman glanced at Spencer. “She didn’t say your name. Not once.”

“No, she didn’t. I noticed that, too. Bast doesn’t like her, you know. I wonder why. But, unfortunately, the opinion of cats is not admissible evidence of anything, anywhere.”

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The process of questioning everyone was an often tedious process. Except for the Israelis, and maybe the other passengers who had been in briefings with them all week, few even recognized Dr. Chaykovsky. Both he and his fiancée had done a very good job of flying under everyone’s radar, disappearing into the metalwork. On the face of it, both people profiled as retiring and shy… not exactly the adventurous explorer mentality O’Neill had talked about. Then why had they come on this journey in the first place? Their main motivation for keeping a low profile seemed to be an understandable desire to keep their romantic interludes secret from everyone, and their nervousness around their fellow Israelis, yet to be fully explained to Spencer’s satisfaction. Spencer was beginning to get an idea about a possible explanation for that… but he needed more time to flesh it out. One thing he would do was warn O’Neill to send a communication, as soon as they had the ability, to warn Agent DiNozzo that a former team-mate was on her way to him.

Meanwhile, there were plenty of other issues and mysteries to uncover on the way to finding the truth. If his helpful lieutenant was sick and tired of hearing the same questions over and over, she gave no sign.

“When did you last see Dr. Chaykovsky? Did he indicate he thought he was in danger from anyone? Did he have any problems with anyone on board, that you know of? What would take him to the engineering section?”

After dealing with the Israelis, Spencer felt he needed a bit of a breather… so he took the Brits next. Of all those on board, for various reasons, he thought they were the least likely to be involved in the crimes. For one thing, Phil, Mick and Taylor were all known personally to Daniel, they’d had minimal contact with, or interest in, Chaykovsky, and were unlikely to have known him before coming on board. Yes, he had his suspicions about Black and Baldrick, but did they involve murder and sabotage? No. Far from it. If he suspected anything, it was that General O’Neill was stacking the deck with his own moles, slipped into the mix to look into whatever O’Neill suspected was really going down in Pegasus. He wondered briefly if it might be useful to send an email to Emily Prentiss, when he could… odds were his past team-mate and current Interpol Office Chief would know them, or of them.

And, as he suspected, beyond a certain ghoulish interest and curiosity in murder and mayhem at such close remove, none of them were aware of anything that might constitute a clue.

Tony Baldrick, sporting a huge bandage across the top of his head like a badge of honor, seemed positively giddy at the early-morning excitement.

Spencer politely asked, “How is your head, Mr. Baldrick?”

“Fine, fine… twelve stitches. My own bloody fault, you know. Phil and Mick both tried to warn us, never bed down on a ship without battening down the hatches. Those two… they always shut up everything loose in their lockers and seal them, and pull the crash nets, whenever they go to bed for the night. Damn Boy Scouts, always prepared. I was the idiot who ignored their advice. And poor Taylor, too. He was reading mission reports in bed, hard to do inside those damn nets, which is how he fell out of his top bunk. Broke his wrist, poor sod.”
As for the revelation of death and destruction in deep space…

“Oh wow! It’s like an Agatha Christie novel, isn’t it? A remote, isolated house on the moors, cut off and snow-bound… and a mounting pile of bodies! Blimey, it’s the ‘Mousetrap’!”

“Only one body, Mr. Baldrick.”

“So far, you mean! Oh! Can I help? Be on your team? I’d make a great minion for you to order around. I promise not to say a word or get in the way… Watson to your Sherlock, Hastings to your Poirot…”

“I’m afraid not.” Spencer nipped that idea in the bud right away, unable to think of anything more disruptive.

Baldrick’s face fell, like a kicked puppy, *almost* making Spencer feel guilty for disappointing him.

“That’s too bad. I would *love* to watch you in action, Dr. Reid.”

Which is pretty much exactly what Edmund Black had to say, not ten minutes later, but in a whole different tone of voice. “Do you need help with the investigation? I’d be happy to offer my services.”

The man made it sound so… *smarmy*! And Spencer was absolutely sure Edmund was laughing up his sleeve the whole time. He was definitely going to send that email to Emily!

When he was finally able to kick the man out, Brown finally let go of the hoot of laughter she had been struggling to hold back. Spencer glared at her.

“I need a break. And lunch. But I don’t want to eat in the Mess… we’d get swamped by people wanting to get their questions answered. Can you have something delivered, lieutenant? And could you please stop grinning? He’s not even serious, you know.”

“I don’t know sir… he seems plenty serious to me! Colonel Mitchell is not going to be amused.”

After lunch, and a brief reminder to Lieutenant Brown to keep her cool around antagonistic witnesses, Spencer set in to tackle the most problematic of his suspect pool. The Russian party.

Like the Israelis, they had been sprung on the SGC by the IOA at the last moment, with no advance warning or vetting, so their very identities and credentials were in doubt. There was enough resistance to this team, based entirely upon nation of origin, that Spencer was more than willing to forgive them much of their hostility, surrounded by suspicious Americans, inimical Israelis and standoffish everyone else. He was also prepared to take any anti-zed bias in stride, too, well aware that the ordinary Russian would have had little to no reason not to follow the party line where his gender status was concerned. Didn’t mean he had to like it, or stand for any disrespect, but… he could understand it.

By now, word must have got around to everyone in the Mess that something bad had gone down, that Spencer was part of the team investigating, and that everyone was under suspicion… of what, they could only speculate, and speculation was no doubt rife, as more and more people disappeared from the Mess, not to return.

So, yes, security attaché Yuri Yashkin was in a wired and over-caffeinated state when he arrived and took a chair, glaring at the zed. “Very well. What has happened?”

Once informed, he blinked, once, ice blue eyes sharpening to shards. “And they have entrusted the
investigation to *you*?"

Spencer asked what experience he had with explosives, and Yashkin was gleefully informative, for fifteen minutes, of his extensive knowledge and experience in that area. Spencer thanked him solemnly, and dismissed him. Yeah, no, he didn’t think Yashkin had anything to do with it.

He told Brown, “No one in their right mind would let that guy near a Fourth-of-July sparkler, let alone an actual bomb. He’d blow himself up the second he touched it. If he’s involved, then the explosion was a total accident, and he would have been the first casualty. Even I know he had half his facts wrong.”

Dr. Katya Petrova, geologist, spoke only in curt, brief sentences, simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’, if she could get away with it, and glared at him the whole time. But he was unsure of the source of her resentment of him. She had seemed supremely unaware of his very existence… until her determined romantic pursuit of Cameron Mitchell had hit a brick wall. Then she began to slide side-ways glances Spencer’s way, full of jealousy and offense, his presence a deliberate insult to her.

As far as her qualifications for the Atlantis mission, he had often seen her sitting with Dr. Taylor Timson, arguing loudly over some mission report. He took this to indicate she knew at least enough about her subject area, geology, to make a good case with another geologist.

Only a few minutes were required to tell him astrophysicist Dr. Evgenia Andreeva knew her stuff, and then some. She confessed that she had worked for the Russian Stargate Project a decade ago, alongside Dr. Svetlana Markov, and had been chomping at the bit to return to it ever since. Her light blue eyes sparkled with excitement as she talked about her involvement, past and present. She had worked with Dr. McKay before as well, and was looking forward to meeting him again. That didn’t quite jibe with what Spencer had heard of the prickly Canadian. When he tilted his head to one side to study her with a somewhat skeptical look, she chuckled.

“Which is it that has you puzzled, doctor? That I look forward to working with McKay? Or that I am able to treat you with common courtesy?”

“Both, actually. Either.”

The older woman chuckled, warm, rich and earthy. “You find my acceptance of you odd? I am not surprised. You ask if I have a problem with zeds? You might as well ask if I have a problem with people who have brown eyes. Yours are a rather nice caramel color, if I may say so. Reminds me of my youngest grandson… who is still older than you, *Vnuchok*. I have had rather more exposure to the world beyond my borders than most of my countrymen and women, Dr. Reid. And more reason to open my mind to possibilities, and re-evaluate my own prejudices.

“As for Dr. McKay… you may have noted, I am rather older than many of my colleagues. That has been rather a constant in my life. But I have found it a distinct advantage in many ways. I have often found myself paired with younger, volatile, highly-strung personalities, and, rather like the donkey stabled alongside the thorough-bred race horse, have provided a… stabilizing influence. Rather like the cat in your lap. Unlike almost anyone else I know of, I was actually able to work well with Dr. McKay when he was assigned to the base in Siberia. I know how to appreciate a person so rigorously *honest* and outspoken in his thoughts and reactions. I find him refreshing and exhilarating to be around.

“Unlike, I am afraid, *any* of the Israeli team, or members of my own team. Not one of them has had a single honest word to say, that I have heard, since I met them.”

Spencer couldn’t help but agree with her, there. But here was a woman with a point of view and
objectivity that might provide useful insights. She’d make a good profiler, he couldn’t help but think. And he realised, somewhat to his shame, that he had been standing aloof so far, simply because of her nationality. He, of all people, should know better, but he’d been guilty of a bit of unfair profiling, there.

“Doctor, I feel I must apologize…”

She seemed surprised, but amused. “What for, my dear?”

“I’ve been guilty of making assumptions, accepting a cliché at face value. All Russians hate zeds. A patently unjustified bias, and I, of all people, should know better.”

The woman shook her head. “Clichés come to be because they are largely true, Dr. Reid. And you have some reason, in your case. You think that being zed should make you immune to making assumptions, or above personal bias?”

“No at all. Being a profiler should.”

“Ah. Well, with Katya, it is out and out jealousy, rather than bigotry at work, I think. You have the devoted and single-minded attentions of the highest ranking available military man on the ship. She’ll settle down once we reach Atlantis, I’m sure, and she can set her sights on other prey. As for dear Yuri… he has never in his life met a zed, or even, probably, a Z positive carrier. He’s blustery and aggressive because he comes from peasant origins, and has had to fight for respect as he has climbed the ranks of the military on merit alone. Oh, I know, he makes claims of expertise he does not actually have… but I have found he means well. He cannot be honest with himself or others, but… few are as fearless as Rodney McKay in that regard. Or perhaps oblivious? And Yuri informed me last night that his grandfather raised him on stories of a corrupt government official who robbed and cheated the workers of his commune, resulting in many deaths from hunger and sickness… and his grandfather always called the official a lousy zed. Now me, I doubt the literal truth of this… given the timing, it is highly unlikely any zed held any office, no matter how lowly the office, or how well connected the zed, and for those generations, zed was synonymous with ‘greedy and corrupt’.”

Spencer nodded. “Most prejudice is founded upon ignorance. And the way to combat ignorance…”

“Is with knowledge. Very good, Vnuchok,” and Evgenia gave another of her wonderful earthy chuckles. “I will speak with him.”

“I appreciate you insights, doctor. What can you tell me about Mr. Shelyapin?”

“Nothing at all, I am afraid. I have never met him before, had never even heard the name… but then, I’m in the sciences and he is not. And in the short time we’ve been aboard, I have had little contact with him. Outside our briefing seminars. Which, as you will have noted yourself, he seems to use as opportunities to nap. It is most disconcerting the few times he actually wakes up to take notice. Usually when Dr. Jackson speaks of the Ancients and their technology.”

“He doesn’t talk to the rest of you about his background, where he comes from, what he does?”

“He almost never eats with us in the mess, or spends time in the library or conference room… Perhaps he feels himself above our company. Some people are still mired in class consciousness, no matter their country of origin or political views. I’m sure even the politicians and those highly placed in the military or business in your own country occasionally feel themselves above the common man.”

“That is unfortunately true.”
He thanked her, honestly, for her contributions, and sent her on her way. He hoped to be able to get to know her better. She seemed a very interesting sort of person to speak to, and he regretted not having done so before this.

Mr. Timur Shelyapin, the towering red-headed Russian diplomat, was the real puzzle to Spencer. Since that early briefing in the conference room, he often found the big man stealing glances at him. Not in anger, hatred or disgust, but… speculation. It was no different now. There was curiosity in those dark eyes, an attempt to assess… As if he was as much of a puzzle to the diplomat.

He took the news of Chaykovsky’s murder with a certain amount of discomfort. No more. Certainly not surprise. It was possible he had made the connections already, enough to be suspicious… but Spencer wasn’t so sure.

“I couldn’t help but notice, Mr. Shelyapin, that there was a certain amount of… friction, between you and Dr. Chaykovsky. Did you know each other before being assigned to this mission?”

“Of course not. How could we?”

“Well, it has been suggested that perhaps you and he were in Afghanistan at the same time. He’s an anthropologist, has worked field sites across the Middle East… the same areas where your work took you. It wouldn’t be so strange for you to cross paths at some point.”

“No, no, we have never met before this ship.”

“Then what was the reason for your… dislike of each other?”

Shelyapin gave a dismissive sniff and said, “He is a weakling and a coward. He does not belong on this mission. I cannot think why he wanted to be here at all.”

Of course, neither could Spencer, truth be told, but… Not exactly the diplomatic response. “How was that any business of yours, sir? If the Israelis put forth his name, the IOA hired him, the SGC accepted him, and the Atlantis Expedition crew would no doubt be assessing him themselves for fitness for field-work… what concerns do you have in this?”

Shelyapin seemed taken aback. “Why… none, I suppose. I just… found his manner… offensive.”

More the other way around, Spencer thought, remembering how extremely averse Chaykovsky had been to any hint of confrontation. But then, Spencer knew well from long personal experience that bullies, once they had their eyes fixed on a weaker target, took any attempt by their victim to back away as encouragement to press even harder. The problem was… Spencer wasn’t entirely sure Shelyapin profiled as a classic schoolyard bully. Certainly not with him, and a zed would always look like easy meat to someone inclined to bully. Nor did he exactly read as class-conscious, as Evgenia had suggested, feeling himself above everyone else.

Spencer had no more questions for the man, certainly nothing he thought he’d get a useful answer to – truth or lie or obfuscation. But when Spencer told him he could go, the Russian hesitated, considering Spencer with curiosity.

“Yes?” Spencer asked. “You have a question for me?” Here it came…

“You…” Shelyapin seemed to struggle for the next words. “… have the ATA gene”

Spencer blinked. Of all the questions the Russian might have for him…
“Yes, apparently, I do.”

“What is it like?”

“I don’t really know how to answer that question. I certainly feel no different than I ever did. Why do you ask?”

“You are a descendant of the Ancients… I would have thought… you would feel something.”

“Not really, no. I’m told that, when we reach Atlantis, I’ll be able to detect and operate their equipment… that’s about it.” Or as much as Spencer was willing to admit to anyone.

Shelyapin nodded, gave him a little half smile and another of those assessing looks, then left.

Brown muttered, “What the actual fuck? We practically accuse him of murder, and he wants to know about the ATA?”

That pretty much summed it up, as far as Spencer was concerned.

It was dinner time before Spencer and Brown were finished with the initial questioning. They were both asked to report to the ward room for debriefing – and dinner.

XO Marks, engineer Novak and Dr. Brightman were all still hip-deep in repairs and explosion aftermath, so it was just Colonel Caldwell, Major Donaldson of the *Daedalus* crew, along with SG-1 at the table when Spencer and Brown arrived. Repair work had apparently reached a point where Mitchell and Vala could be released for other duties… in this case, assisting Spencer with his investigation.

Mitchell reported on his overseeing the search of the ship common areas. “All bloody or sooty clothing has been collected, bagged and tagged, and is waiting in a secure locker to be tested for the victim’s blood. But there’s a lot, most from injuries in the wake of the explosion, so it’ll take time to go through, and infirmary staff are still busy enough with the living. No bombs or bomb-making kits found yet. But Lindsey identified the materials… It was a small block of C-4, with a blasting cap hooked to a remote detonator, all or any of it could have come from the cargo hold, still to be searched.”

Spencer nodded and bent to his dinner – chicken something-or-other on pasta… not nearly up to Rossi’s standards, but then, his Italian-American team-mate had rather spoiled him for all things pasta-related.

“Got any conclusions for us yet, Dr. Reid?” O’Neill asked.

“Not really, but several flags were raised.

“First, I’m almost positive that Dr. Sasson is pregnant, with Dr. Chaykovsky’s baby.”

“Aw, for crying out loud…” the general complained. “Does she know?”

“Oh yes. Suspects, at least, which is what I picked up on. You might want to have Dr. Brightman take a look at her. Second… Dr. Berkovitch is not who he says he is.”

“I knew it!” Daniel exclaimed in vindication.

Vala patted his arm soothingly. “Yes, so you told us, many times, my Daniel.”
“Any ideas who he really is?” O’Neill asked sharply.

“I do, actually. I suspect he’s Mossad, or maybe ex-Mossad, and pretty high in their hierarchy. Mostly, it’s in the deference Ziva shows him, and absolutely no one else, but also, it’s the nervous caution Chaykovsky displayed around them both.”

“Hunh…” O’Neill thought about this a moment, then slapped the table beside his plate. “Son of a bitch! I should have known… he looked familiar to me, but… That guy is Eli David, until very recently the Director of Mossad, or I’m a ring-tailed wombat. Father of Ziva David, I’ll just bet a cookie. There was some scandal recently… something about illegal Mossad operations on US soil… I don’t know the details, but as soon as we can re-establish contact – with anyone – I’ll sure as hell find out. And the next time the IOA tries to send us an un-vetted pig-in-a-poke, I’m going to take a zat and shoot the lot of them! Go on, doctor. I can tell that isn’t the only bad news you have for us.”

“Did you know that ex-Mossad officer Ziva David—“

“As if anyone is ever ex-Mossad,” O’Neill grumbled, still smarting over that one.

“As I said, did you know that ex-Mossad officer Ziva David was Agent DiNozzo’s partner on the NCIS MCRT team for five years? You should definitely warn him she’s coming. With her anti-zed bias… I can’t imagine what she’s looking for, chasing across the galaxies to track him down like this, but he should certainly know about it, asap.”

Everyone just stared, imagination failing in the face of this information. “I will definitely get right on that one,” O’Neill agreed whole-heartedly. “Whatever her reasons, they can’t be good.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of. Now… as to Mr. Shelyapin… he’s a total question mark to me. None of the standard profiles seem to apply… None of his reactions or behaviors make any sense to me. Now, maybe it’s a cultural gap, or a language barrier, but…”

Daniel declared, “I already think he’s not who he claims to be.”

“Damn, not another one,” O’Neill groaned. “Who is he, then?”

“Now, there, I have no idea. He doesn’t even profile as Russian. I expected a certain level of bigotry from them, and even the one member of their team who does not display it, at least was aware enough to explain to me why her attitude is at odds with the others.”

Daniel nodded. “Evgenia Andreeva?” When Spencer nodded, he continued, “We’ve talked. A fascinating woman. I like her. Oh, Jack, she’s an old crony of Svetlana Markov’s. Svetlana sent me an email, warning me to play nice with her team… I think she meant Evgenia.”

“So at least we have one passenger whose identity we can validate,” Mitchell offered hopefully.

“Yashkin and Petrova were completely predictable in their reactions to me. But Shelyapin? When I offered him the opportunity to question me in turn, all he was interested in was the ATA gene, that I was a descendent of the Ancients.”

Jack eyed his FBI profiler. “Hunh. So you’re suspicious of him because he *doesn’t* automatically hate your guts?”

Spencer grinned. “That’s about right. Given our doubt about his identity, and the animosity we all observed between he and the victim… We definitely need to know the root of that.”

Vala sighed. “Well, blood on clothing is going to be no help to us in pointing a finger at the guilty
party. Almost everyone had blood on them this morning. Even I got hit with a stray shoe that bounced around my cabin before it landed on my head.”

“Hmmm…” Spencer ruminated. “Maybe we’re looking at this from the wrong end… something Baldrick said… that he had been warned by his team-mates to always be prepared for accidents at sea, by battening down the hatches, stowing everything loose away for the night, and always sleeping with the crash nets engaged, as uncomfortable as that is. So… who *didn’t* have any injuries after the incident? There might be someone who was warned in advance, and acted accordingly. I did have advance warning… Bast woke me, just before the explosion.”

“You were lucky,” Daniel sighed, rubbing a large bruise on his cheek.

Colonel Caldwell nodded. “We’ll check the infirmary records tomorrow. It’s late, we’ve all had a long eventful day… I suggest we table everything else until we’ve all had a good sleep. But, Dr. Reid… next steps?”

“I suggest we search the Cargo Hold, first thing. Whether any or all of these flags I’ve mentioned have anything to do with sabotage or murder… I have no idea. We need evidence to point out which avenues we need to explore. We need to know where that bomb came from. And we need to find the murder weapon.”

First thing next morning, right after breakfast, and refusing to answer any questions from the many anxious passengers and crew, Spencer and Brown joined the search of Cargo Hold, under the command of Colonel Mitchell. They had a dozen crew members paired up to assist. The Hold was all on the bottom level of the ship, D-Deck, one long corridor down the center lined with numbered garage-type doors that, when unlocked with biometrics or from key-code pads, retracted into the ceiling. Inside each bay was a variety of crates, different sizes, some standard plastic crates from the SGC designed to interlock, some wooden crates from other sources, some mere pallets loaded down with sacks or cardboard boxes, and held in place with crash nets, heavier than those in the cabins.

The first thing they discovered was that the *Daedalus* had a bit of a rat problem. Droppings, the faint hurried scratching of tiny claws on metal, were undeniable signs. So were a few cardboard boxes and burlap or canvas sacks with chewed holes in the corners, and trails of flour with tiny footprints tracking through. Bast was *most* interested in this, and soon disappeared into the shadows of the first cavernous bay. According to the quartermaster senior airman with them, this was the bay where most of the Atlantis food supplies were stored.

Sure enough, the Atlantis explosives locker, in the second bay, was broken into, and it wasn’t subtle. The latch on the retractable door had been prized open, as had the lid on the locker, looked to have been done with a crowbar, or something similar. A quick check against the inventory showed all the materials needed for the bomb in engineering could have come from there. But there was more than that missing… a lot more. Several glowering looks from crew officers made the quartermaster master sergeant and his senior airman assistant squirm a bit.

“There was no damage to the doors the last we checked,” the big quartermaster maintained defensively. “And once we’re in flight, we have no reason to even come down here. The next inventory check would have come when we arrived on Atlantis.”

“Let’s hope it’s smuggling, then, and they’ve just shifted everything to hide it, not a bunch more bombs hidden around,” Mitchell suggested.

“You are definitely a glass-half-full kinda guy, Cam,” Daniel observed.
By lunch, inventory checks revealed more missing cargo. Medical supplies, weapons and ammunition were also missing. There was a question in Spencer’s mind, shared with Mitchell, as to the rationale behind the thief and smuggler. Surely the thefts would be discovered almost immediately with the damaged doors, or if that was somehow missed, as they arrived in Atlantis and processed everything through when unloading? This only made sense of the thief counted on being able to retrieve the stolen goods before they reached their Pegasus base. Another check in the ‘hi-jacking’ column.

After a break, the search teams moved on to the personal effects bays. If they hadn’t even gotten names for some of their late arrival passengers before the *Daedalus* launched, then the crates picked up from Tel Aviv and Moscow, beamed directly into the hold, hadn’t been properly cleared or checked, either.

So it was no surprise when several turned up the missing smuggled items – drugs, weapons, explosives accounted for, thank god. And in some crates there was additional contraband found. More weapons and drugs – and not the medicinal use kind, either.

Spencer warned them all that this was not definitive proof of guilt on the part of the owners of these crates – merely circumstantial. The thief/smuggler could have used anyone’s personal crates to hide their loot, counting on being able to steal it back, either before they made land-fall in Pegasus, or after arrival in Atlantis, either way hoping to do so before anyone noticed the inventory discrepancies. In fact, since most knew the Israelis and Russians had not been properly checked already, those would be the best places to hide their stashes.

He and Brown diligently took fingerprints on all crates that had evidence of tampering, or contained any illicit items.

And then, in Dr. Chaykovsky’s personal effects crate, they hit something of a mother-lode. Shoved in and around the anthropologist’s clothing and sparse belongings, some of which were removed altogether and shoved in bags behind other crates at the back, were boxes of chocolate, tins of coffee, cartons of cigarettes, scented soaps, high-end shampoo and conditioners, magazines, books and DVDs of porn, alcohol, illicit drugs… all the most popular black-market items for the remote and isolated Atlantis base.

Spencer was not totally surprised to find this crate was remarkably clean of any prints at all. He would expect at least some handling to be evident, but this crate in particular had been carefully wiped down. So had several others that held contraband. Unlike the ones that had been more obviously broken into, or that now held the stolen supplies. Those crates had been rather littered with prints. It was somewhat odd, but Spencer was beginning to get a picture of what was happening here.

But still, no murder weapon.

Spencer continued down the line of storage bays… until he heard the squeal of a rat… suddenly cut off. Then the echo of something hard hitting the metal floor. Mitchell edged up beside him, they shared a brief look and nod, and both crept up on a shadowed corner…

Only to have a black-and-white tuxedo cat emerge from the darkness, just the pink, naked end of a tail in his mouth. He stared at them with green-gold eyes, settling himself in a fastidious sit, tail wrapped around neat feet, ears perked forward…

He was mostly black, but with a white face, collar and chest, down the belly and white boots… with a black bow-tie under his chin. If Spencer exercised his imagination, he could almost see the glitter of diamond studs down the cat’s front.

Spencer grinned. “Hello, James.”

The cat blinked slowly back. Until the echo of more scratching was heard, James turned his alert head to follow… then he leapt to his feet and loped out of sight.

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When they called it quits for the day, and Spencer noted that the guards on the Cargo Hold access were the Quartermaster, Master Sergeant Donetti and his senior airman. Spencer asked Mitchell to double up on the guards – someone not related to the Quartermaster office – and have Donetti and his buddy assigned somewhere else for the evening.

This won him a resentful and angry glare from the master sergeant, not to mention the airman. Spencer ignored the echoing whisper of “fucking effem…”

Reporting in the Ward Room, Spencer shrugged.

“There were clearly two different criminal parties with access to the Hold.

“The first is a person, or persons, engaged in smuggling, but not theft. They hid their contraband in Dr. Chaykovsky’s crates and others they thought they could access easily enough, chocolate, coffee, cigarettes, drugs, luxury items of all kinds… those items would have value only if the smuggler could get them to Atlantis for trading. That rather points to someone with familiarity with the Atlantis Expedition, and with free and easy access to the cargo locks and inventory, probably with bio-metric access. They must have realized a search would be undertaken after the accident, and hoped the one crate we wouldn’t think to check would be the murdered man’s, so they had to know which crate that was – marked only with a serial number, as far as I could see. This person, or persons, were careful to hide their activity by wiping down any prints they may have left. Also a sign they expected to be around for the search to be made.”

Caldwell winced and said, “You suspect someone in the Quartermaster office.”

“That seems likely, yes. I believe the smuggling operation has been going on for at least a few runs, most probably with more than one person involved. And with their own operation at risk, they had a vested interest in not reporting the obvious damage to the Atlantis storage area. But it’s highly unlikely it has anything to do with our two main crimes. It wouldn’t have even been discovered if not for the ship-wide search. The smugglers had to work quickly to attempt to hide their activity.”

Caldwell nodded reflectively.

“Now, the theft from the Atlantis stores… that points a different direction altogether. There’s no way our quartermaster smuggler is responsible for that – the damage, theft and inventory discrepancy would be discovered immediately as we docked on Atlantis, even if the smugglers attempted to hide it. There would be no hiding the stolen goods, and no way to unload them for profit before they were discovered. There was also absolutely no attempt to hide their activities… the damaged doors and locks were left hanging, the crates they disturbed were littered with fingerprints… which Brown and I have already determined do not match anyone on board. Not according to our records, anyway. Of course, all we need to do to uncover the thief is to get everyone’s prints now, in case their official records are… less than accurate. Which would immediately identify the thief. Again, actions which make no logical sense. Unless…”
O’Neill groaned. “We’re back to the hi-jacking theory, right? The only point in the theft would be to hand the stolen goods off to someone outside the ship, before we land. Or in case we don’t land at all.”

“That’s how I read the situation, yes. Oh, and… we discovered another stowaway. Without opposable thumbs. A black and white tuxedo cat is taking care of your rat problem in the hold.”

Caldwell shook his head and sighed. “It’s like a damned Andrew Lloyd Webber musical around here! How the hell do all these damn cats keep getting on my spaceship?”

Spencer grinned, unconcerned. “Probably the same way as the rats, in the grain and flour supplies you bring on board. Which is probably a good thing, right?”

“Until the damned xeno-biologists find out we’ve brought not one, but two invasive species to Pegasus with us.”

Spencer could only chuckle and agree, although, in his opinion, mankind were far more invasive and destructive to any ecology than any other known species of life.

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Chapter End Notes

(per Wikipedia) The Mousetrap is a murder mystery play by Agatha Christie. The Mousetrap opened in London's West End in 1952, and has been running continuously since then. The longest running West End show, it has by far the longest initial run of any play in history, with its 25,000th performance taking place on 18 November 2012. The play is known for its twist ending, which the audience are traditionally asked not to reveal after leaving the theatre. (per Trinket2018: it was a struggle not to make references here that might give away the twist! But I am honor bound.)
James had properly presented himself at the door with Anna and Lucifer in time to share Bast’s
dinner, and none of his visitors had objections to staying the night, even though Spencer was taking
good advice, battening down hatches and pulling the safety net as soon as it was time for bed. The
cats didn’t like the net much, but only grumbled a little and soon settled down.

Spencer had given up wondering how they moved around the ship… come morning, as usual, only
Bast remained for a morning bowl of milk, and to make use of the opened locker with her litter box.

It was now day three after the accident, and there were still many internal systems off-line, not
necessarily because they were damaged, but the ship was conserving energy wherever possible, and
a lot of surveillance and security systems, as well as access terminals in secondary decks, had simply
been turned off, along with anything determined to be non-essential. That meant a fair number of
darkened decks, LED lights still running on emergency battery packs.

Embarrassing as it was for him to admit, Spencer got himself turned around at some point, not even
sure how he had got to this dead-end corridor, too lost in his own head, turning over evidence and
witness statements, speculating on profiles, trying to plot out his next moves.

He stood and stared at the sealed hatch in front of him… it was an air-lock chamber and the small
round porthole on the bulk-head side showed black beyond… one of several access points to the
exterior of the ship.

He looked down at Bast, who was rubbing anxiously against his ankle.

“Ì don’t suppose you know where we are?” he asked her.

There was a noise behind him… Spence turned swiftly to find the quartermaster senior airman
behind him. The small man whispered something into a radio he put back in his pocket. He had a
silver zat-gun in his other hand. Spencer had been briefed on the Jaffa device. It was an energy
weapon, one shot stunned the victim, two shots killed, the third eliminated any evidence. It was
enough to give anyone in law enforcement nightmares.

“Stay right there, effem. Don’t try and shout. You’ve wandered into a restricted area. Lucky for us…
we thought we’d have to take the chance and jump you in one of the busier sections.”

“And if I do try and shout?” Spencer said in an increasingly loud voice, echoing in the otherwise
empty corridor.

The airman shrugged. “Then I zat you. Once. You meet your fate unconscious instead of awake and
staring it in the face like a man. Your choice.”

Spencer glanced behind him. “You’re going to shove me out the air-lock?”

“The systems tracking the air-locks and the internal security cameras are all off-line. I’m wearing
gloves. No one will ever know. I doubt they’ll even find you, unless you float past the bridge view-
screen. And if they blame anyone, it’ll be our murderer and saboteur. Not a loyal true blue SGC SF
like me… and…”
Another figure appeared behind the little airman. The burley Quartermaster himself, Master Sergeant Donnetti.

“Well well. The General’s prize effem. Got yourself into a bit of a mess, haven’t you, fuck’em?”

“Not unlike your own, Quartermaster. The General and Colonel are already aware of your activities, smuggling contraband to Atlantis. Killing me won’t help you at all.”

The big man’s eyes had that oily sheen Spencer had grown to recognize and fear. The man shrugged, and grinned, evil shadows making his face an ugly and terrifying mask. “Maybe, maybe not. Maybe I’ll just enjoy the chance to get one more beat-down on a lousy effem.”

He took a stick of some kind out of his back pocket and clutching it like a club in one hand, he slapped it in the other as he approached.

Okay, two on one were not great odds, and one held a zat on him, but his odds were not great anyway unless he did something right now. Taking a page out of the Krav Maga manual, realising a fight was unavoidable, he exploded into action, classic blitz attack he knew all too well from his cases, going straight for the Quartermaster. The big man was almost twice his weight, but had not been expecting a weedy effem to fight back, and was totally unprepared for his desperation moves. He had once told Hotch that he did his best work in situations of extreme terror… The airman was shouting something, shuffling around to get a good shot with the zat without hitting his boss, apparently unaware that his best strategy at this point was to just zat them both and sort out the bodies later.

The other man’s size, weight and presumed training would soon begin to tell, so Spencer needed to end this quickly. He went for the groin, and when Donnetti was bent over double and howling, sliding to his knees, Spencer twisted and kicked out at the airman, succeeding in making the little man lose his grip on the zat, which went skittering away over the floor. Both he and the airman made diving leaps for the one weapon… Bast screamed out and flew at the airman’s face with claws and teeth, and Spencer made it to the zat first. He whirled and fired, once at the airman, Bast having leaped away already, once at the Quartermaster.

Then he lay there on the deck floor, panting.

“Spencer! Spencer, where are you? Are you down here?”

Down at the other end of this corridor, two silhouettes appeared, the small one cat-shaped, the yowl of a Siamese unmistakable. Spencer knew the human voice, too.

“Edmund. Down here. I don’t suppose you could call some of the crew to help? I need to get two suspects under arrest before they wake up.”

Right on the Brit’s heels came another pair, Colonel Mitchell following a jet black cat.

“Yo! Sunshine! You’re sure you’re alright?”

“I’m fine, Colonel. You’ll be glad to hear I actually won a fight. Two against one, even!”

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The Quartermaster foolishly tried to claim that Spencer had been the one attacking him… but Spencer had a voice recorder in his pocket, had been keeping voice-note records of the cargo hold search as well as the interviews, so he had more than enough proof of his claims for assault and attempted murder. Oh yes, and wholesale smuggling, for over a year, apparently.
The airman had broken at once, and spilled every detail he knew of the operation... which was most of it. He even named the two airmen on the Atlantis side who ran that half of the ring’s enterprising work. He and the Quartermaster obtained and shipped in their contraband with the help of one more airman at the SGC, who slipped it into one of the empty store-rooms in the upper levels, under the noses of everyone.

Their airman maintained that it was the Quartermaster who discovered that the Atlantis supplies had been broken into, late the night before the explosion, but had ordered him not to tell anyone. They couldn’t afford anyone looking too closely at their own illegal activities. When Dr. Reid led the search of the hold, they knew they were in trouble anyway... thought by murdering the effem, they would buy themselves time to hide their acts and even escape detection altogether. They didn’t realize it was already too late for that.

And satisfying as it was to get that part of the mystery cleared up... they still had a murderer and saboteur to catch.

Spencer shook his head at Lieutenant Brown. “I’m really not sure where we can go from here, without at least some evidence to go on. But without a murder weapon, and not having any forensics on the bloody clothes we’ve collected yet... we at least need to get everyone fingerprinted again, and find out who is flying under false colors. That will at least tell us who was messing around in the explosives lockers. And there are a few follow-up questions we need to ask.”

Brown typed industriously into her notepad. “Such as?”

“Well... one thing mystifies me. How and why did Dr. Chaykovsky even get this assignment? I would have said he’s the least likely adventurer in the world, unless you count Dr. Sasson. She must suspect she’s pregnant, probably before they left...” Spencer rubbed his own belly reflectively. “I have many good reasons for endangering my unborn child out here... mostly because both of us were more at risk if we had remained on Earth. But Dr. Sasson? It must have seemed like madness to her, to bring them all out to Pegasus and into such dangers. So why do it?

“Does she know that Dr. Berkovitch and David were both Mossad? It seems highly likely that Dr. Chaykovsky, at least, knew that much about their team-mates. And I’m almost sure she does know why Chaykovsky and Shelyapin were at odds. That’s one thing we really need to know before we can proceed much further, if only to eliminate the Russian from our suspect pool. If we can. Because I know he isn’t who he claims to be.”

“Shall I go look for Dr. Sasson, then?”

“Let’s go together. Colonel Mitchell already read me the riot act on situational awareness and not letting myself be alone.”

Brown got all huffy. “I’m glad he did, sir, so I don’t have to.”

They found Ziva David first, in the Mess hall, drinking coffee. She eyed them both, letting her eyes linger on the developing bruise on Spencer’s cheek, a smug little half smile on her lips.

“Walk into a door?” she asked blandly.

“No, actually,” Spencer offered with a sunny smile, “I was practicing the Krav Maga moves you demonstrated in the gym the other day. You’ll be happy to know they worked surprisingly well for
me. But we’re looking for Dr. Sasson. Do you happen to know where she is?”

Ziva wrinkled her nose in distaste. “I try to avoid her at all costs. She does nothing but weep.”

“Well, she did just lose her lover, fiancé, and the father of her unborn child. I think she’s entitled. And given the current situation, with a murderer and saboteur on board, when one of your party has already been targeted… I would have thought a security attaché would want to be apprised of your team’s movements every moment. Shouldn’t you have their backs?”

Yeah, Spencer absolutely could not resist getting that little dig in. The David woman annoyed him almost as much as she grated on Bast. Although, he was somewhat surprised the mild shot actually made her flinch. He hadn’t thought her so thin-skinned. But, as he expected, she soon recovered and shot back. This was when Ziva David was most vulnerable and apt to make a slip – when she was angry and defensive and over-extending herself in an effort to attack a perceived threat. And, for whatever personal reason, she found him, in particular, a threat. As a rival LEO, as investigator in these crimes, or simply as a zed, he did not know.

“They may have been lovers once, and maybe she was carrying his child, but fiancés? Not for much longer, I am certain. Their relationship was far from assured. She suspected him of having an affair with someone else. She complained about him sneaking away from her. On this ship? Truly? She was unreasonably jealous of his every interaction. She was terrified of this mission and wanted to go home, immediately, whether Isaak remained or not. Since he was contracted to Atlantis a minimum of two years, what relationship did she expect they could have if she went home and left him? Isaak had an eye for the women, I admit, and it would not have taken him long to make a connection on the city, if left to his own devices. Leah knew this. The woman is a weakling and an emotional mess, and does not belong out here. But if you are looking for someone with reason to kill Isaak, why not her? The woman scorned. One of my NCIS team-mates always suspects the wife or lover in any crime… you might do well to consider that.”

Spencer nodded slowly. Yes, the scorned lover might be motive… classic hell hath no fury, but… Spencer didn’t buy it. Not from what he observed from Leah Sasson, far more focused on her own and her baby’s safety and defense than vengefully striking out to attack a betraying partner.

“And I will consider it, of course. In fact, I might ask her about those issues now. Would she be in your quarters? You share a cabin, right?”

With an impatient huff, Ziva got up and led Spencer and Brown down to C-Deck. But when she pressed the button for the door to slide open…

“Stop!” Spencer shouted out, pulling the woman back from the entrance. “Brown, get Dr. Brightman down here. Now.”

Ziva, staring into the cabin, trembled slightly in Spencer’s hold. “I fear it is far too late.”

Dr. Leah Sasson was dead, her body a sprawled form face down on the floor, a pool of red blood covering the entire, if tiny, space, and now spilling into the corridor.

“Damn. Another body,” O’Neill grumbled, rubbing his face with both hands. He was leaning against a Sick Bay wall, out of the way while Dr. Brightman and Dr. Reid both went over the newest casualty in their little junket to Atlantis. Beside him stood Brown, Vala, Daniel and Mitchell, all solemn and properly respectful of the victims. Bast also sat solemn and watchful of her human, as if
expecting him to dive into trouble again at any moment.

“Two bodies,” Spencer corrected quietly. “She was pregnant. Two months, maybe more.”

The tiny Sick Bay had three beds, only the far one, surrounded by a curtain, held a live patient – one of the crew had a severe concussion from the accident and was still under observation. The other two beds held the bodies. Both were naked, cleaned of blood and unnaturally pale, a towel over their hips. They looked pathetic and vulnerable under the medical lights. Even worse, was the slight swelling in Dr. Sasson’s lower belly, betraying her condition.

Dr. Reid seemed even less affected than even the doctor, as he studied the bodies, his hands in latex gloves, using a medical probe to examine the wounds.

“The same weapon. A long, extremely sharp blade… a single slicing motion across the throat, almost decapitating the victim.”

With a swallow, Alisen Brightman nodded. “Yes. I concur.”

“And… post mortem bruising. As with Dr. Chaykovsky, he stood behind Sasson, held her clamped against his chest, and made the fatal stroke. Arterial blood spattered the entire cabin… he did it there. Not more than an hour ago.”

“He?” O’Neill questioned. “Not the Mossad chick? She’s supposed to be their security, and now she’s lost two of her team. If I was in charge, I’d fire her ass. She shared that cabin with Sasson. You sure it isn’t her?”

“No. It’s definitely a man. A large man at that. See the size of the hand-print? And from the angles…” Spencer tried out a few things, holding out his arm in mimic of a hug, flexing his knees to try and get the proper effect. “Yes. At least a foot taller than Sasson. At least as tall as me, probably taller, and I’m not a short man.”

He finally straightened with a sigh and put down his instruments. “We need to find the murder weapon. As soon as possible.”

“Okay then. You go do that. Steven will assign every single non-essential crew to the search. Pairs, like before. And Dr. Reid, you don’t go alone. Anywhere. Not for a single second.”

“Yes sir.” Bast made an agreeing huff as she followed her human out the door, with Brown trailing pale-faced but determined behind.

O’Neill watched and his mouth twisted. “You know what? I’m not liking this situation at all. I especially don’t like having two ringers assigned to my command, and I am not at all happy about our ‘Dr. Berkovitch’ and his daughter. Mitchell? Get them both to the interrogation room. It’s time I had a little chat with them both. Danny, you want in?”

“Hell yeah. Without me, you have no one to play good cop.”

Vala glanced in speculation at the linguist, then grinned. “Much as I would like to watch that… I think I’ll go help Dr. Reid with his search. I think he needs space pirate/smuggler expertise as to the best places to hide contraband.”

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For the occasion, a couple of extra chairs had been crammed into Spencer’s interrogation office. ‘Berkovitch’ and David were already there, under guard, Jack letting them stew a while, even if they
were probably trying to get their stories straight. They might think they were under suspicion for murder, but that wasn’t what Jack wanted them for, anyway.

So when he sauntered casually in, took a chair and immediately tipped it back on its rear legs, grinning at the pair before him, it made them both stiffen in wary alarm. Daniel quietly followed him in, with a jerk of his head sent the guards out of the room so the four were in private, and took the last seat Jack had left him at his side.

“So,” Jack declared in a jovial manner, “took me a while to recognize you, Eli. We met once, Desert Storm. We were running rival ops across the Iraqi border at the time. Long time ago now, of course. And the glasses, the face fuzz… But my shiny new FBI consultant is a pretty smart cookie, and he put it together. Current or Ex Mossad… That’s all I needed to hear. This your kid?”

Eli David was too cagey to play a losing hand. He smiled back and said, “Yes, this is my daughter Ziva. Good to see you again, Jack. You’ve done well for yourself.”

“So I have. Never expected to get above colonel. Too much blood on my hands. But… well, the Stargate Project put a real dent in my retirement plans. So tell me, Eli… what in the hell brings you way out here?”

“Come now, Jack. It’s the adventure of a lifetime. When my government informed me that my services were no longer required… well. I cashed in some old debts to get myself a berth on your ship.”

“Yeah, but linguist? Under an assumed name?”

“Your government isn’t any more happy with me at the moment than my own is. It seemed prudent. And I do speak over ten languages. So does Ziva.”

“Uh-hunh… she make Earth too hot to hold her, too? Surprising how much of that is going around right now.”

“She wanted to come along, assist me.”

“In what?”

“Oh… this and that. With all that’s going on in Atlantis, there are any number of applications for the work your people are doing. The opportunities are quite literally endless.”

“Sure. Sure. You know, I heard some rather nasty rumors about both of you… running illegal black ops on American soil? Ziva, aren’t you supposed to be a newly-minted American citizen? Wouldn’t that sort of thing constitute treason?”

Ziva’s eyes narrowed on the kindly old general. “I was deported and my citizenship revoked, so treason is not an issue any longer, surely. I boarded *Daedalus* direct from Tel Aviv, so I was in no way trespassing on American soil. And Home *World* Security is supposed to be an international endeavor, is it not? Under the auspices of the IOA? If they have no problem with my taking part, why should you?”

“Oh, I don’t know… maybe because I don’t trust either one of you further than I can through you both at once. So. You wanted to come along with dear old dad? How nice. Heart-warming. But Eli, you do realise, your darling devoted daughter is really, *really* lousy at the security gig? She had three little chicks to take care of, and she’s already lost two of them. I’d be worried, if I was you.”

Daniel cleared his throat and decided it would be best if he broke in at this point. “Since neither of
you are here under proper credentials, may I ask why Dr. Chaykovsky and Dr. Sasson were included? Neither of them seem well suited to the Atlantis posting, yet here they were. Was that your decision, Director David? Or someone else?"

Eli seemed to consider the wisdom of his answer... how likely, or not, he was to be able to get away with a lie. Then he sighed. “I have known Isaak for many years. Of all the people we might have sent with the proper education and background to fill the available posts, he seemed to be the one least likely to cause me... difficulties. But he was reluctant, so I had to be... forceful. Even then, he would only come if Leah were included as well. I was unaware at the time that they were in a relationship, and that Leah was so unwilling to come.”

Daniel’s eyes hardened behind his glasses. “Did Leah know who you really are?”

“I do not believe so. But no doubt Isaak warned her to keep out of my way and not cause trouble. Honestly, General, Dr. Jackson, I had no part in either the murders or the sabotage. I am not so stupid or suicidal. And I had no reason to cause harm to either of that young couple. Isaak would never have dared disobey me, nor would Leah.”

Daniel nodded, glancing at Jack.

Jack was still staring at the young woman. “So, Ziva. You just wanted to be near daddy. You had no other reason to want to come along on this trip to Pegasus?”

“Of course not. What other reason could I have?” She fluttered a negligent hand in the air, for all the world as carefree as a bird. And even her father looked at her askance.

Daniel said, “You worked for NCIS for over five years, correct? In the Major Crimes Response Team?”

“Yes. We were most successful. Senior Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs is well known in law enforcement circles as the best investigator there is. I learned much from him. And my skills were invaluable to the team.”

“Skills in assassination and spying, primarily,” Jack suggested brightly. “You know, we acquired an NCIS Agent Afloat about six months back. He’s doing a hell of a job for us on Atlantis. Maybe you know him?”

Okay, the woman seriously needed to work on her poker face. She had gone abruptly pale. “Perhaps. Perhaps not. NCIS employs many people, out of bases and offices all over the world. There are agents afloat on most large ships at sea. I do not know them all.”

“Yes, but this one actually worked for the MCRT out of DC for over eight years.”

For just an instant, a horrified gasp escaped Eli David, and his poker-face was legendary in certain circles. In fact, rumor had it he had only been broken in interrogation one single time in his long and varied career... for an NCIS agent he was *supposed* to be interrogating himself.

“Ziva...” the name was said low and heavy with threat. “What have you done?”

“His name is Anthony D. DiNozzo Jr. Know him?”

With a gulp, and struggling to ignore her father’s furious glare, Ziva did her best to mimic *sang froid*. And failed. Epically.

“Yes, I do happen to know Tony. So, Atlantis. That is where he landed. I had wondered. He was
kicked out of the DC office in disgrace, you know? He was found to have hidden his gender status his whole life. Director Vance and Senior Agent Gibbs were both furious with him. It was not only a violation of American law, but they took his lies as a personal affront and betrayal.” She was positively gleeful in reciting these facts.

“Uh-hunh,” Jack commented blandly. “Well, I guess bigoted idiot ass-holes are everywhere. Their loss, my gain. But, see, the way I heard it... Vance knew all along, just never said anything. Until DiNozzo called him on his bullshit discrimination. See, DiNozzo was trying to log a reprimand against a couple of partners who were supposed to be backing him up in the field on an undercover surveillance op... getting voice prints from some home-grown terrorist, wasn’t it, Ziva? Who had already killed three people? The partners violated protocol, FLETC training and every lick of good sense they may have had, by turning off comms. Shit, someone ever leave me hanging in the wind like that, I’d punch them square in the face, before getting them canned out of their jobs and black-listed from every military, government and law enforcement job in the country. But you, Daddy David’s little golden girl, you get off scot free. How did you work that one? Vance didn’t care, obviously, but gunny Gibbs? He didn’t complain? DiNozzo was his 2IC for almost a decade, and he didn’t give a damn you left your partner stranded without back-up?”

Furious, Ziva stood abruptly, her chair hitting the floor behind her. “You know nothing! He’s a fuck’em! A lousy zed! He’s... he’s... You know nothing. You have no right to say a thing about my choices. If Vance and Gibbs chose not to reprimand me, what gives you the right?”

Jack just gave her a slow smile. “You hunt him down to get another lick in? Blame him for all your troubles? Yeah, I’ve heard that story a time or two. It’s just so god-damned easy to blame a zed. Well, not gonna happen on my watch. Eli, Ziva, you’re confined to quarters for the rest of the trip. Lucky, isn’t it, you don’t have to share your cabins anymore? Then you’ll get a nice round-trip on *Daedalus* right back to Earth.”

“The IOA will not allow...” Eli began.

“Oh, you and your daughter have given me *more* than enough ammunition to keep the IOA from sticking their noses into my staffing issues, or forcing me to take people I don’t want and haven’t personally checked out, ever again.”

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Vala took a look at the ship schematics and suggested they start their search in one of the restricted corridors on D-Deck, outside the Cargo Hold, leading to a section where *Daedalus* replacement components were stashed.

But it was Bast who led them to the actual weapon, still caked with blood, that had her chittering her teeth and licking her mouth as it was cautiously drawn from its hiding place, wrapped in a bloody white Mess hall cloth napkin. It had been shoved behind a panel in one wall, easily enough opened with just a screwdriver. Spencer had Brown dust the area for prints – plenty of those, all around the panel, and take blood samples... including brown flecks of previously dried blood. He was pretty sure there would be evidence of Chaykovsky’s DNA as well as Sasson’s.

Spencer himself took possession of the wicked-looking blade. It was about a foot long, with a glittering edge, even if it was stained and filthy. The handle was of some kind of grayish-green metal, almost crystalline in appearance.

“Oh my,” Vala whispered. “Be very *very* careful with that, Spencer. It’s a Shikra blade.”

“A what?” Mitchell asked.
“Something Quetesh liked a lot. It’s made of naquadah, and its edge is honed to the thickness of a single atom. It can cut a man in half, if your hand slips even a little bit.”

Spencer blinked, treating the evil-looking thing with even more respect. Just picking it up unwarily could result in lost fingers.

“Wait… there’s something else in here,” Brown said, kneeling down and pulling a flashlight to get a better look. Then she pulled out a round ball, about the size of a grapefruit, glowing faintly gold.

Mitchell groaned. “Don’t tell me. That’s a vo’cume, right? A Goa’uld communication device.”

Spencer glanced at the members of SG-1. “You know where this points, right? We may have a Lucian Alliance spy on board.”

Spencer found it astounding that there were actual finger-prints on both the Shikra blade handle and the vo’cume… who didn’t know enough to clean their prints off a murder weapon or other material evidence? An alien spy, maybe? But the prints didn’t match anything in the *Daedalus* records. They did, however, match the prints taken in the hold – their supply thief. Their spy must have been using a forged or stolen identity, so their own prints wouldn’t be on record.

Spencer recommended that the ship-wide search be continued anyway, in case of anything else turning up, as he, Brown, Mitchell and Vala reported to the Bridge, where O’Neill and Jackson had just arrived with their own news.

“For crying out loud!” O’Neill exclaimed angrily. “Another* one? I swear, I am going to wring the IOA’s collective neck for this cluster-fuck! And this is on top of the Lucian ringer and Trust agent DiNozzo already found haunting Atlantis! Okay, a major black-market ring operating right under my nose, smugglers running rampant there and here, okay, that’s on me, I can man up and take that on. But all these damned spies worming their ways in… I am not standing for that.

“Now, we *KNOW* we don’t have any Goa’uld or Jaffa on board…” And Colonel Caldwell winced and turned pale at just the suggestion. “We do frequent standard internal searches and scans for unexplained naquadah as protocol, especially after Caldwell’s possession. That Schick blade and the vo’cume are small enough to disappear that close to the hull, but… There’s no symbiote on our ship, in a host or a jaffa belly. That I guarantee.”

Mitchell winced a bit. “There is that drug the Tok’ra use to disguise themselves... and if a symbiote was in a shielded jar or stasis container of some kind...”

“Mitchell. Come on. You’re our glass-half-full guy. Remember?”

Mitchell was about to apologise, when Major Marks interrupted. “Sirs! Something just dropped out of hyperspace, right alongside us. It’s a ha’tak, sir. And they’re hailing us. They’re…” he listened on his ear-wig to the comm channel he was listening to. “They’re demanding we surrender and prepare to be boarded. They want access through our X-302 bays.”

“Hunh,” Jack commented mildly. “Well, whaddaya know. The kid was right about the damned hi-jacking in space.”
There followed a burst of activity on the Bridge, with Brown quickly hustling Spencer out of the way. Battle Stations sounded, and Brown took her charge to the Mess to await events. More and more passengers were hustled in with them. Spencer was just glad they weren’t expected to have to wait it out in their cabins. At least here they could watch out the Mess viewport.

The enemy ha’tak had graciously decided to approach on the port side of the *Daedalus*, in full view of the Mess portal. It was a huge pyramid-shaped craft, twice, maybe even three times the size of their BC-304 deep space cruiser. And from its bottom platform issued a dozen or more smaller fighter-type vessels, more maneuverable and fast as they spun out and spread in an attack formation of some kind, buzzing around *Daedalus*.

But their ship had its own smaller defenders. Major Donaldson’s X-302 squadron quickly deployed, some kind of laser weapons firing beams of light at the enemy.

Brown took it upon herself to deliver a play-by-play of what was happening for the alarmed and mystified passengers, most of them new to space. It was probably meant to be reassuring, but as the pyramid itself began firing more serious weapons at them, the ship shuddered and jolted with the onslaught.

Movies and television had conditioned them to expect noise, screams, fire, explosions with big bangs and pyrotechnics… a John Williams orchestral soundtrack… but Spencer was well aware that the airless vacuum of space allowed for none of that. Tiny fighters simply… broke apart, spewing debris in a cloud that quickly stopped and hung suspended once their inertial force at being flung outward was expended. Some smaller pieces did indeed continue on a never-ending trajectory out… Gasps at the carnage beyond the window were the only soundtrack to the battle.

One X-302 took a bad hit and rocked… limping out of the way as others of its brethren rushed to guard its retreat.

More hits against their own hull rocked them back and forth. They could actually see the outline of a milky defensive shield as the enemy fired at them, point-blank from far too close as it edged up nearer.

“We were damaged by the sabotage explosion and repairs are still being made to our engines…” commented Shelyapin calmly. “Will that affect our ability to fight back? Would it not be best for the Colonel to simply surrender?”

Yashkin spat at that idea. “They are pirates. They would kill us all.”

Shelyapin glanced briefly at Dr. Reid. “Maybe not all.”

Oh my… Spencer put the elements together at lightning speed. He had no proof, of course, although substantiating his theory probably wouldn’t take much. There was the soiled clothing still to be checked, and a fresh set of fingerprints to take from everyone, as well as, once contact with Pegasus and Earth was re-established, a far more stringent security check on all involved… but… there was one way Spencer could think of, right off the top of his head, to verify his suspicion.

Now was not the time, perhaps, but… he took out his notebook and typed something in for Brown alone to read. She peered over his shoulder, gave him a stare, then nodded. She could handle that.
Provided any of them survived this unequal battle, between a ha’tak mother-ship and a crippled BC-304.

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So far, O’Neill reflected, the ha’tak seemed to have the fight all their own way, although the death-giders fared badly against the X-302s. Yeah, Donaldson’s Snakeskinners had been sparring against Teal’c’s best Jaffa pilots for years. There was no way these Lucian Alliance jerks were even in the same class, and that was becoming more obvious, as whoever was in command of the ha’tak soon called their few surviving death gliders back to their berths.

But, hard as they tried, the Lucian mother-ship was unable to break the *Daedalus* shields. Sure, some of the hard missiles shoved them around some, but not as much as the Lucians must have expected.

“Stop playing around, Steven. It’s time we ended this.”

Caldwell gave him a lifted eyebrow, but then nodded agreement.

It was a closely held secret, but the initial damage to the engine room hadn’t really been all that extensive, and repairs to the major systems – engines, shields, weapons – had been completed. But O’Neill, Caldwell and his command staff had been worried enough about Dr. Reid’s hijacking theory to want to play possum, and see who they could suck into a trap.

Objective achieved. They had a name for the Lucian guy in charge of the ha’tak, called himself Lord Kherty, and the obvious aim to board and take over the *Daedalus*, rather than destroy or scuttle her. Taking the cruiser was only step two in the plan, then. Step One had been the initial sabotage, to turn *Daedalus* into a sitting duck. Step three? Well, what else could it be? With the *Daedalus* under new management, it would be much easier to take Atlantis as well… the true prize in this evil plan. But the Lucians were well aware that only very few people could actually command the City of the Ancients… they must have got that message already. How did they plan to keep her, and run her?

Unless someone told them about O’Neill. And Dr. Reid.

Who would both need to be alive and under control when they made their move in Pegasus.

Caldwell offered the enemy the chance to surrender and survive. The gesture was answered with another few futile shots over their bows. So Caldwell gave the command…

One single bolt was all it took from the fully functional enhanced Asgard weapons array. The ha’tak split down the middle…

Yes, there were sputters of bright light against the utter blackness of space, from internal explosions, until the vacuum sucked all the air away, and the glimmers became glows from heated metal, until absolute zero cold chilled even that to darkness.

Three death gliders made it back out of their bays in time to surrender. *Daedalus* accepted them into the starboard X-302 bay, with heavy security to take the six pilots into custody. One was a Goa’uld host (Kherty, no one they’d ever heard of before, but the actual captain of the ha’tak, deserting his ship like the rat he was in a panicked effort to escape alive), one a jaffa with a black Sokar tattoo on his forehead (wow, that guy had been running and hiding a while, then), the others all human, opportunistic hoodlums all.

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It was quiet aboard the *Daedalus*, for now, the lights dimmed in the night-cycle once more as everyone obeyed curfew and retired to their cabins or night-shift duties.

Well, almost everyone. One, at least, was out and about.

Security was far too heavy on the brig cells in C-Deck, so there was little he could do about that, for now, but he could at least report that the attempt to take *Daedalus* was a failure. He still wasn’t sure how that had happened. The ha’tak captain must have been a total incompetent. He had all but gift-wrapped the damned Tau’ri ship for them. But what could they do now? Without the *Daedalus*, and the troop reinforcements on the ha’tak, how were they to take Atlantis? He also feared his own subterfuge would not long go unnoticed. If their first plan had succeeded, he wouldn’t have had to worry, after all. But they had not counted on facing a Tau’ri investigator who seemed able to almost read their minds.

It would not take long for his activities to be discovered.

He needed to contact his masters, to see what they wanted him to do. They had other options and resources, he knew, although he had not been informed what those might be.

He took out the screwdriver, a very handy little tool he had grown quite fond of in the brief time he had become familiar with it. He undid the single screw to open the panel, and reached in for his stash. He carefully by-passed the cloth package, not wanting to lose a hand with an unwary motion, and caught the vo’cume in the back.

He pulled it out and prepared to activate it.

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” advised Dr. Spencer Reid.

At his side were Colonel Mitchell, General O’Neill and several armed security crewmen.

“You are under arrest, Mr. Timur Shelyapin, for two counts of murder, one of sabotage, several of theft, and one of treason. Perhaps mutiny, certainly conspiracy to commit piracy. And, I have no doubt, at least one more, of being an imposter. We’ll have to wait until we learn what happened to the real Timur Shelyapin before we charge you with anything else.”

General O’Neill had warned Spencer that he would likely get little from the Goa’uld but ranting and boasts, and he was right. The creature didn’t seem to realize that it would soon be subject to a medical procedure to remove it from its host, when Vala apparently had a long-standing mandate to wring their little blue necks. The human host, once freed from subjugation, would be far easier to deal with, he was promised.

The jaffa and the other Lucian Alliance pilots had gone all stoic and mute, refusing to answer any questions. It was O’Neill’s opinion it was because they didn’t know anything worth telling, if they weren’t already screaming to make a deal for their lives.

Timur Shelyapin, or whoever he really was, however, had been dealing with the Tau’ri for at least a little while, was at least a little more familiar with the way they did things.

When faced with Spencer in the little interrogation office, he frowned in confusion, studying the Tau’ri with a combination of amazement, curiosity, and grudging admiration.

“How did you know it was me?”
Spencer was perfectly willing to build a rapport with the suspect.

“I was finding it very difficult to profile you. None of your reactions or attitudes fit any of the patterns I had learned to expect, from a Russian, a diplomat, or even an Earth human. You really don’t know anything about zeds, do you?”

“I know you have the ATA gene, required to operate all the most impressive of the Ancients’ technology. That is enough.”

“Perhaps, but it revealed that you weren’t yourself from Earth. You know nothing about our criminal investigation techniques either, do you? Forensic examination of blood, fingerprinting… Fingerprints? The little whorls of skin on the ends of your fingers? Each pattern is unique, and the oils on your skin leave behind prints on everything you touch. I’ve already matched yours against the murder weapon, the vo’cume, the crates you broke into in the hold for explosives… not that we really needed more evidence against you after we caught you accessing that panel.”

Shelyapin blinked. “You have a remarkable intellect. I was not warned before-hand. I should have been.”

“I’ve also been well-trained in murder investigations. We have a lot of them on Earth. Is the real Timur dead?”

Shelyapin shrugged. “I have no idea. I was given the identity papers I was to use, studied the file I was given, and played the part I was told to play. And it would all have gone smoothly, except…”

“Dr. Chaykovsky recognized you. Or rather, he recognized who you *weren’t*.”

Shelyapin nodded. “He began stalking me. He followed me to the engineering section, saw me attack the night-shift crewman and shove him in a closet. He accosted me then, only then, accused me of being a stranger, an imposter. I killed him. Then I went ahead with the original plan. There was no reason not to. I was to cripple the *Daedalus*, and then alert my Lucian contact of our location, so they could come and take the ship. Then we would use the Tau’ri ship to invade Atlantis and take it, as well. I doubted Chaykovsky had told anyone else his suspicions… he was a coward and a weakling, even more afraid of his own team than of me.

“But he must have said something to the woman… she kept watching me too. I only needed a little more time, one more day of freedom until the Lucian mother-ship arrived to take the *Daedalus*… if the stupid woman had waited even one more day… but she didn’t. She threatened to expose me, and I could not be locked up when the others arrived. They would have killed everyone they encountered on board, we needed none of them alive, except for one… My orders were to ensure that you, Dr. Reid, survived the taking of the ship, alive and well. We need you.”

“For my ATA gene.”

“General O’Neill is famous far and wide for being a colossal pain in the mikta. He is one who would die before he bent to the will of another, and he hates us, all Lucians. He and his Tau’ri and his Free Jaffa and his Tok’ra allies have been making war on us for years… and have come close to destroying us, many times. He is useless to us, no matter how strong his claim to the Ancients. But you… In fact, any of your kind… zeds. No one knew about you before this. No, I have no idea what you really are, and I care not, beyond possessors of a legacy that will open untold gates for us.”

A shiver passed through Spencer at that. Because if the Lucian Alliance knew all zeds possessed this ATA gene… it made all dual-genders valuable commodities to a bunch of space pirate Mafia, all too used to taking and dealing in slaves. Terrific.
As if zeds didn’t have enough problems.

Caldwell had ceded his ward room to General O’Neill to make his private communications over sub-space relays to Earth and Atlantis.

He’d already had a chance to rant to POTUS over the clusterfuck of IOA interference with HWS staffing. POTUS had been suitably shocked and apologetic, assuring Jack he had no fucking idea, and fully supported Jack in anything he wanted to do about it.

But the call to the IOA chairman, even armed with the President’s promises, didn’t go so well.

“You sent fucking Eli fucking David to Atlantis! What the hell, Antoine?”

“So you found out.”

“We’ve had two murders, an act of sabotage, an attempted piracy action to take over the *Daedalus*, so they could *also* take the City… you bet I fucking found out! Oh, and you might want to ask the Russians if they found any inconvenient bodies lying around the Kremlin lately, because the Timur Shelyapin they sent us isn’t the real guy!”

“Now, that was… unfortunate.”

“*Unfortunate*? We’ve got two bodies here, Antoine! Two *real* anthropologists! You realize this is the last, the absolute *last* fucking time I let you dictate staffing to me. You have a king-sized mole somewhere in your works, Antoine, and you better fucking find it and deal with it before I get back, because I sure as hell will! And you’re getting Eli fucking David and his daughter back on the return trip. Faster if I can justify opening the gate home to kick them the hell off the city.”

“Now there, O’Neill, I must object. The IOA, all of us, every one, have been unhappy for some time with the amount of transparency we have seen in your reports. Or rather, the distinct lack of transparency. From the SGC, Area 51, the Ancient Outpost, but mostly from the Atlantis mission. Yes, Eli is in rather bad odor right now, with both the US, for spying, and with his own government for getting caught at it, but no one can deny his expertise in counter intelligence and anti-terrorism. He is able to get results. When he expressed an interest in assisting us… we agreed. And since it is easier to ask forgiveness than permission, we aided him in building a suitable alias and choosing a team he could work with, or, at least, could be counted upon not to obstruct him.

“In your rather colorful vernacular, General, suck it up. Eli is on Atlantis at our request, and we have absolute faith in his ability to serve our interests. It has become doubtful to us that the same can be said about you, or any of your people.

“As for any supposed mole in our ranks… we’ll look into it. DuPont out.”

Shit on a cracker. This was not good. *Sooo* not good.

And DiNozzo was going to absolutely hate this.

Spencer was doing his best to relax over a meal in the Mess hall, occasionally looking out at the mesmerizing panoply that was the blue waves of hyperspace. But the closer they came to their destination, the more he felt his anticipation, excitement, and perhaps a little bit of dread, growing. Or maybe that was just the niggling beginning of morning sickness tugging at him.
The British team entered with their usual boisterous good mood. Baldrick immediately took the seat on one side of the FBI profiler, while Edmund Black took the other.

“We heard you saved the ship, and all our lives. Thank you!” Edmund offered cheerfully. “I’m rather fond of not being skewered by pirates.”

“Ditto!” Baldrick agreed happily. “And you solved two murders, a case of sabotage, *and* a smuggling ring! Congratulations! I knew you were a brilliant investigator!”

“Brilliant just about anything,” Edmund was quick to add, with a raised eyebrow and a leer.

Spencer sighed. Luckily, SG-1 arrived to help him out. Hopefully.

“Congratulations on solving your first case for HomeWorld,” Daniel offered.

“Case-es,” Mitchell rejoined, patting Spencer hard on the back as he stood behind him, edging Edmund rather un-subtly to one side to get in next to the profiler. “Two murders, one sabotage, piracy on the high… space, two imposters unmasked, and wide-spread smuggling. Wow! And a brig full of prisoners to deliver to Sheppard and DiNozzo. They’re gonna *love* ya, Sunshine.”

“Until the paperwork hits their desks,” Spencer sighed. “Which is why I’m in here, trying to get all my reports finished before we make planet-fall. Which, I am told, will be in less than two days.”

“As long as we don’t have any more little accidents,” Vala agreed, and why was everyone around him talking about such ominous subjects, yet in such high spirits? That risk-taking profile for space adventurers was going to bite them *all* in the ass, he just knew it.

When Dr. Evgenia Andreeva obtained a mug of tea and joined them, Spencer was inclined to sigh in relief. At last, someone with sense.

“Congratulations, Vnuchok! All I hear from everyone is that you have saved us all.”

Spencer moaned and hit his forehead on the table in front of him. “It was a team effort,” he mumbled into his Bast-filled lap. “I had a lot of help.”

“Naw, naw, none ‘o that, Sunshine,” Mitchell recommended. “No false modesty, please. You’re every bit as smart as we all knew you were, and you definitely showed all the nay-sayers back on Earth that you have the Right Stuff. In spades. After this, General O’Neill will be able to hire every zed he can get his hands on, and maybe, just maybe, stop any more damned Lucian Alliance ringers from sneaking their way out to Pegasus. So good news all around.”

Spencer straightened up, and looked out the window. He couldn’t help think that he had failed at least one person, technically two, in this affair.

He thought about Dr. Leah Sasson and her baby, the true innocent victims in this. If he had been quicker, smarter, if he had pressed a little harder to get her to confide in him… without Isaak, there was literally no one on board she had trusted. He should have…

“Vnuchok,” Evgenia said in a low tone, somehow reading his thoughts. He doubted it was very difficult. “You cannot save everyone. You cannot save anyone from themselves. What you have done is save what you could, to the best of your ability, all who would let you save them. This is all to the good. Say a prayer for little Leah, and let her go.”

Bast purred out loud in agreement, giving a bit of a knead to his knee. He swallowed and nodded.
“And get ready for the next great adventure, my young friend, because it’s coming whether we will or no.”

Then the rest of the British team arrived, boisterous and enthusiastic as always, Phil and Mick arguing good-naturedly about which Pegasus sites they most wanted to visit, while geologist Taylor Timson sent a jaunty wink to the Russian astrophysicist.

What was somewhat more alarming was the delicate rose blush that tinted the woman’s cheeks.

“Ah, love is in the air,” Edmund Black murmured, trying to edge closer to Spencer, but getting shoved back by a glowering Mitchell.

“If only,” Vala whispered under her breath, no doubt thinking no one would hear, although Spencer certainly did, as she glanced mournfully at Daniel, even now joining in Phil and Mick’s lively discussion.

Spencer could only shake his head and give up on his report writing, for now. Maybe the cats in his cabin tonight would let him finish it then, without stepping all over his notepad to add their own editorial comments.

Picking up his cup of coffee, he said, to everyone and no one in particular, “Here’s to the next great adventure.”

~When I was eight years old, to be a spaceman was the most exciting thing I could imagine. – Roberta Bondar~

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